

□ PUBLIC LIBRARIES ONLINE □

BY TINA ROOSE

What Factors Affect Our Performance as Online Searchers?

IN MY APRIL 1 column (*Measuring Reference Performance: Manual and Online*, p. 68, 73), I wrote of a study that found some interesting facts about what affects the quality of an online search (Janice Helen McDue's *Online Searching in Public Libraries: A Comparative Study of Performance*, Scarecrow, 1988). Here, I want to discuss a few of that study's common sense findings as well as a few more unexpected findings and their implications.

Background on McCue

First, some brief background on this study. McCue asked librarians to answer a multifaceted research question using 30 minutes of online time on two databases—a newspaper database and a business database. Then McCue measured the actual performance of the searchers at the terminal and the quality of the results. She also tried to find how their background and experience as well as their libraries' resources and policies affected the quality of their searches.

Subjects of the study were 21 reference librarians and their supervisors in urban area public libraries in 16 states. Most of the libraries charged a fee for the searches.

McCue found a wide range of quality in the searches of these 21 librarians. Here are some of the findings that struck me most.

****LIBRARIANS WHO RETRIEVED MORE CITATIONS DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

This was the main statistically significant finding. This finding means



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that higher quality searches included more relevant cites because there was a larger pool to choose from. It makes sense when the question is a multifaceted research question with no one answer. But, the "more is better" idea always prompts me to recall what would happen if we took it to its most ridiculous extreme. To retrieve all relevant cites in a database, just retrieve the whole database.

"Most libraries don't have an absolute rigid limit of how many minutes they will spend answering a reference question using printed or telephone sources. Why not extend the same flexibility to questions answered using computer sources?"

****LIBRARIANS WHO SPENT MORE TIME PER SEARCH DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

The five highest ranking searchers responded that they averaged 21-40 minutes terminal time for a requested search. By contrast, the five lowest ranking searchers reported that they averaged approximately ten minutes for a requested search.

[I]f an online searcher wants to produce quality citations (hits) then there has to be sufficient volume for this selection process, and sufficient volume generally means more connect time at the terminal.

And, this also means a higher cost per search. Remember, however, that this specific search was a

many-part research question. Studies of simpler questions or ones with definitive answers might show different results.

****LIBRARIANS WHO SPENT MORE MONEY ONLINE DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

This follows from the two findings above.

****LIBRARIANS WHOSE LIBRARIES CHARGED A FEE FOR SEARCHES DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

The three libraries that didn't charge for searches did poorly. A main reason for this is that their policies of how much money they would spend or free time they would search were too rigid to let them search the requested 30 minutes—therefore, they didn't retrieve enough of a critical mass of citations to include enough good citations.

McCue tested mostly libraries that charge fees because those libraries were willing to do a computer search of any length on any database on demand—and for someone who did not have a local library card. Many libraries that provide free searches want to choose the databases searched, to determine how much time to search, and to do searches only for residents of their local service area.

Also, libraries that are really rigid about their policy on how many minutes or dollars of searching they will give each user may detract from quality searching by making staff nervous so they don't do well—they worry and watch the clock.

This finding shows a negative service effect of not being flexible. Libraries that have a policy of free searches maybe should have a charge mode once they have exhausted the free mode—for manual searching as well as online searching. Most libraries don't have an absolute rigid limit of how many minutes they will spend

answering a reference question using printed or telephone sources. Why not extend the same flexibility to questions answered using computer sources?

****LIBRARIANS WHO PREPARED THE SEARCH CAREFULLY AND KNEW HOW TO CONSTRUCT GOOD SEARCH STATEMENTS DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

Common sense, but good to validate.

****LIBRARIANS WHOSE LIBRARIES HAD MORE CURRENT ONLINE THESAURI AND VENDORS' MANUALS DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

"[O]nline searches tended to achieve a higher number of excellent hits when the backup material was current." This falls in the common sense category, but it's good to prove it. Too many libraries don't have up-to-date manuals and thesauri to support this part of their reference service.

****LIBRARIANS WHO SEARCHED MORE HOURS PER MONTH DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

This sounds like common sense too. But similar factors like more formal training or years of experience did not produce higher quality searches. This finding tells me that to maintain high quality we must practice. We must practice and update our skills. We must use and update the knowledge needed in computer-aided reference work. The same need for practice and updating applies to reference work using printed material or the phone. But when do staff get to practice?

****THE ONE LIBRARIAN WITH A CLIENT SEARCH EVALUATION FORM DID THE HIGHEST QUALITY SEARCH.**

We can't generalize from this one instance. Many of the searchers conduct post-search interviews with clients and think these are important to good service. Nearly half of the searchers also think they will do better searches with the patron present to refine the search. I agree. But, I also believe it's significant that the best searcher *always insists* that the patron *evaluate* the search in writing.

I can't resist emphasizing the im-

portance of asking clients to evaluate our work. In my April 1 column, I noted that the Maryland study of reference performance found the single most important behavior we can use to ensure correct answers is to ask: Does this completely answer your question? The same principle applies here. When we ask the clients how well we did in answering their questions, we give ourselves a second chance to provide a better answer—if our first answer missed the mark.

Recently, a suburban Chicago public library tried an experiment. The reference staff made one small change in their behavior. They asked patrons: "Does this completely answer your question?" And what happened? Even some unassuming, non-demanding, mild-mannered patrons now respond quietly: "Well, not ex-

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actly." Then, the librarians get a second chance to answer the question right. It's like magic. The library staff are amazed and excited at how this one minor change gives them the chance to improve their service.

****LIBRARIANS WHO DID THE PRE-SEARCH INTERVIEW THEMSELVES DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

These librarians knew better what the question was. The fact that the searchers who actually did the pre-search interviews themselves did better searches supports the idea that better answers result when the

searcher understands the question—as in manual interviews shown in the Maryland study.

****LIBRARIANS WITH MORE RECENT DEGREES DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

Online searching wasn't taught when I was in library school. Most recent grads at least got exposed to computer searching. But maybe this finding also relates to the issue of us middle-aged librarians being less comfortable (and therefore less skilled?) with new technology.

****LIBRARIANS FROM SEPARATE BUSINESS DEPARTMENTS (MEANING THEY HAVE SPECIAL SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE) DID NO BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE.**

This surprises me. I think more research should be done to check this. Maybe the problem is that having special subject departments doesn't guarantee staff practice time at the computer.

****LIBRARIANS WHO DID ONLINE SEARCHING IN A SEPARATE LOCATION AWAY FROM THE REFERENCE DESK DID HIGHER QUALITY SEARCHES.**

"The 12 libraries which provided a separate area for searching were in the top range in relationship to the performance scores." "The seven libraries that reported integrating the terminal within the same reference area were among the libraries with the lowest scores."

This finding makes sense. I'm not surprised that librarians who had separate, quiet places to plan and to execute their searches (many of which took 50-70 minutes) did higher quality searches. I bet many reference librarians would do higher quality print or phone reference searches if they had the luxury of a quiet place to work undisturbed.

I still maintain that ready reference online searching should be done in the same location as ready reference manual searching—at or near the reference desk. But library management must give staff undisturbed practice time to learn online searching well enough to be able to perform ready reference computer searches easily in the midst of an often chaotic public service area.