

Imagine there's no desk

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Imagine there's no Desk

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Abstract

Imagine walking into an academic library and finding no service desk and no queues. There are friendly staff who greet you and ask you if you need assistance. You are then directed to a self-service check out, a workstation or to a consultation room. This is the new reality at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Library. This paper outlines the planning, design features and service model of UNSW Library's Help Zone, including the imaginative use of space, details on changes to staffing work and structure, and responses from customers and library staff who work in the Help Zone.

Introduction

The University of New South Wales (UNSW) Library has in recent years undertaken a series of major renovations to the Main Library building. Customer feedback, both formal and informal, had highlighted the evolving way in which our customers use the Library, and that physical and online spaces needed to be adapted to reflect this usage. The Library needed to make a variety of improvements to services for customers, including making locating items (both physical and online) easier, providing more seats for study and relaxation, introducing wireless internet access and greatly increasing the number of power outlets available. Although print collection borrowing statistics continue to decrease, the number of customers actually using the Library building has increased, and in 2010 there were 1.46 million visits to the Library. Feedback, again both formal and informal, had shown that our customers were happy with the renovations completed so far. The final stage of the renovations, completed in March 2011, concentrated on the entry level to the Library. The major focus of the last stage of the renovations was to remove the service desk and in its place create a Help Zone, along with the creation of additional study areas adjacent to the Help Zone on this level. The Help Zone has quickly established itself as the jewel in the Library's crown, and upon entering the Library a customer comes into immediate contact with an open, friendly customer-focussed environment.

Background

The University of New South Wales was established in 1949 to teach and conduct research in scientific and technological disciplines; initial faculties in engineering, science and built environment have been followed by humanities and social sciences, business, medicine, law, military studies and fine arts. UNSW currently has over 50,000 students and 7,500 staff.

UNSW Library is made up of the Main Library, housed on ten levels of a 14 level building, located on the upper campus; the Freehills Law Library, located on the lower campus; and the College of Fine Arts Library, which is at a separate facility in Paddington.

Major restructuring began in the period 2004-2006, when the Physical Sciences, Social Sciences, and Biomedical Libraries were amalgamated and the Law collection was relocated from the Main Library to the new facility on the lower campus.

Following on from these moves came the planning and undertaking of large-scale renovations within the Main Library. By 2010, all ten floors of the Main Library had been refurbished with new carpet and furnishings, including small booths, seminar rooms, group study rooms, study pods, benches, beanbags, stools, comfortable chairs and computer workstations. The two lowest levels of the Main Library became general study areas, with the majority of the physical collection housed in the six level "tower" section of the Library.

The Library's priorities had also changed, with greater emphasis placed on value-add activities such as collaboration with faculties and research centres and more active consultation services for postgraduate students and early career researchers. This required creating the time for staff to provide these services, and therefore the Library implemented the automation and outsourcing of processes such as

acquisition of physical material, and also invested heavily in customer self service technologies, including self-check machines (for both general and high use collections), a compulsory online information literacy tutorial and online self-guided library tours.

Literature Review

The literature indicates that there is no single way that libraries are designing or redesigning their reference and information service. However, there is agreement that the reference service must evolve to meet changing customer expectations and provide better customer service (Bell 2007; Sonntag & Palsson 2007). Most of the research focuses on how to reduce librarians' time at the reference desk or improve online reference services (Fitzpatrick, Moore & Lang 2008). The most common solution is a tiered reference service, where library assistants are paired with librarians.

The variations to this solution are vast and include combining the service points into one (Allegri & Bedard 2006; Bradigan & Rodman 2008; Bradigan & Rodman 2007; Murphy et al 2008; Bracke, Chinnaswamy & Kline 2008; Flanagan & Horowitz 2000); expanding service points back from one to two (Bugg & Odom 2009); getting rid of the desk and providing an on call service (Arndt 2010; Reed 2007; Meldrem, Mardis & Carolyn 2005); roving (Lorenzen 1997; Kramer 1996; Smith & Pietraszewski 2004) or virtual reference services (Carlson 2007); and finally, being more proactive with customer service also with no desk (Korenowsky 2005; Calvanico 2005; McMorran & Reynolds 2010). It is obvious that reference librarians are needed as they are "uniformly viewed as helpful, competent, and knowledgeable, as excellent resources, that is, for patrons who could find them" (Massey-Burzio 1998, p. 212).

Libraries can get inspiration about trends in customer service and information service design from the retail, airline and banking sectors. These sectors are increasingly streamlining their service and enhancing the customer experience through spatial design. According to Byrne (2010, p. 63), looking beyond the library has "informed thinking about the use of space, presentation of collections, configuration of services, signage, traffic flows, client management, maintenance of security, enhancement of ecological sustainability and many other aspects of the new Library". The idea of proactive reference that Korenowsky (2005) outlines can be seen in successful retail models such as the Apple Store and Disney. In these outlets, customer service is streamlined and operates at the highest standard, which makes shopping in these stores a coveted experience (Johnson 2011; Farfan 2010; Delmont 2010).

By emulating these customer service standards libraries can provide a richer and more rewarding reference and information service. These retail models are even influencing banks and medical practices with a focus on greeting the customer on arrival using the concierge system (Passman 2011; Hilgert 2005; Whaley 2008). Both the banking and airline sectors have used this concierge system combined with self-service machines (Lu, Chou, & Ling 2009; Chang & Yang 2008). While technology is recognised as important, the human element must also remain in order to provide superior customer service (Passman 2011). With the advent self-service machines for libraries, this model is easily transferable.

Planning

An integral part of the realignment of UNSW Library's service model was to remodel the entry level, including the service desk area. Planning the redesign of this space began in early 2010, with the three key objectives of:

1. Enabling library staff to approach and greet customers rather than the other way round.
2. Continuing to exploit self-service technologies by providing self-service checkouts, computer terminals and shopping centre-style information kiosks.
3. Ensuring that the Library's prime real estate is used even when library staff are not present.

Like most libraries, the Main Library's entry space consisted of a large loans desk with a staff area behind it, and a separate, smaller reference desk. This space was dead space, particularly when the library is not staffed; for example, between 7-9am and 8-10pm during semester, when the library remains open with only a security presence. How could this space be freed up to provide access to more study space and resources at times when the entry level was not staffed? How could the objective of working more closely with faculties, researchers and postgraduate students in this level be met? Discussion with UNSW Reference Librarians when the redesign of the service desk area was first proposed provided a functionality wish list which included PCs with staff login access, Endnote loaded onto the PCs, telephones for phone enquires, having enough PCs in the public space for enquiries and consultation space for longer research consultations.

Early in the planning process, it became obvious that the physical barrier of the service desk should be removed (Korenowsky 2005; Calvanico 2005). After studying other libraries and consulting various library and furniture suppliers it seemed that the Library would need to maintain some sort of desk, with consideration given to modular tables that could be locked away. Also considered was the concept of a fixed desk or "nest" of desks with equipment that could be locked away when not required. This would have provided more flexible use of space, and included space for the use of self-help tools such as self-check machines, but this solution would not have met the first objective of enabling staff to approach and greet customers rather than the other way round, nor fully have met the third objective of freeing up prime real estate before and after hours.

The Help Zone Concept

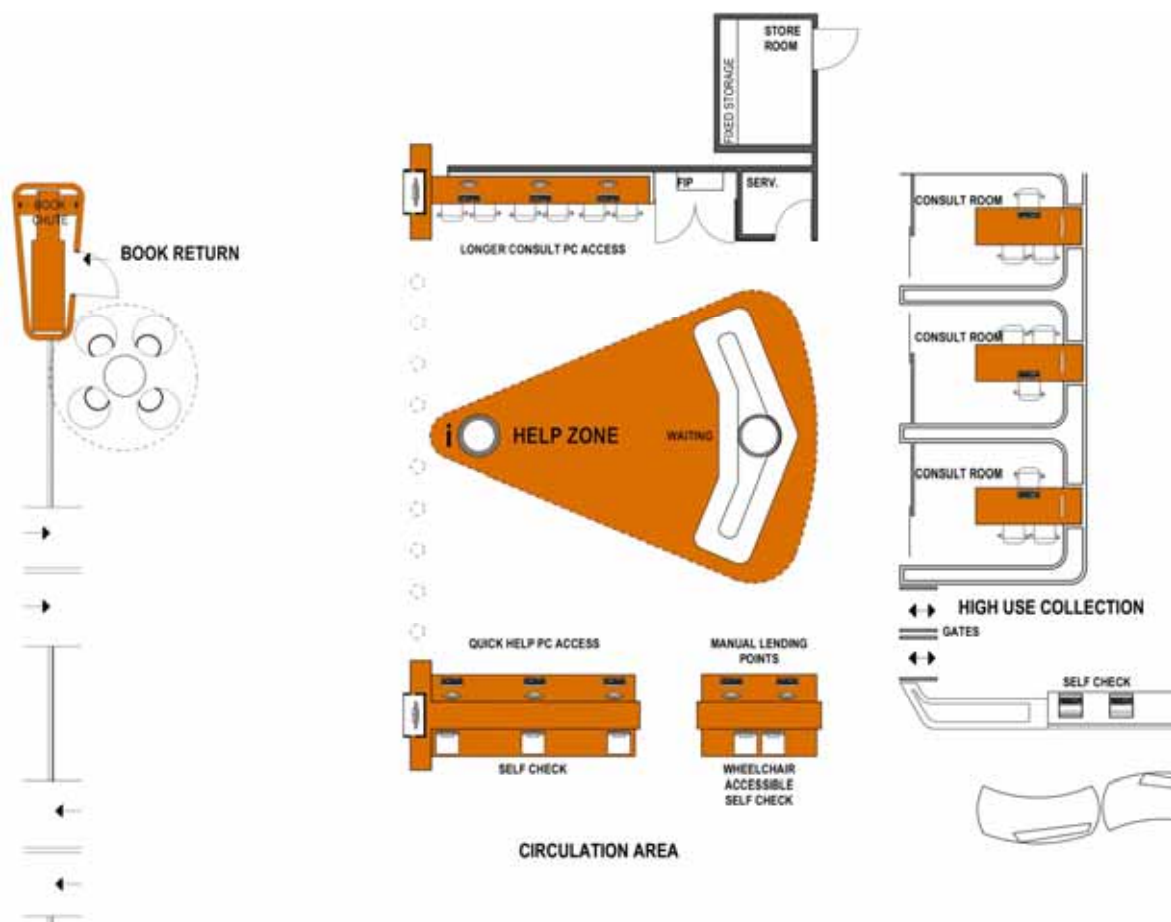
To develop the concept further, the Library looked outside of traditional library spaces, into the retail and airline sectors, to examine the latest trends in customer service. Retail models such as the Apple Store, the current benchmark for customer service in a retail setting (Johnson 2011; Delmont 2010; Iwatani & Sheer 2011), friendlier banking environments (Passman 2011), which use concierge systems as well as self-service technologies and the newest developments in airline check-in lounges, where self-service kiosks facilitate a quicker check-in process (Chang & Yang 2008), have a common theme: staff do not position themselves behind desks but instead roam the space, approaching customers to offer assistance and advice. Staff are professionally presented, easily identifiable and knowledgeable. Staff often carry mobile devices to assist in answering customer queries. Customer service

areas are spacious. Research from the library sphere was also looking to these sectors for inspiration (Byrne 2010; Booth, McDonald & Tiffen 2010). The idea of a library space service model based on the principles demonstrated in these environments emerged, and the concept of the UNSW Library Help Zone began to take shape.

From this study emerged the idea of a zoned space, similar to that used in retail and other customer service areas. The space needed to be flexible and large enough to provide areas for quick searches on a computer, reference interviews, longer research consultations and staff-only computers for functions such as checking borrower records. Within the space, customers, including those with disabilities, should have easy access to assistance and resources, including quick PC access, and be able to wait for assistance without the need to queue. Directional kiosks similar to those found in shopping centres would be placed at the front of the Help Zone to assist customers with directional enquiries, while large numbers of self-check machines were to be located on the outer walls, to provide easy access for borrowers. Staff would be able to roam throughout the Help Zone and approach and assist customers, guiding them to the appropriate staff-assisted or self-help service point.

This plan met the three key objectives for the entry space, the refurbishment was approved, and the Help Zone was opened for the start of first semester in March 2011. The finalised layout can be seen in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: Help Zone Layout



Preparations for the Launch of the Help Zone

Any major change brings anxiety, and the introduction of the Help Zone was no different. When library staff were first briefed on the Help Zone plans, concerns were raised about how the service would operate and how it would impact on staff.

The removal of the service desk was the greatest concern, as staff, like customers, viewed the desk as a barrier between staff and customers. However, while customers may have viewed the desk as a barrier in a negative sense, interestingly, staff found the desk a comforting physical barrier that acted as a form of security when dealing with a large number of people, or with disgruntled customers. Staff felt removing the desk would raise the chances of physical danger, particularly at times when only one staff member was present, notably on weekends and in evenings. Health and privacy issues were raised, and staff wondered about the management of customers waiting for service during busy times. Other issues such as where to store special items awaiting collection, where staff could securely place personal possessions when rostered to the Help Zone, and ergonomic issues regarding standing for long periods, were also raised.

A risk assessment by an external consultant was therefore commissioned, in order to alleviate the security and occupational health and safety (OHS) concerns expressed by staff. The recommendations that followed the assessment included providing further staff training on dealing with difficult customers, ensuring that all safe work practice documentation was up to date and easily accessible by staff, and installing duress alarms. The report stated categorically that no OHS guidelines were breached by the Help Zone design, and there were no greater security/OHS implications than associated with the previous service desk layout.

Despite the concerns raised, there were many aspects of the proposed Help Zone that enthused staff. All staff immediately recognised that from the customer point of view it did not matter whether a staff member was or was not a Librarian. Staff therefore committed to learning more about each other's roles, in order to guide customers to the most appropriate staff member for assistance. Librarians and support staff could also then carry out all basic loan transaction and reference services. The provision of three consultation rooms, multiple self-check machines, directional kiosks and varied service points all met with approval.

Help Zone in Operation

Since opening, the Help Zone has proved a major success, with both informal and formal feedback being very positive, and a wonderful enhancement of library services at UNSW Library. Some of the formal feedback was gathered by Bailin (forthcoming) earlier this year during a survey of students to determine their satisfaction with the entire library refurbishment. The whole concept of customer service has been turned upside down, with library staff becoming enablers, working alongside customers, in a more collegial, less formal way. Learning is very different when the staff member can step aside and allow a customer to use a PC to learn for him or herself, with the staff member acting as a guide rather than an instructor.

The space is large enough for people to move easily in and out, while the brightly lit “i” pillar draws the eye to the Help Zone on entering the building. The furniture and layout is welcoming, with a range of stand up and sit-down PCs. The large couch area has proven popular for people waiting for service, or just pausing for a quick break, and has ample provision of power points for the use of laptops while waiting. The number of PCs provided is adequate for the busiest of times, while the individual consultation rooms have been heavily used for extended research consultations. The fact that the library PCs and phones are locked away when the area is not staffed has meant that the Help Zone area is left open and accessible at all times that the library doors are open. In this way prime real estate has been freed up for use at any time, while the security of library networks and equipment is safeguarded.

Sonntag & Palsson (2007) refer to a statistical report on service trends from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), which shows a 34% drop in reference transactions from 1991 to 2004. However, the Help Zone has seen an increase in both reference and general enquiries. Statistics show that reference enquiries have increased by up to 200% in some months in 2011, compared with the same period in 2010. This increase has been created by the extra visibility and accessibility of librarians in the Help Zone as opposed being behind a separate reference service desk.

Library Staff find this new way of interacting very satisfying. One staff member explained the difference:

I think the Help Zone is a big improvement. I have noticed that clients feel less apprehensive to approach me with a question, and are more forthcoming in the services they require. I have also noticed an increase in eye contact used with customers and better opportunities to use different communication skills. Customers are ready to converse and clarify with me the services they require, which is a situation I have found very different from a desk service environment. They also seem happy that there is no barrier between myself and them, and appreciate that I respect their personal space when conversing with them.

The flexibility of the Help Zone space means that in quiet times fewer staff need to be rostered, as staff no longer need to maintain a presence at multiple service points. Another benefit has been an increased sense of collegiality between Customer Support and Academic Services staff, with the two staffing groups working alongside each other much more than in earlier staffing models.

The self-check machines have been heavily used, with the usage rate currently at over 91%, and up to 100% on some weekends, which is in keeping with the concept of providing increased self-help opportunities for library customers. In comparison, self-check usage rates for the years 2008, 2009 and 2010 were 31%, 33% and 38%.

The shopping centre-style information kiosks placed at the front of the Help Zone have been well used. The similarity in design and content headings to those kiosks found in shopping centres means that customers intuitively know how to use them.

Customer Response

Customer response to the Help Zone has been overwhelmingly positive. Students find the area a more friendly space than the old service desk model. Some quotes from students are:

I love the new Help Zone. The staff are so friendly and it's really nice that they come up and want to speak to you. Normally when I go into a library the Librarian behind the desk looks bored and I don't feel comfortable asking any questions. I really like the big couch, the whole space feels inviting.

"The Help Zone is much better than the desk before as it is easier to get help with people walking around. I was shocked at first since it is not traditional but thought it was cool. I think it will help the first years a lot as it is a big building. The location at the entrance makes it a great starting place" (Bailin, forthcoming).

The area is welcoming and inclusive and the design has proven to be both practical and intuitive for customers to use (see Figure 2). Space is not an issue; there is plenty of room, even when the Help Zone is busy. There are still a few occasions where customers may need to queue for assistance, and the placement of one small retractable queue barrier near the Library PCs has provided a suitable space. The barrier is withdrawn when not required. The amount of space in the Help Zone has meant that even when a queue develops there is plenty of room through the rest of the Zone for staff to assist customers. The number of PCs, both Library and public, and self-check machines (see Figure 3), is ample for the demands placed on it by UNSW Library customers. There have been very few problems in moving people in and out of the Help Zone. There has been less conflict. Before the introduction of the Help Zone library staff raised concerns about the removal of the service desk as a barrier between customers and themselves, as they were concerned that the customer would be standing right next to them when they were passing on negative information regarding fines or other issues. In fact, the new arrangement has led to less conflict: staff member and customer stand side by side and discuss matters in a more equitable way, with no desk to serve as a barrier or symbol of authority to alienate the customer.

Figure 2: the Help Zone – looking towards the library entrance



The design of the space has proven popular with library users, both when staffed and at other times. The consultation rooms are used by students for study outside of staffed hours, as are the public PCs, while the self-check machines are heavily used at all times that the library is open. It is a much better use of prime real estate within the library to see the Help Zone area used by students at all times, rather than the previous layout, with the inevitable “dead space” behind the service desks.

Figure 3: the Help Zone, showing Self Check machines and an Information Kiosk



Issues

Initial reaction from a number of academics and other long-time library users to the launch of the Help Zone was “where are the staff?” In other words, in the Help Zone space staff were not always easily identifiable. In an attempt to resolve this issue, staff now wear yellow UNSW-branded name tags, and investigations continue regarding other ways in which staff might be more easily identified. It is noticeable that new students adapt to the Help Zone very quickly while more experienced customers initially struggled with the lack of service desk. Some customers simply “don’t like it”, and that was always going to be the case, but it will be interesting to revisit these customers in twelve months time and see if they still feel the same way. Another common question is “where is the book chute?” This has proven to be a signage issue and is being rectified.

At times, an unexpected issue has been the amount of floor space taken up by the Help Zone, notably when less staff are rostered trying to assist multiple customers at the same time. Walking backwards and forwards from one side of the Help Zone to the other has been tiring for some staff, as they assist a customer at a sit-down PC and then move across to assist another customer at one of the stand-up Library terminals.

The location of the two Library PCs has proved problematic for two reasons. One is the location, near to the High Use Collection (HUC) doorway, and the other is the congregation of customers that can form in this area waiting for assistance. To alleviate the over-crowding in this area the library intends to relocate the Library PCs to the front of the Help Zone, taking away the crowding near the HUC door, and has

also introduced one small queue barrier to the front of the Library PC location. Security screens will also be installed, in order to protect customer privacy when their Library records are on-screen.

Due to the basic concept of the Help Zone involving the need to move students on from public PCs in the area, especially at busy times, it became obvious early on that staff needed to be able to “reserve” one or more PCs in the area for assisting customers, without the need to move students off the computer before using it. Flexible signage was designed and attached to the public PCs with the message “This PC reserved for staff use”. These signs can be placed over the front of the monitors at busy times to in effect reserve one or more of the public PCs for staff use when assisting customers.

Lighting and noise have been the other issues with the Help Zone. The original refurbishment allowed for carpet in a triangular shape within the zone, while the rest of the zone and thoroughfares nearby were covered with floor tiles. The acoustics have proven to not deaden sound with this set-up and it can be very noisy within the Help Zone when large numbers of students enter the library. Further study is being undertaken to see what steps can be taken to rectify this problem. While most of the lighting is adequate, the lighting options above the library terminals need to be revisited and the area brightened. Lighting for the entire area could be improved, which would help to draw a customer’s eye to the Help Zone upon entry to the library. Signage needs to be reassessed, and in some cases re-lit, as some customers have stated that they experience confusion as to the role of the Help Zone.

Conclusion

The Help Zone has been a major success since its introduction. Customer and staff feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The concept of the Help Zone is now being rolled out to the Freehills Law Library (FLL) and College of Fine Arts (COFA) libraries. FLL will undergo a refurbishment, starting in November 2012, which will feature a scaled-down version of the Main Library Help Zone, and COFA Library, while retaining a service desk for the time being, will have the customer service area rebranded the Help Zone, to maintain the one concept over all three library locations. The developments in UNSW Library have also been noticed and appreciated by the University Executive and other senior members of the University, and aspects of the Help Zone, such as the directional kiosks, are being studied with a view to improve customer service beyond the library, by rolling them out across the wider campus. Enquiries and requests for tours are also being received from other libraries. Provision of top-class customer service relies on continual improvement and observation of trends, both within the library sector and beyond, and the UNSW Library Help Zone is a prime example of the rewards for thinking beyond the standard library structure.

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