The view from above: How consolidating library enquiries led to a streamlined and enhanced service

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1 Introduction

Edith Cowan University (ECU) is situated across three campuses in Western Australia. At ECU we are guided by our core values of integrity, respect, rational enquiry and personal excellence. We have recently gained the recognition of being listed under the Times Higher Education (THE) 100 Under 50 List (Times Higher Education, 2015). Like many other universities, ECU’s student population is experiencing a gradual trend of increasing online students (Table 1). The growing need to provide equal and more technical services to these online students was the rationale behind the establishment of the Communications Team (Comm’s Team) at the beginning of 2013. In late 2012, an internal advertisement was released for three technicians to establish this new Comm’s Team.

Table 1.
Study mode of ECU students across a 4 year span

The basic model of the Comm’s Team is to field incoming electronic enquiries to the library where the majority are either satisfied or logged for further action, and if not, than referred to the relevant library staff. The team performs all the core circulation functions and services associated with a traditional library enquiries desk such as loan renewals, placing holds, and catalogue searches. The team conducts administrational tasks such as invoicing for lost items, organising new ECU Alumni records and cards, room bookings and bulk adding of print
credit to the postgrads and faculty staff. The enquiry channels were mainly phone and email, though included internet chat and Twitter.

The introduction of the Comm’s Team revealed inconsistencies and insights into ECU Library services between the campuses and the statistics generated and collated from Comm’s Team activity allowed the library to become more visible to the University. This led to a new level of transparency, standardisation, and gradually improved workflows. The impact of change is discussed in this paper with a focus on the technology, service transformation, and experiences of both the staff and the student. A discussion of both the benefits and hindrances of these changes are also detailed. I, as one of the establishing technicians of the Comm’s Team, observed this transition and offer a personal insight into my experience (a view from above) with an aim to contribute to the body of knowledge of our steadily transforming industry.

2 Planning the new model

As students adopt more engaging, integrated, and enriched technology, so must we (Lawrence, W, 2002, p.369). Edith Cowan University, like its fellow institutions, is undergoing significant change - the greatest of which is the vast reduction of books in favour of electronic resources. The evolution of the publishing industry, changing student behaviour, and the wonders of technology are all primary factors in this significant change, therefore it makes strategic sense for ECU Library services to form a new team with the means and skills to serve this expanding patronage.

The Comm’s Team was to be formed from the Enquires Desk staff, as experience with ECU’s LMS, Millennium, as well as circulation procedures was essential. Applicants had to undergo a panel interview and a series of observed mock calls, but the general response to the new positions was underwhelming, despite opportunities for a promotion. Management understood this response as resulting from an incorrect perception that one would be ‘chained to a desk’ and acting as a switchboard. This may pose an unsettling prospect for some
Enquiries Desk staff whose day-to-day circulation, collection management, and service duties require movement about the library.

The team had several tools at their disposal - a Wikipedia-structured knowledge base called Confluence, a call management system called Solidus eCare, and a customer relation management system (CRM) called RightNow CX Cloud Service. In order to complete various administrative duties, supervisor-level access to some internal ECU systems was issued. With regards to hardware, we were fitted with dual screens and wireless headsets. The Comm’s Team were situated in the administration office along with acquisitions, document delivery, and cataloguing departments.

All the Comm’s Team information, procedures and guides would be easily accessible online via Confluence, our Knowledge Management System (KMS). Confluence was introduced to ECU some years prior to the inception of the Comm’s Team with the intention of replacing outdated and wasteful paper-based systems. While the whole team was involved with the authoring of its contents, I was responsible for entering this information into the team's Confluence space. A great feature of Confluence is that anyone can edit or update information quickly.

I attempted to structure all the information contained in the Confluence into a quick-access style layout. There were two main subsections - procedures and information. The procedures were accessed from an alphabetically ordered list of hyperlinks, though as the list grew past twenty they had to be prefixed them with subject keywords. The information database was a long table with alphabetical keywords in the left column and the information on the corresponding right column. The intention was for team members to actively use Confluence during a call, so the layout was all about clarity and large fonts.

RightNow, our CRM, processes email enquiries and tasks. Standard texts are a very useful library of model responses to common queries which were embedded in RightNow. We started with just a handful but steadily accumulated. Eventually we had one response for
every common enquiry, enabling us to edit only the pertinent details. Our use of Standard Texts became instrumental to our efficiency and accuracy as an information service.

3 Implementation of the new model

All projects launched are prone to teething problems, and changes to service methods motivated by the introduction of new technology can lead to difficult situations in workplace flow (Adeyoyin, 2012, p.5). At 8am February 10th 2013 the Oracle based phone system Solidus went live. All incoming calls to the three campus library desks, as well as numerous other phone numbers nominated for the consolidation, were now directed to the Comm’s Team. From day one, this system did not function as expected. The on-screen interface failed to interact with the phone system. In response to the system malfunction, the Comm’s Team switched to using the desk-phone consoles and bypassed the issue to ensure continuity of service. The on-screen control issue wasn’t resolved for three months and by that time the team had adapted to the alternative solution. While one cannot underestimate the problem solving capabilities of employees, it is not up to employees to ensure vital systems are operating correctly.

Through normal day-to-day operations of the Comm’s Team and interactions between staff and students, small reservoirs of procedural inconsistencies were identified and addressed, many dealing with minute library operations. Some example policy inconsistencies found were: additional renewals of alumni loans, reciprocal borrowers requesting books be delivered to other campuses for collection, and the requirements for someone collecting loans on another’s behalf.

There was a certain diminishment of service surrounding our lack of physical presence at the Library desk. For example, Comm’s Team staff cannot conduct an immediate shelf check, help to find lost items, or come up to level three to fix a printer; all those tasks required calling the relevant campus desk but I think this small price to pay when stacked against the gains.
On the subject of location and situational awareness, the Comm’s Team was physically located next to the executive management team, though our team leader was a Library Coordinator herself. I felt that this was beneficial for both parties, as having access to management offered quick resolutions on day-to-day issues that other service teams did not benefit from. As for management, it was beneficial having us nearby as they had convenient access to the new transparency of service our team provided and could monitor how it rolled out.

Systematic codification of enquiries resulted in further benefits. In a previous role of mine as a Library Assistant, I was tasked with the collation of paper activity trackers located on the service desk. It was my observation that this procedure was a low priority for busy desk staff and the busier a desk, the more erratic manually entered statistics will be. The phone and email management systems allows easy codification so could place every incoming enquiry into twelve different categories such as room booking, loans, and fines. These statistics were exported into a spreadsheet and processed. We now could submit accurate monthly activity reports.

When the Comm’s Team started using RightNow the system automated the follow-up of emailed enquiries. It tracks every electronic enquiry and should any persist unanswered for more than 48 hours then the Comm’s Team will alert the staff member to this outstanding request. This for the Comm’s Team offers a sense of ownership to each enquiry and, importantly, promotes good customer service which transfers into other sections of Library Services. This has helped us to meet ECU service standards, as prior to this enquiry follow-up was not systematically tracked.

4 Discussion

Over time it became statistically apparent that a pressing issue for students is database access and navigation. Guiding a student through the multitude of database interfaces is difficult
without mirroring their on-screen steps. With ECU’s resources spread across almost 300 databases it is no surprise that some students struggle, especially returning students who studied before digitised resources really took off. An analogy is a huge box of remote controls for one television but each channel requires a different remote control. For all those first years who miss Library Service information sessions it can be quite intimidating. This is, to me, is the greatest advantage of the Comm’s Team; students need help when they are actively working. They are at their computers trying to get what they need and this is when they require assistance.

Taking advantage of our screen-based work stations, the Comm’s Team were able to deliver enhanced assistance and troubleshooting and this is when IT and Library Services clearly overlap. Amusingly, as the Comm’s Team collated this knowledge into a Confluence guide, we eventually had staff from ECU’s IT department consult us for particular solutions. The guide was gradually created from an archive of resolved student problems and a client version now resides in the official ECU ask-a-question database which anyone can find through the ECU website. This could not have been attentively achieved at a busy circulation desk and is an example of harvesting information from a KMS.

Here are some examples of positive outcomes of our service transformation:

- Students can request book chapter via an online form. The form output was redirected through RightNow which improved visibility and speed of the request. As a bonus, the acquisition department mined the hundreds of chapter requests from RightNow to help identify the books which students needed most.
- A library record encumbrance is a type of administration block. Previously it took 24 hours to lift. The Comm’s Team, using their admin access, cut this down to minutes which prevented a lot of inconvenience.
- Invoicing for lost item and refunds were redirected through RightNow. Previously this was conducted at the desk then actioned by a supervisor and the process was a little
patchy depending on who the student spoke to and written documents were misplaced. Now the process was smooth, fast and all documents correctly archived.

- Systematic codification of calls revealed a high volume relating to loan renewals and fines for overdue items, a definite source of angst for students. This information was instrumental in library management’s decision to extend the loan period to 7 days and permit unlimited renewals.
- Fines over $20 blocks a library record. An off-campus student trying to place a hold or renew a book cannot proceed till the fine is settled. With receipt of payment made over the phone being email to RightNow, Comms Team members can clear the fine and even call the student to alert them if it’s an urgent request.

To reflect upon the issue of staff resistance - one can understand how a shifting status-quo is unsettling for most workplaces embracing change. Resistance to change has been attributed to a “disbelief” of the motives of the agents of change (Cervonne, 2011, p.95). I experienced this first-hand in the staff rumour-mill. Management noted that staff were reassured repeatedly of roles, expectations, and opportunities. The Associate University Librarian at the time retrospectively offered the following response to queries of management involvement in responding to staff concerns; “The management team responded to concerns by providing information to staff, attempting to explain the reasons for the change. I don’t think we were that effective in assuaging people’s fears. Those who were fearful and suspicious remained unconvinced.”

After a few weeks of operation it was noted by the team that some calls with remote students, especially mature age, would continue for ten or more minutes. An initial enquiry would then transition to related information we considered valuable to the enquirer. While it was sometimes difficult to guide them on-screen to relevant resources, we got better at it, and it was easy for the student to see the value as we guided them through.

We believed these calls were providing significant information to remote students and we did not consider it over-servicing. Eventually, just like the technical trouble-shooting guide, we
compiled an assistance guide called simply ‘Library Help’ and would email the guide to callers as a follow-up. CRM is definitely related to the discipline of KM, thus, the existence of sufficiently and continually updated customer knowledge is critical for an effective CRM system (Garrido-Moreno, 2011, p.438). I praise the Comm’s Team’s innovation to provide this targeted information and believe this just-in-time service model suits students better than an information dump at the beginning of semester.

In light of the changes experienced by the modern academic library, users have become the customer. The essential difference being that a customer’s experience is now directly connected to the on-going relevance on the library; so if the customer is not coming to us, we need to go to them. We need to develop the communication link and cultivate the bond between the library and the student as our customer.

5 Conclusions

The necessity for a communications team is being driven by increasing digital resources, increasing off-campus student population, and the increasing pervasiveness of technology in the student learning experience. Library technicians need to respond to this challenge by continuously evolving their own digital and information literacy skills; now more than ever. Like the Tasmanian Devil, library technicians who do not evolve their skills risk becoming an endangered species themselves! This is an equally valid point for the student too as they explore new ways to engage with their library.

Service transformation offers many benefits to the library users, however, one cannot leave the story there. The staff experience is essential to the success of such transformations, as some difficulties did arise in the ECU library service consolidation. These issues were broad in their categories and created a complex play of technology, staff politics, student experience, and workplace morale. Management need to plan for this by convincing affected staff that the process is not about reducing departments or creating a noisy call centre, but will improve overall service and provide valuable professional training opportunities.
While the Comm’s Team was not a part of the formal change management plan which ECU was undertaking at the time, it is now considered to be an integral component to better servicing our clients and to continue our evolution as an engaged and relevant university library. A consolidated enquiry service can greatly assist with the endeavour of standardisation, especially with a multi-campus academic library such as ECU. I felt appreciative for the opportunities the position in the establishment of the Comm’s Team provided for me.
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