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Aiming for service excellence: Implementing a plan for customer service quality at a blended service desk Joanne Oud and Peter Genzinger, Wilfrid Laurier University Library, Waterloo, ON, Canada

ABSTRACT This article discusses a public service review and redesign that resulted in a blended service desk combining reference and circulation functions, staffed by nonlibrarians. The redesign implements a number of organizational structures that encourage service excellence, as found in the business literature and in examples of nonlibrary organizations that excel in customer service. The article identifies key organizational structures that have been shown to support or hinder good service and discusses the process of implementing these structures in practice and the results of an assessment process designed around determining success.

Introduction

Recently, academic libraries have faced pressures that have called their operational assumptions into question. These pressures include the decreasing usage of more-traditional services. The numbers of in-person reference questions have been steadily declining, and a higher percentage of those questions are at a low level of complexity (Bracke et al., 2007; Ryan, 2008; Sheffield, Silver, & Todorinova, 2013). Many students, and increasingly faculty, do not differentiate between or understand why the traditional library administrative divisions of Circulation and Reference are separate.

At the same time, users' expectations for online service have increased due to the ubiquity of electronic technologies. Use patterns have changed considerably. Many academic libraries now have more virtual visits than in-person visits. Libraries realize the need to offer more electronic services but are already stretched thin due to often serious staffing and budgetary constraints. Public service librarians face pressures to offer more instruction, including newer services like course-embedded instruction, blended learning or "flipped classroom" instruction, and creating online video tutorials and other multimedia applications, all with the same or constrained budgets and time.

For these reasons, academic libraries have started considering major changes to their public service functions and have begun implementing blended models that combine traditionally separate Circulation and Reference functions at a single service desk. One large-scale survey of academic libraries sought to determine to what extent blended services, or single-service desk projects, have been initiated. Findings were that of 63 ARL Access Services departments who

responded, 8% mentioned that "reference was part of their department," and 19% planned on implementing a combined desk in the future (Wilson, 2013).

Users' expectations of customer service have also changed, influenced by their service experience outside the library. Business service trends have shifted toward self-service models, and perceptions of good service have evolved. Many businesses have recognized the importance of improved service models to gain an advantage in an increasingly service-driven economy (Ford, Brown, & Heaton, 2001). Most academic libraries have not adapted to changing expectations of service quality in the same way. The dominant public service delivery model was created decades ago in a context of different user needs and service expectations. If academic libraries want to keep attracting users as demand declines, they need to pay attention to service quality. With the reality of declining usage and budgets, though, how can libraries maintain and improve service quality to match user expectations? One strategy is to look at corporate organizations known for their service excellence and see what lessons can be learned from them to create high levels of library public service.

This article will describe a comprehensive redesign of public services, including the implementation of a blended service desk that combines reference and circulation functions offered by cross-trained staff. The primary goal of the redesign was to implement a variety of organizational structures that encourage and support service excellence, as found in the business literature and in examples of nonlibrary organizations that excel in customer service. The article will discuss the creation of a formal service plan, vision and goals, the identification of structures that support or hinder good service, the process of implementing these structures in practice, and the results of an assessment process designed around determining success.

Literature review

Despite the increasing interest in combining traditional Reference and Access Services functions into a blended service desk, most libraries have not yet followed this trend, and examples in the written literature remain relatively uncommon. The case studies that exist report similar rationales for change. Some point to the dramatic decline in face-to-face traditional reference transactions as one reason for the shift (Aguilar, Keating, Schadl, & Van Reenen, 2011), along with a shift to less-complex reference questions (Bracke et al., 2007; Crane & Pavy, 2008; Sheffield et al., 2013). A more efficient delivery of a wide variety of services is also noted as a reason for blending service desks (Churchwell, Stark, & Wallace, 2011; Flanagan & Horowitz, 2000; Murphy et al., 2008). Increased demand for virtual reference and increased demands on librarian time for services like library instruction is also widely noted (Bugg & Odom, 2009; Crane & Pavy, 2008; Leuzinger, 2013; Sheffield et al., 2013; Wang & Henson, 2011), as is the need for more efficient staffing due to staff reductions and constrained or decreasing budgets (Bracke, Chinnaswamy, & Kline, 2008; Murphy et al., 2008; Sheffield et al., 2013; Troy & Lawson, 2012).

As found in the published studies, existing implementations of integrated service desks can be classified into three different models:

1. The "on-call model" removes librarians from the desk, and staff and/or students handle circulation and reference transactions at a single service point. Librarians are called or sent referrals for more-advanced reference help. Some modified on-call models include a single service desk as an initial point of contact, with a Reference desk or consultation area still in use for peak times (Dempsey, 2011).

2. The "discrete model" of service, which consolidates service points at a single desk while keeping services separate (Sheffield et al., 2013). Typically, circulation functions are handled at one area of the desk and reference questions at another. Examples include Powell, Bryan, Michelson-Thiery, Koltay, and Patterson (2007) and Bugg & Odom (2009).

3. The "integrated model" of service, where reference librarians work jointly with staff during busy hours. All those who work on the desk are crosstrained to handle core circulation and reference functions. The model is frequently deployed in smaller libraries where staffing complements are limited (Sheffield et al., 2013).

One theme that emerges in existing studies is the increasing use of paraprofessionals on the desk. This shift has been a continuing trend since at least the 1970s (Dinkins & Ryan, 2010; Rettig, 1993). Many libraries with blended service models rely more heavily on paraprofessionals for reference staffing after implementation, and a number also rely on students to assist with low-level reference functions such as directional or rudimentary reference questions (Allegri & Bedard, 2006; Bracke et al., 2008; Johnson, Jennings, & Hisle, 2011; Magee & Perini, 2014; Powell et al., 2007; Sheffield et al., 2013; Troy & Lawson, 2012).

Not all blended service desk case studies refer to service quality. Of those that do, most implicitly equate improvements in service quality to the reduction of user confusion and frustration formerly created by referrals between separate desks (Crane & Pavy, 2008; Flanagan & Horowitz, 2000; Leuzinger, 2013; Troy & Lawson, 2012). A few also mention increased service consistency or the development of more usercentered policies (Allegri & Bedard, 2006; Johnson et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2008). The concept of service quality or excellence remains undefined in most studies, and efforts to achieve it seem relatively informal and limited in scope.

Business research, however, contains many recommendations for achieving high levels of service quality. There has been some debate about the applicability of business models to libraries (Quinn, 1997). Libraries and for-profit businesses do have different goals, user bases, and values. Although their underlying motivations differ, businesses have found some successful service strategies that can be usefully adapted by academic libraries. A few libraries have in fact implemented service quality initiatives adapted from business models. Wright State went through a process of initiating customer-focused improvements to service through the creation and implementation of a customer

service plan and service standards (Wehmeyer, Auchter, & Hirshon, 1996). At Sunderland, the library implanted a service quality model with clearly defined core services and associated quality promises or standards for each service (Grieves & Halpin, 2014). The University of Minnesota–Twin Cities Libraries implemented a structured customer service program to improve service quality, including a service vision statement, a set of core competencies for staff, a training plan, and a process to measure and assess service outcomes (Bayer & Llewellyn, 2011). Finally, at Villanova, the Falvey Memorial Library implemented a comprehensive quality improvement process using a wide variety of assessment methods, resulting in several service improvements (Stein, Edge, Kelley, Hewlett, & Trainer, 2008). No studies of blended or consolidated service desks report using these kinds of formal service quality models adapted from business.

A small but growing area in the business literature has begun to focus on the characteristics of companies known for service excellence and the organizational factors that lead to success in providing good service. Studies agree that achieving excellent service requires a systematic organizational effort, with structures, systems, and processes in place to enable service excellence (Asif, 2014). The studies also agree on a number of the organizational structures and characteristics that need to be in place to facilitate service excellence, including:

1. Integration: A focus on customer service quality needs to be integrated into all the organization's structures, including its goals, planning, employee hiring, evaluation, rewards, and training (Bartley, Gomibuchi, & Mann, 2007; Ford et al., 2001; Horwitz & Neville, 1996; Kline, 2001; Thomassen, Ahaus, Van de Walle, & Nabitz, 2014; Ueno, 2010).
2. Service-oriented staff: Organizations need to hire staff who have a strong service orientation, since people can be trained for skills but not for attitudes (Bartley et al., 2007; Ford et al., 2001; Horwitz & Neville, 1996; Ueno, 2010).
3. Training: Staff need regular, ongoing training and support for skills development (Asif, 2014; Horwitz & Neville, 1996; Kline, 2001; Scott, 2001; Ueno, 2010).
4. Empowerment: Organizations need simple and flexible policies that allow employees to use their judgment in meeting customer needs and solving problems (Asif, 2014; Ford et al., 2001; Kline, 2001; Thomassen et al., 2014; Ueno, 2010).
5. Standards: Customers need to know what kind of service they can expect; normally, organizations set out clear, formal customer service guidelines and standards that staff will follow (Asif, 2014; Kline, 2001; Scott, 2001).
6. Assessment: Organizations need to have strong mechanisms for gathering customer feedback, assessing how services meet customer needs, analyzing data and using them to make service improvements (Asif, 2014; Bartley et al., 2007; Horwitz & Neville, 1996; Kline, 2001; Thomassen et al., 2014; Ueno, 2010).

These characteristics are generally not discussed in published blended desk studies. Although assessment is an exception, most case studies do not strongly feature assessment. More than half of the studies report no formal assessment or used only anecdotal methods of assessment. Most others used only one or two methods of assessment. Only a few projects report using more rigorous assessment strategies. Murphy et al. compared LibQUAL survey results in multiple years with focus group sessions and surveys assessing user satisfaction, desk staff surveys, and two separate surveys that evaluated a new on-call system's effectiveness (2008). Flanagan et al. report on using a formal assessment group, which developed project goals and success criteria, then created evaluations to measure whether those goals had been met (2000).

Some libraries adopting service quality programs based on business models have taken more comprehensive and formalized approaches to assessment. At Villanova, a wide variety of methods were used to assess service quality as part of a quality improvement program, including staff suggestions, focus groups, benchmarking, site visits to determine best practices, surveys, transaction analysis, activity mapping, and secret shoppers (Stein et al., 2008). The University of Alabama reports on a long-standing program of ongoing assessment of services, coordinated by a Library Services Assessment Group, and emphasizes the importance of having goals and a plan, along with a systematic process for analyzing and reporting results (Chapman & Ragsdale, 2002). At Sunderland University, a service quality program first defined service promises or standards, then services and assessments were aligned with those standards, and a mechanism for gathering data on the impact of services on user outcomes was developed (Grieves & Halpin, 2014).

The blended service implementation described in this article differs from others because it is based on a service plan framework adapted from the business literature. It attempts to implement organizational structures taken from successful service-oriented businesses to deliberately facilitate a move toward improved service quality. Assessment of the new service model is integrated into the planning and implementation stages, and the process and results of this assessment are discussed.

Background and motivation

Wilfrid Laurier University is a midsize, comprehensive public university in Canada with 15,000 students on three campuses. In 2011, the main campus library underwent an extensive external review involving user and staff consultations and workflow analysis. The review resulted in more than 85 detailed recommendations for changes to all areas of the library. Most recommendations were seen by staff as useful and necessary changes, and implementation began almost immediately. Public service was one area of the library not covered in any detail in the external review. The only major recommendation was that public services needed to be separately reviewed.

At the time, Laurier Library had a traditional public services organization with two service desks. One offered circulation and reserves services; print course reserves materials were located in a closed-access area behind the desk and retrieved by staff on request. A book self-check unit was located near the desk but seldom used. The second desk offered reference service, both in-person and online, and was staffed by a combination of librarians and library assistants. The reference desk was open for more limited hours, especially during evenings and weekends, than the circulation desk. The desks were run by different departments, and the staff working at the two desks had different responsibilities, training, knowledge, and pay grade levels. The two departments had different policies and practices and operated separately.

An internal library group was formed in spring 2012 to review the existing public service model and make recommendations for changes. All other areas of the library had been thoroughly reviewed, and there was disappointment that public services had not received the same treatment. The internal group was formed to give the same level of detailed examination to public services and make recommendations for improvements. The key starting point for the review process was therefore an examination of how services could be improved.

Creating a customer service excellence roadmap

The Public Service Review Group consisted of six members, representing all public service units: the Associate University Librarian for Public Services, who chaired the committee; two library assistants from Access Services; a library assistant and a librarian from Reference; and a librarian from Archives and Special Collections. Committee members were frontline public service workers rather than department heads so that decision making would draw on their experience and not be seen as top-down.

The group began a comprehensive review of all public service functions in spring 2012, using a variety of methods, including:

• Mapping services and service points to see which services were offered and at which locations, to uncover all the service points that students needed to navigate;

- A task analysis of circulation and reference service functions to see which tasks were unique to each function and which overlapped;
- A review of use statistics and patterns, including usage data and types and levels of questions asked at each service point;
- Discussions with public service staff and librarians on what was working well and what wasn't, which helped pinpoint many areas where staff felt they encountered barriers in delivering good service;
- Analyzing existing user focus group and survey information, including the most recent LibQual survey results; since the recent external review had involved extensive consultation with users on services, the group did not repeat this work;

- Literature reviews on both library public service models and on recommendations for achieving high-quality customer service from the business literature;
- Site visits to academic and public libraries with different service models, to see their physical layout and discuss their recommendations and best practices in workflow, staffing, training, and staff roles.

After these activities, it was clear that many aspects of Laurier Library's existing service model were working well. The public service staff were service oriented and committed to providing good service to students and were frustrated when they were unable to. Their effort resulted in good feedback on service and staff helpfulness from students during the external review. LibQual service quality ratings were also good, especially when compared to other institutions with our size and funding levels. LibQual results showed user satisfaction with employee courteousness, knowledge, and abilities.

There were also indications that the existing model needed change. Service usage steadily declined, during a time of steadily increasing student enrollment at the university. When calculated per student over the previous 3 years, print circulation declined by 26%, and reference questions declined by 21%. Reference question complexity had also decreased: 85% of questions asked at the reference desk over the previous 3-year period were level 1 (directional) or level 2 (quick lookup), similar to other studies of reference question patterns (Bracke et al., 2007; Ryan, 2008; Sheffield et al., 2013). Both service usage and question complexity decreases appear to be long-term trends, making it difficult to justify the existing configuration and staffing of services into the future.

There was also room for service quality improvement. Mean scores for nearly all LibQual service quality dimensions were lower in the 2010 survey than the 2007 version, suggesting that patrons increased their expectations of service quality, or that service is not keeping up with their expectations. Faculty in particular felt that the library fell short of their expectations in a few areas, especially in "employees who understand the needs of their users."

Finally, public service staff identified a number of service problems, including difficulty staffing service points, ineffective use of staff skills, patron confusion over where they should go for different types of services, overly complex policies that caused confusion for both users and staff, inconsistent services as a result of different staff training and knowledge and different hours and availability for different services, poor communication between the two public service departments, and the relative lack of self-service options for users.

The Public Service Review Group produced a review report in fall 2012 outlining these findings and making recommendations for a major redesign of the existing public service model. The main focus of the report was a plan for service excellence, setting out ambitious goals for moving from good to excellent service, specific quality-driven goals for the proposed public service redesign, and a plan and roadmap for achieving excellent service.

Findings from the business literature and library site visits convinced the Public Service Review Group that excellent customer service doesn't come about

through happenstance; organizations need to plan for it intentionally and put in place structures that facilitate and encourage it. Therefore, the recommendations for redesigning public services focused on creating the structures needed to support service excellence, based on factors common to successful customer service organizations as identified in the business research literature. The report sets out a customer service plan that tries to achieve a more servicedriven focus. This plan begins with an ambitious public service vision statement that reaches toward service excellence and a definition of what excellent service would look like.

The report then sets out quality-driven goals for the public service redesign project, including more effective use of staff, improved service consistency, better ease of use, improved service quality, and increased time for librarian outreach to faculty, the least-satisfied user group.

Public service models identified in the literature review were evaluated based on how they met these project goals. The best fit was the "on-call" model, which involves a blended desk with both circulation and reference services at the same desk offered by cross-trained staff. Other major recommendations included an increase in self-service options for users, reducing user waiting time and relieving staff from some of the more mundane tasks such as retrieving course reserves and basic book checkout. This change would allow staff to spend more time on user interactions that better use their skills and allow improved service consistency, service hours, and improvements in online chat reference service.

To improve the level of service quality, the report recommended implementing other organizational structures drawn from the business literature. These included the creation of formal service standards, a focus on staff training, streamlining of policies, increasing staff 's discretionary ability to resolve user complaints and service problems, and improving mechanisms for user feedback and service assessment.

Implementation

Implementation of the new blended desk model began in fall 2012. The Public Service Review Group acted as the coordinating group for the implementation process. Six subgroups were formed to implement specific aspects of the project, including staff training, policy review, self-service implementation, physical renovations, online services, and assessment. Each group was chaired by a member of the Public Service Review Group. Volunteers were solicited to form the subgroups, and all public service staff and librarians participated as members on at least one subgroup.

Staff training was seen as a key part of the implementation, since circulation and reference library assistants with formerly separate duties would be responsible for both functions at the new blended desk. Other libraries who have implemented blended desks agree on the importance of training. Sheffield et al. (2013) note that cross-training and collaboration are key components in the transition to a successful new model, and many other blended desk

implementation processes undertook cross-training initiatives as a key part of the project (Allegri & Bedard, 2006; Bracke et al., 2008; Bugg & Odom, 2009; Crane & Pavy, 2008; Johnson et al., 2011; Mozenter, Sanders, & Bellamy, 2003; Wang & Henson, 2011).

The training subgroup identified content areas and desired methods for training, scheduled training, and worked with reference librarians and senior Access Services staff who developed and delivered the training. Training took place over the summer of 2013 and was delivered using a blended model. Trainers delivered two halfday in-person sessions per week, with follow-up assignments, additional content, and discussions through the university's learning management system. Staff had the opportunity to shadow each other on the desk and to try out their new skills in a supported environment before the blended desk opened in September.

Both circulation and reference staff attended all sessions. This model was helpful for consistency. All staff heard and experienced the same things in training, which led to improved consistency of knowledge and understanding. It was especially helpful for creating a sense of team cohesion. Staff who knew more about one area worked with and helped those who knew less. The creation of a sense of a greater team was a critically important outcome of the training.

Several parts of the training program involved the library's newly developed service standards. Service standards, sometimes called service plans or service charters, are relatively common in the business world but less common in academic libraries. As discussed, the creation and implementation of service standards play a key role in delivering excellent service in companies recognized for their service quality. They define what the company means by service quality and let customers know what service they can expect. Service standards may focus on performance guarantees, such as a maximum waiting time in line, or on service behaviors such as friendliness and approachability, or on some combination of both. The Laurier Library's approach to service standards was largely based on service behaviors. The Public Service Review Group coordinated the creation of standards for both in-person and online service. The group found and reviewed service standards from other, mainly public, libraries and looked at behavioral competencies such as the Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers (American Library Association, 2013). Open discussions were held with staff to inform the creation of the standards and to gather feedback on initial drafts.

The standards have seven main categories, each with a number of specific behaviors that staff are expected to demonstrate:
1. Being approachable and showing interest in user needs;
2. Listening carefully and communicating clearly;
3. Problem-solving to find solutions to user needs;
4. Determining user satisfaction and referring;
5. Dealing positively with challenging service situations;
6. Being flexible in solving user problems;
7. Being service oriented.

The standards were used in staff training in several ways, helping to make staff familiar with the specific behaviors and expectations involved in delivering excellent service and to give them practice with those behaviors.

Other implementation groups looked at self-service options and public service policies. The self-service group had a goal of increasing options for self-service. This group worked to raise user awareness and use of the book self-check units, running an educational and promotional blitz during the busiest time of term. These efforts resulted in positive user feedback and a substantial increase in self-check usage.

The self-service group also created new services. Previously, course reserves and materials delivered from other libraries were kept behind the circulation desk in a closed area. Users lined up at the desk and requested their materials, and staff retrieved them. Moving these materials to open self-serve shelving was a primary task for the self-service group, with the goal of reducing waiting time for users and allowing staff at the desk to focus on more complex service interactions with users. The new open shelving model was a major cultural and logistical change and involved working out many changes involving physical layout, policies, and procedures.

One of the issues identified in the public services review was the complexity of policies. This complexity made policies difficult for staff to remember and resulted in some confusion and frustration from users. The policy review subgroup was tasked with reviewing and streamlining these policies and identifying areas where staff could be empowered to deal with user issues and problems as they arose, rather than making referrals to supervisors. The policy review subgroup first created an inventory of existing circulation and reference policies, then reviewed each policy to see which could be eliminated or streamlined to allow more flexibility. A number of recommended changes to policies were agreed on and implemented in the summer of 2013. One major change was the treatment of user accounts and fines. Previously, circulation staff did not all have permission or necessary system privileges to deal with user account issues or forgive fines themselves. Under the new desk model, all staff had consistent privileges and were empowered to make judgments about issues like forgiving fines on the spot with users. There was some staff trepidation around these new areas of empowerment, so some suggested guidelines or issues to consider when making judgments were developed to provide a framework for decision making.

Another subgroup was involved in identifying goals for the physical changes needed to implement the new desk model, including the type of desk, its location and signage, and the location of other services such as self-check units to ensure their visibility. The group looked at examples from other libraries and developed key issues and principles to be considered in the renovations. Campus Physical Resource planners then worked to come up with a layout based on these principles and worked to coordinate the renovation project. This project involved removing both existing desks, creating space for a new desk, locating open shelving for reserves, relocating self-check machines, and creating additional seating space for students. The work was done in stages over the

summer of 2013 and was ready by the official opening of the new blended desk in September.

The virtual services subgroup focused on a number of areas. The group did an analysis of chat reference transactions to identify common questions and issues, which informed staff training. The subgroup also worked on creating a new support system for staff working at the new blended desk. Since librarians would no longer be working at the blended desk, a system was put in place for referrals. When staff at the desk needed to make a referral, they were to call a librarian, and if the librarian was not available, they completed an online referral form for the user. Librarians receive the referral forms as e-mail with a standard subject line and contact the user to arrange an appointment. Librarians had discussions about the referral process and agreed on a service standard of one business day for responding to appointment requests.

Training for desk staff included the mechanics of making referrals as well as discussions about when to refer questions. The assumption is that staff will get the user started, except for very specialized questions, and make a referral when they run into difficulty answering the question to the user's satisfaction or feel that a librarian could do more to help.

In addition, the virtual services group set up a "backchat" system to support desk staff. This system uses a second instance of the library's chat reference software and consists of a separate chat window that is only available internally to staff and librarians. Librarians log into the system when they are in their offices, and the window is kept open at the desk computers. If someone at the desk needs help, s/he can go to the backchat window and make a quick request to a librarian.

Along with the implementation work done by subgroups, departmental structures and staff position descriptions were revised considerably. This work was coordinated by the Associate University Librarian, working with the heads of the two former public service departments. A new departmental structure was created that eliminated the former Reference and Access Services departments and consolidated all public service functions into a new department, called User Services. The former Access Services department retained its back-end processing functions and was renamed Copyright and Resource Delivery. Departmental changes also involved changes in reporting structure for various staff and the rethinking of public service positions. Position descriptions for all library assistants involved in public services were rewritten and regraded, a significant undertaking in a unionized environment. Most former Circulation staff had positions split between public services responsibilities and functions like course reserves or interlibrary loan. One consistent description for the public service functions of all positions was created to ensure that everyone had the same responsibilities, hours, and tasks. After discussions and consultation with Human Resources and the staff union, positions were finalized, reviewed, and regraded. Unlike some other reported blended desk implementations (Crane & Pavy, 2008; Magee & Perini, 2014), former circulation staff with new reference responsibilities were given higher position grade levels and received a pay increase; reference library assistant positions generally stayed at the same grade

level. Along with desk staff position changes, a new Desk Services Manager position was created to deal with day-to-day scheduling and operational issues at the in-person desk and the online chat service. This nonlibrarian managerial position started just before the new blended desk opened and has played a key role in the smooth operation of the new desk model.

The implementation went well and was completed in just under a year. The new blended desk opened as students arrived for the new academic year in September 2013. At that point the implementation team disbanded, and there was a feeling of completion. However, the team did not properly anticipate the many new processes and details to be worked out with the new desk model. The new User Services Department Head and Desk Services Manager spent the first year developing and modifying systems for smooth operations of the new desk model. These systems included tools and mechanisms for internal communication and information sharing, both between desk staff and librarians (who no longer worked at the desk), the implementation of a new online scheduling tool, and the ironing out of many scheduling details. A key area of focus has been staff observation and feedback and the development of ongoing training mechanisms.

In hindsight, there were several factors that helped in the implementation process. The main contributor to the project's success was its acceptance and buy-in from public service staff. This acceptance was the result of a few factors. One was the focus from the beginning on making changes to improve service quality rather than for budget cuts or staffing efficiencies. Public service staff could readily identify with the project goals to improve service to users and did not feel as if their jobs were at risk. This focus on service quality as the motivation and goal for the new service model not only helped gain staff trust but also helped in union discussions over position changes. The other factor was the active involvement of public services staff in the process, as several other studies have reported (Flanagan & Horowitz, 2000; Johnson et al., 2011; Troy & Lawson, 2012; Wang & Henson, 2011). Frontline staff were involved as key decision makers in the initial review process and helped create the recommendations. In addition, all public service staff gave input and feedback in several open sessions on various aspects of the process. They also participated proactively as members of at least one implementation subgroup of their choosing, helping to shape what the final implementation looked like. This involvement helped build trust in the process, since it was seen as coming from colleagues and not top-down from administrators.

Project management was also critical, and the structure with a central coordinating group and several action-oriented subgroups, each led by a member of the central coordinating group, worked effectively. The central group continued to meet regularly to keep track of and work out issues that arose in the subgroups, which kept everyone informed and ensured that the subgroups progressed with their tasks and did not duplicate efforts.

Other factors include training and communication. Attention was paid to frequent communication during the implementation process, using e-mail and an internal staff blog. Key decisions, milestones, and documents were

communicated, and feedback was solicited regularly, so people felt connected to the process. In addition, two training sessions on managing change were made available to staff to help give them strategies to deal with difficulties they might encounter, one at the beginning of the process and another after the new model had been implemented. The cross-training sessions for staff, as mentioned, were also key to building trust and a strong sense of teamwork in the new blended team. All these factors helped contribute to staff trust, buy-in, and acceptance of the changes and their willingness to embrace the new public service model.

Assessment and results

As discussed, several studies from the business literature have found that one of the major traits of organizations that provide excellent service is a focus on continual improvement through gathering customer feedback and assessing service quality (Asif, 2014; Bartley et al., 2007; Ford et al., 2001; Horwitz & Neville, 1996; Kline, 2001; Thomassen et al., 2014). These studies agree on the need to actively seek to understand customer views and expectations, regularly monitor and evaluate service quality, and make service improvements based on feedback and assessments. Therefore, formal assessment needs to be a key component of a customer service plan.

The Laurier Library's blended desk implementation project attempted to adopt a more intentional approach to assessment along these lines. The initial review report called for improving mechanisms for assessment and user feedback and service assessment. An Assessment Subgroup was created during the implementation process, made up of frontline public service staff, and was tasked with developing assessment goals and carrying out assessment to determine whether the new model met its intended service quality goals.

The subgroup first decided on a variety of assessment techniques based on the goals of the initial public service review. The group then did several assessments before the new model was implemented to create baseline data on the effectiveness of the existing service model and allow comparisons with the new blended model. A variety of qualitative and quantitative assessments were used, including staff and user surveys, an analysis of use statistics, and a step count or user task analysis. The group kept detailed notes on the process, method, and evaluation tools used for each assessment to allow for reliable duplication.

After the new model had been in place for two academic terms, the Assessment Group redid their initial assessments and created a report with the before-and-after comparison results to determine whether the project had met its goals. Project goals and their assessed results include the following.

More effective use of staff

Blended desk staff have strong customer service skills, which are being put to better use in the new service model. Circulation staff previously spent much of

their time retrieving course reserve materials and checking out books. In the new model, course reserves are on open self-serve shelving, and book self-check usage has increased from 8% to 32% of total book circulations. As a result, staff spend more time on more complex user interactions. In a staff survey, staff were generally positive about the changes to their roles, feeling that they did more interesting and meaningful work, had a better idea of the bigger picture, had better knowledge and skills, and were better able to help users. Some still felt inadequate at times in their new responsibilities and felt somewhat overwhelmed by the number of changes and the number of new areas to keep up with.

Librarian skills are also better used in the new model. Of the questions at the former reference desk, 85% were at a directional or quick lookup level (level 1 or 2). Librarians no longer work at the desk but are available for referrals. As expected, referrals from staff at the desk to librarians have increased: 3% of total questions were referred by the former reference desk, and 12% of total reference questions are referred by the new blended desk. This has partly contributed to a substantial 54% increase in librarian office consultations. In a staff survey, reference librarians were generally positive about the change, feeling that they were now able to focus their efforts on the kinds of complex reference questions their skills were most suited to.

Although budget considerations did not motivate the change, the new blended desk model has resulted in increased cost effectiveness. The new model requires 34% fewer staff hours, even though both in-person and online chat reference services have been expanded substantially and are now offered all hours that the building is open. In addition, there has been a 40% reduction in the cost per reference transaction at the desk, calculated using average salaries and reference transaction figures. This savings is largely a result of removing higher-paid librarians from the desk.

Improved service consistency

Formerly, reference and circulation services were offered at different times and in different places. Now all services, including in-person and online chat reference, are available in the same place at all hours that the building is open. In addition, online chat reference service has expanded its content coverage to include all questions dealt with in person at the blended desk, like accounts issues and fines, which were referred to Circulation in the former model.

Staff answers are now more consistent. A survey was done before and after the new model was implemented, asking staff how they would answer several questions commonly asked at the desks. Before the new model, 65% of answers were consistent. After the new model was implemented 85% of answers were consistent; the only exceptions were two areas with recent policy changes.

Improved ease of use

Since the new blended desk is the only service point, users report much less confusion. Tasks have also been streamlined for users. A step count was done before and after the new model was implemented. A student was asked to do

several common tasks and write all the steps needed to accomplish those tasks. After the new model was implemented, eight steps were required on average for these tasks, compared to 12 in the former service model. Improved service quality User surveys were done to compare approachability and perceptions of service effectiveness. Perceptions of approachability increased in the new model, with 88% agreeing that the service was very approachable compared with 74% previously. However, perceptions of service effectiveness decreased to 79% from 91% in the former model. Some of the decrease is likely due to staff inexperience at the time of the survey, and more information on service effectiveness will be gathered after staff are more comfortable in their new roles.

Service standards have helped define service expectations for staff and to create areas for training. They have also been used to evaluate online chat reference transcripts to see where areas for improvement lie so additional training strategies can be developed. It has become clear that the initial standards are too complex to be used as initially intended and need to be more streamlined so they are easier for staff to remember and can be more easily communicated to users.

Increased staff empowerment was a major goal of the new blended service model. This has been successful on many levels. Policies were reviewed and streamlined, and many were standardized to make them simpler. Staff were given authority and system permissions to make decisions on many issues, such as waiving fines, that they were not allowed to decide on before. One unexpected consequence of moving to the new model, however, was the need for new policies and procedures. In the staff survey, there was some concern that our policies are now becoming more complex again and may need more regular review.

Increased librarian time for outreach to faculty, the least-satisfied user group

Reference librarians used to work 8–10 hours of in-person or online reference shifts. In the new model, librarians do not work any reference shifts. As a result, librarians do report spending more time on faculty outreach, and after the next LibQual survey faculty service perceptions will be analyzed to see whether there have been improvements. Some of the librarians' time has also been taken up by a substantial 54% increase in office consultations for higher-level reference questions, as well as by increased instruction and more involvement in specialized projects.

Librarian comments in the staff survey revealed that they were generally positive about the changes. They appreciate the ability to focus on more complex questions, they have been able to develop more specialized subject reference skills, and they feel that their more in-depth consultations with students has better informed and improved their instruction. A few librarians, however, missed being at the desk, felt that their general reference knowledge had declined, and felt disconnected with what was happening at the desk.

The new model was positively received by the university community. The student newspaper ran an editorial praising the project as a model for student-centered service development. The Public Service Review Group was awarded a

campus employee achievement award for the project implementation process and results. Although the review and new model were based on service quality improvements, the staffing and cost efficiencies it accomplished were helpful in demonstrating the Library's efforts to make effective use of its budget during a recent campus-wide program prioritization initiative and resulted in a recommendation for more financial resources to support the library's public services. The library's budget situation has since worsened, resulting in staff reductions through attrition. The shift to the new model has made it easier to function and continue to provide high-quality service in the new staffing reality.

Assessments show some successes in the new model, along with some areas for improvement. A one-year progress report was submitted in 2015, with recommendations for priority areas for improvement. These include a continued emphasis on offering regular and ongoing staff training, better communication between librarians and desk staff, and more emphasis on user feedback and service assessment. In particular, the work of the Assessment Subgroup needs to be regularized and integrated into the User Services Department's functions. Decisions need to be made about which assessments are needed on a regular basis now that the service is operational, and the time frame and responsibility for doing those assessments need to be established.

Recommendations

After our experiences, we have several recommendations for others undertaking a similar project. The first is to take planning seriously. A public service redesign project is complex, and a strong plan, including goals and assessment, should be in place from the beginning. A strong plan and project management is also needed for the immediate postimplementation phase. After the new model is unveiled, new procedures need to be worked out, and new structures and processes for communication and ongoing staff training need to be established. Ideally, there should be continuity between the people implementing and running the service to ensure that pre- and postimplementation decisions have same goals.

Assessment can be time consuming, but it is critical for achieving service quality and needs to be integrated into the planning and implementation process from the start. As others have also found, meaningful service quality assessment needs to be guided by assessment goals and a formal plan for gathering and evaluating data (Chapman & Ragsdale, 2002). Besides service quality, there are other reasons for planning assessment into a public service redesign project from the beginning. The change process is difficult. People are reassured by knowing that the changes will be evaluated and that the model will evolve if it doesn't work out as intended. In the first year of a new service model, staff need to cope with difficult and radical learning and change. Assessments involving before and after comparisons help show staff where and how their efforts have succeeded as well as where further changes need to be made.

Staff involvement in major change projects is key to building trust and buy-in, as others have found (Flanagan & Horowitz, 2000; Johnson et al., 2011; Troy & Lawson, 2012; Wang & Henson, 2011). In Laurier's experience, staff were an integral part of the group that developed the recommendations and coordinated the implementation. All frontline staff were also involved in implementation subgroups; some of the subgroups were chaired by staff, including policy review, training, and assessment. Staff were trusted with major decision making and had key roles in shaping the results, both in planning and implementation phases. This involvement was a key factor in the success of the project.

The main recommendation, however, is to make service quality a key goal for a public service redesign project. Both the literature and Laurier Library's experience show that quality service doesn't happen by accident; it needs formal structures and organizational support, a plan, and commitment to achieve. Deliberately designing for service quality involves a change in mind-set for many libraries. Achieving better service quality is hard work and involves a long ongoing process of continual feedback and change. Deciding on the definition of service quality at your institution, developing service goals, and considering which formal structures need to be in place to help achieve those goals is a good first step in this process.

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