

# Book Reviews

**Introduction to Reference Work in the Digital Age.** Joseph Janes. New York: Neal-Schuman, 2003. 213 pp. \$59.95. (ISBN: 1-55570-429-8)

This book provides the profession with a cogent, thorough, and thoughtful introduction to digital reference. Janes not only provides the breadth of coverage expected in an introduction, but also depth into this important topic. Janes' approach is managerial or administrative, providing guidelines for reference work that can be applied in different settings. Janes creates a decision-making framework to help reference librarians make decisions concerning how, to what extent, and in what cases digital reference services will be delivered. In this way, Janes avoids dictating a "one-size-fits-all" model. This approach is the major strength of the book.

Library administrators and heads of reference services will find the administrative approach welcome by helping them think through which digital reference policies and methods will best target core constituencies and their institutional environments. However, the book deserves a broader audience as professors will find that the book fits nicely in a general reference course. For all readers, the book is readable and engaging and also challenging and questioning.

The book begins with a history of reference work, nicely positioning digital reference in this tradition and noting the changes wrought by the digital age. By doing this, the author establishes both continuity and change in reference work as well as the values surrounding this activity. These values are largely those from the library community and support people's access to information as well as activities that support the use of information. Janes closes this chapter by noting that the continuing changes in demographics, technology, and connectivity will impact reference work in ways that are not yet imaginable. This introduction sets the tone for the rest of the book.

Janes defines digital reference service as "the use of digital technologies and resources to provide direct, professional assistance to people who are seeking information, wherever and whenever they need it" (p. 29). This definition covers a lot of ground. Examples include everything from a public library answering email queries to commercial ask-an-expert services. While the primary audience is librarians, Janes continually reminds readers that many others perform reference activities on the World Wide Web. Furthermore, he cautions readers that there are larger forces shaping this activity in the world that need to be acknowledged.

In building a framework for decision-making, Janes outlines the types of digital reference service. This discussion covers the communications modes, such as e-mail, chat, Web forms, etc. It also analyzes the modalities by which reference service is delivered: synchronous/asynchronous. Using these two dimensions (communication method and synchronous/asynchronous), Janes presents the variety of contexts in which digital reference can take place and then outlines the strengths and weaknesses of each of these. This translates into a decision-making framework by which readers analyze their particular setting and then select the modes and modalities that would be most effective. This is a powerful device and demonstrates the many options (and perhaps also the obstacles) for providing digital reference service.

The discussion of modes for digital reference would be incomplete without focusing on the technologies that support this activity. E-mail,

Web forms, chat, instant messaging, and videoconferencing, as well as the call center based software, are now being adapted for use in libraries. The book discusses the technologies currently available and on the horizon to support digital reference services. While these sections of the book may not age well, they will provide us with a historical glimpse of the nascent development of such tools and how they were used at the beginning of the digital reference age. True to the emphasis on decision-making, the chapter on technology includes a list of functions that reference librarians would want in software to support digital reference. While no current applications have all of these features, this list provides librarians with some ideas concerning possible features that can be prioritized to aid in a selection process.

Despite the emphasis on technology, Janes contextualizes this discussion with several significant issues relating to its implementation. These include everything from infrastructure, collaborative service standards, service design, user authentication, and user expectations. The sections on collaborative service models and service design are particularly interesting since they are both in their infancy. Readers wanting an answer or the "best" design of either institutional or collaborative digital reference service will be disappointed. However, raising these considerations is important and Janes points out how crucial these issues will be as online reference service matures. User authentication in the context of reference service is especially tricky since tensions can emerge between license agreements and the range of people who may or may not be covered by these contracts querying reference librarians. Finally, no discussion of digital reference is complete without a discussion of the possibility of 24/7 reference service and the ensuing user expectations. While Janes has no answers to the dilemmas these raise, he does alert libraries providing digital reference services to some of the realities. One is that libraries will get a broader range of questions, which could impact staff time, collection development to support these questions, and necessitate either a confirmation of priorities or a reprioritization of activities. Another reality is that the users of digital reference services may never have partaken of their services before. In fact, for libraries funded to serve a particular constituency (public libraries, academic libraries) this influx of users raises questions about levels of service, funding, and policy.

Finally, in keeping with the underlying theme of values that pervades the book, Janes points out the deeper issues related to technology such as increasing ability to track users on the web. While he realizes that anonymous information about those who ask reference questions would provide reference librarians with a great deal of information to hone services and better serve constituencies, he is well aware of the dangers involved in collecting patron information in electronic form.

Given that the Web is constantly changing, Janes turns his focus to the future of digital reference. Topics include changes in reference practice, restructuring resource utilization, and the evolving reference interview. These are crucial dimensions of digital reference practice that require attention. The most intriguing of these is the changing nature of the interaction with the patron. The majority of digital reference takes place without physical, aural, or visual clues to gauge understanding or to sense conclusion of the interaction. While Janes provides some guidelines for both digital reference interviewing and Web forms, he honestly admits that reference interviewing in the technologically mediated environment requires additional study in both the asynchronous and particularly synchronous communication modalities.

As previously noted, Janes is as concerned about developing the infrastructure for digital reference, as he is about the service itself. By infrastructure, Janes means not only the technological infrastructure, but also the people and the institution. In discussing the need for institutionalization of digital reference, he discusses (re)training reference staff, staffing models, and institutionalizing the service. The section on institutionalizing the service itself is particularly strong and presents a 10-step planning process for libraries to follow as they consider developing online services.

The book ends with some final thoughts and exhortations to the readers. The author, as in the rest of the book, encourages experimentation, innovation, and risk taking. These are not characteristics that are automatically associated with librarians, but these qualities are not alien to readers either. The theme of planning and the value of connecting people with information pervade this chapter. In this closing, Janes subtly tells readers that his guidelines and proposals are just that—there is no magic bullet here. But he does argue that there has been good work done and some models that can be adopted, adapted, and improved (and then hopefully shared with others). In the end, Janes leaves readers with a feeling that there is a place for library reference service in the digital realm. Furthermore, he is convinced that the knowledge and skills of reference librarians are translatable into this arena. By focusing on the institutionalization of digital reference services, Janes is trying to get libraries to better position themselves in the virtual world, beside the commercial services and the plethora of Web-based information competing for the patrons' attention.

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**Virtual Reference Training: The Complete Guide to Providing Anytime Anywhere Answers.** Buff Hirko and Mary Bucher Ross. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2004. 160 pp. \$42.00. (ISBN: 0-8389-0876-4)

Virtual reference services are becoming an important tool as librarians strive to stay current with patron's information demands. In 2001, the Washington State Library initiated the Statewide Virtual Reference Project (SVRP) to support electronic reference services throughout the state. An element of that project, termed "Anytime, Anywhere Answers," was designed to train librarians in the effective use of virtual reference services. The results of that project, including precautions and pitfalls, as well as the curriculum used in the project, are recounted in this book.

The book begins with a short review of the Washington State experience with virtual reference training (VRT) and the means by which the guide can be used. The very first page begins with an example of a virtual reference session gone wrong and the authors set the tone for the remainder of the book, which decries the "Shazam! You're a virtual librarian" phenomenon. The second chapter provides a thorough overview of the Washington State SVRP, including planning elements, budgeting, convening of focus groups, and training development. Perhaps the most important information in this chapter is the identification of eight key skills, aptitudes, and knowledge critical in online environ-

ments: chat skills, online reference interview, internet searching, database searching, collaborative browsing, customizing scripts, methods for evaluating success, and coping with technical glitches. Building on the aforementioned eight key skills, Chapter Three of the book examines the "core competencies" needed for virtual reference. These 14 competencies are wide ranging and clearly demanding of the librarian training in VRT. In addition, the authors expound upon the eight key skills, aptitudes, and knowledge identified in Chapter Two. Constructivist learning, which has garnered controversy in recent years, was identified as the learning platform for Washington State's SVRP and is the subject of the book's fourth chapter. The authors explain why this learning format was chosen—primarily because VRT developers felt that participants would learn better by reaching their own conclusions. In this case, constructivist learning involved virtual field trips, secret patron activities, and weekly chat meetings. The challenge of developing the SVRP is described in Chapter Five, with a focus on descriptions of in-person training, online training, and individual and collaborative learning.

While earlier chapters discuss theory, practical issues involved in developing and maintaining a VRT program are the subject of Chapters Six through Nine. Important issues, such as curriculum development, training activities, online behavior, and post-program assessment, are examined in detail. Many of the issues examined in these chapters are those that information professionals are faced with on a regular basis. In discussing curriculum development, the authors describe the important questions that need to be asked, as well as important issues such as identifying and qualifying trainers and staff, course timing, determining curriculum efficacy, methods of training delivery, and methods of evaluation.

The real core of the SVRP, that is, the VRT training activities actually utilized by Washington State, are presented in Chapter Seven in roughly the same order as they took place in the course (train the trainer, orientation, chat practice, multitasking skills, virtual field trips, secret patron, transcript review, checking out the competition, policy and procedure review, sharing via a discussion list, and online meetings). Most interestingly, Chapter Eight deals with behavior, an issue rarely discussed in the context of librarianship, let alone providing reference services. As stated by the authors, "the most difficult aspect of digital reference service involves incorporating model reference interview techniques into an online transaction" (p. 74). The SVRP utilized an "online secret patron scenario" as a training tool that helped the student get the question straight, kept the customer informed, and provided the information required by the patron. The final chapter of the book reviews the important tasks of evaluation, modification, and follow-up. To that end, evaluative material is described and linked to Appendix A (assessment tools). In addition, evaluative tasks such as trainer debriefings and consultation with others participating in the SVRP are described. Finally, the chapter includes examples of unexpected consequences experienced in evaluating VRT services (from total inability to handle online transactions to poor marketing or branding of online services).

Many useful appendices are included in this book. Appendix A provides examples of several assessment tools used during the "Anytime, Anywhere Answers" program. Appendix B consists of actual transcripts (edited) designed to illustrate good and bad virtual reference transactions. The transcripts illustrate transactions involving helping with homework, source citing, providing an opinion, suggesting print materials, and clarifying a question. This appendix should be required reading as it provides real-world examples of VRT in action. Appendix C is a copy of a VRT field trip questionnaire. The next appendix, like Appendix B, should be required reading as it includes an actual transcript from seven secret patron scenarios. A policies and procedures checklist is provided in Appendix E. Yet another critical source of information is presented in Appendix F, online meeting transcript. This transcript is the result of an online meeting conducted during a VRSP training class held in 2003. According to the authors, it is an example of the positive working relationship developed during a five-week learning course. The remaining appendices (G through I) present

information about support materials used in the VSRP, the VSRP budget, and trainer notes and tips.

Clearly, VRT is a skill and resource that information professionals need to embrace, and this book does a fine job of outlining the essentials. It is apparent that the Washington State experience with VRT was a pioneering venture and is a model that other information professionals may seek to embrace, if not emulate, in developing their own VRT programs. However, this book is not a “complete guide” to VRT. There is too rapid development in virtual environments for any one to claim such an achievement. However, it is likely the most “complete” guide to the Washington State experience that will

be published; therefore, this book should serve as a thorough and revelatory guide to VRT for several years to come.

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