Short review

Virtual Reference Desk Projekt – Baden Wuerttemberg (VRD_BW)

1. Introduction

A pilot-project called "Virtuelle Auskunft in Baden-Wuerttemberg (Virtual Reference Desk Baden-Wuerttemberg (VRD_BW)), including the undertaking of a feasibility and market study, has been started by the Bibliotheksservice Zentrum in Konstanz (BSZ)[1] with the participation of (university) libraries of Dresden (Saxony), Freiburg im Breisgau, Heidelberg, Konstanz, Stuttgart and the Projekt Virtuelle Auskunft Bavaria.

An important aspect of this project will be the identification and involvement of foreign VRD suppliers[2]/partners, which may be looking for a pilot-site in Germany/Europe, this will include the participation of Library management system vendors. Also a comparison will be made of the needed features.

The basic principle of this Virtual Reference Desk project will be a 24-hours shared reference service, which allows users to ask questions, whereby librarians provide answers or guidance either by chatting, e-mail, website forms, instant messaging or interactive video, and eventually via videophone.

2. The VRD_BW as part of the BW Digital Library

A VRD_BW could be a virtual research library (VRL), which focuses on the need for easy access to professional and STM information for its users (students, staff and researchers).

A VRL could be a web-based structure of connected libraries and information services.

Access should be possible from any location either work, home or remote/mobile.

The main access to the VRD_BW is a Portal, which would consist of a "catalogue" of catalogues of available resources with Z39.50 and/or XML cross-access searching and a VRD button.

The Portal with VRD will provide single-point access to heterogeneous resources (reference and full-text) to users and allow personalized cross-database and domain searching via HTTP/XML and Z39.50 interfaces.

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[2]24/7 Reference www.247ref.org; Docutek Information Systems, Inc. www.docutek.com; eLibrarian www.elibrarian.com; QuestionPoint www.oclc.org; Tutor.com www.tutor.com.

3. A Virtual Reference Desk (VRD)

Today, reference staff has access to the Internet and a variety of other resources online and offline: reference books, CD-ROM/DVD and in print files/bibliographies. Their duties have changed in the last decade from just reference services to helping users with technical issues (reformatting diskettes, fixing printers and/or workstations).

The professional reference job is impacted heavily by the following trends:

– many patrons feel that they do not need a librarian due to the Internet (and the OPAC);
– commercial services are providing satisfactory information resources at the end-user's point of need/service;
– 24/7/365;
– unavailability of qualified staff;
– lack of (very) specialized subject knowledge;
– an institution cannot subscribe to all online/Internet resources and;
– an institution cannot subscribe to less-frequent used resources (anymore).

In looking for alternatives libraries have started services, like e-mail, telephone, chatting, submission of Web-forms, etc., which have had less or more success. However the "always on" nature of the Internet has given the impetus of providing "24/7" (around-the-clock) reference services with live interaction and call routing to a network of subject specialists.

Reference services are offered, which are not confined to a physical location. Virtual users will get the same degree of interactive assistance as a physical library patron.

To accommodate these reference needs libraries are offering Virtual Reference Desks (VRD) via collaborative projects (networks of expertise intermediation) or via using commercial VRD services, of which many cooperate with ILS vendors to physically accommodate these services.

4. Preparation for a VRD project

Preparing for a VRD is a complicated process

– acquiring the technology (via a LMS vendor eventually)

   special software,
   open source software,
   special hardware;

– create training programs for staff/users;
– promoting the service;
– providing an attractive physical lay-out of masks;
– have a FAQ list and 'best practices' on display;
– needs inventory and quality issues;
– budgetary issues;
– licensing/copyright issues.

5. Budgetary issues

The project will have a close look at the various costs involved in setting-up the project and running costs.

Costs in the first year are:

– initial project management up till funding known investments

    one time,
    PC plus;

– annual license costs, not including resources;
– training;
– maintenance;
– consumables;
– staff (current budget);
– project management.

Costs in the future year:

– annual license costs;
– maintenance;
– consumables;
– staff (current budget);
– project management.

6. "Market study"

Deliverables of the market study[3] include

– a survey of VRD software providers and a functional evaluation of the software packages concerned ("Kriterienkatalog");
– a survey of relevant foreign VRD projects;
– a bibliography of relevant literature;
– participation in the VRD 6th Annual Reference Conference "Creating a Reference Future", November 8–9 in Cincinnati, OH (USA); and
– open source features.

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[3]External consultancy by Johan van Halm Information Consultancy.