
Brief Communications

Reference Services via Electronic Mail

BY ELLEN H. HOWARD, *Reference Coordinator*

TERRY ANN JANKOWSKI, *Reference Librarian*

*Health Sciences Library SB-55
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington 98195*

EARLY in 1984 the University of Washington Health Sciences Library decided to use the university's electronic mail service (EMS) system to communicate with users throughout the health sciences complex. This EMS system was created by the John L. Locke, Jr., Computer Cost Center (the Locke), which supports many of the computer needs of the Health Sciences Center (HSC). Most HSC departments were recently hard-wired to the Locke, which also supports dial-up access. The HSC has about 600 hard-wired terminals and 600 terminals with modems. At least theoretically, most HSC faculty, researchers, and residents (a population of about 2,000) have access to in-house EMS.

A review of the literature disclosed that many American libraries already use EMS for external communication and that many universities use EMS networks for internal messages [1]. Few libraries, however, seem to use EMS for routine library services. The medical libraries at Washington University (St. Louis), Loma Linda University, and the University of Maryland recently began experimental programs for this purpose [2-4]. The University of Washington system, in use for over a year now, has been found to be a practical new application of this technology.

DESIGN

The primary benefit expected from EMS was increased efficiency. Users could send messages at any time, not just during the library's normal operating hours. Library staff could process these requests at scheduled times, thus eliminating queuing for users and allowing librarians to plan their time. The chief problem anticipated was that the demand for service could not be met with existing staff.

The program began with a six-month experimental, unstructured period to analyze users' needs and

to study the library's problems in responding to requests. During this period, users could request any library service, including those not previously offered by telephone (for example, photocopying of articles by library staff). For some of the services there was a fee charged to a university budget. A turnaround time of twenty-four hours was guaranteed. Messages could be sent in any format, although a simple menu-driven program was offered. To minimize problems and to study a manageable number of participants, during this experimental period the library offered EMS to a limited audience. Only sixteen of the seventy-five health sciences departments were invited to participate.

IMPLEMENTATION

On May 1, 1984, after seven departments signed up, the program began. The two reference librarians who were the project coordinators handled all the electronic communication and forwarded the requests for service to the appropriate sections (e.g., photocopy or reference).

During the first six months, seven people in two departments used the service sporadically. As anticipated, they asked chiefly for photocopy services (79% of the eighty requests). There were scattered requests for interlibrary loans, online searches, books to be held, and book renewals. Although incorrect citations generated some reference work, there were no reference questions.

To evaluate the service a questionnaire was sent to the seven participating departments. Of the four respondents, three had not used the system; all had different reasons—no need, dislike of the Locke electronic mail system, need for more information. The fourth respondent fully appreciated the service as it existed.

EXPANSION

Because the system had not been used as heavily as expected, it was subsequently opened to the entire HSC. The librarians distributed a flyer (Figures 1 and 2) throughout the HSC, discussed the service at departmental meetings and in university internal publications, and trained all reference librarians to use the EMS system.

Use of the system increased gradually. During the first ten months of the 1984/85 fiscal year,

BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
HEALTH SCIENCES LIBRARY
ELECTRONIC MAIL SERVICE (EMS)

WHAT IS IT? Using the Locke computer and a terminal in your home or office you can communicate with the University of Washington Health Sciences Library (HSL).

ADVANTAGE: Messages may be sent to HSL at your convenience and responses received at your terminal within one day, excluding weekends.

**SERVICES THAT
MAY BE**

REQUESTED: The usual library services; e.g., interlibrary loan, Medline searches, ready reference.

Previously unavailable services; e.g., having journals retrieved and articles photocopied, books placed on a pick-up shelf.

We are interested in discovering what services are most needed by Health Science Center users. Some services will require a fee.

REQUIREMENTS: Equipment to access Locke Computer Center
An account with Locke Computer Center
UW faculty or student, or UW, University Hospital, or Harborview Staff Status
UW budget number if requesting fee-based service.

HOW? See reverse side for a sample request

For more details request EMS Procedures and Policy or contact Terry Ann Jankowski or Ellen Howard at 3-5530, SB-55 or HSL (EMS). Demonstrations can be arranged for interested groups.

11/84

FIG. 1.—EMS flyer—front.

members of eight departments, using fourteen different passwords, sent 660 EMS messages. Of those messages 630 (95%) were photocopy requests. However, the demand has not evened out; there are still bursts of heavy use. Requests per month range from ten to 161. This irregular pattern makes it difficult to provide routine staffing to achieve the desired turnaround time.

THE FUTURE

If the EMS service is to grow, it must employ more publicity, demonstrations, and some enticements (possibly the offer of services otherwise

unavailable). To keep the operation running smoothly, explicit formats are necessary, so that all information is received in the initial communication; follow-up for clarification is time-consuming. Although the requirements must be precise, it is desirable to keep the menu-driven program short and the required information minimal; users quickly lose patience during the input stage.

Although the librarians hope a predictable workflow will eventually evolve, it may remain irregular. This presents problems in training staff and planning operations—problems to be solved by continuously monitoring and modifying routines.

BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

SAMPLE EMS MESSAGE

USER: (Dial Locke computer)
terminal: CONNECTED
LOCKE 701A 110Job...
Please Login

USER: Login
terminal: JOB 00 Locke 701A...
USER: 999,999 (your Locke account number)
terminal: *** (random characters to mask password)
USER: ABCD (your password which you enter over blackened line)
terminal: 00:00 DD/MM/YY Mon (time, date, day)
. .
USER: r hsl
terminal: Health Sciences Library Electronic Request. Choices are:
1. Photocopy
2. Place item on HOLD
3. Interlibrary Loan
4. Computerized subject search
5. Renew item
6. Other
7. Help on...
Choose 1 through 7

USER: 1
terminal: REQUEST FOR PHOTOCOPY
Please give the following information,
referencing each number:
1. Requester's Name 2. Budget Number
3. Mailstop or "pickup" 4. Author
5. Title, Volume, Year 8. Pages 9. Copy instructions?
Mail command:
Subject:
Text of message (use control-Z when done):

USER: 1. Ellen Howard for GJO 2.99-9999 3. SB-55 4. Enoka RM
5. AM J PHYSICAL MED vol. 61 (2) 1982 8. 66 to end
9. Enoka may not be primary author
1. Ellen Howard for MW 2. 90-9999 3. SB-55 4. Smith JJ
5. Lancet vol. 1 1983 8. 77 (letter) 9. Reference
may need to be verified. I got it verbally from
colleague at a meeting (Control-#)

TERMINAL: Mail command:
USER: exit
TERMINAL:
USER: k/f
TERMINAL: job...(includes time spent)
USER: (Disconnect telephone)

FIG. 2.—EMS flyer—back.

This service is not as popular as was anticipated, but the library's administrators do not regret their involvement. EMS use seems to correspond either to great service advantages (for remote users who need the photocopy or book retrieval service offered

only by EMS) or to familiarity (for individuals or departments already using electronic equipment). The library's EMS system anticipates and will tie into a communication network being developed and promoted throughout the Health Sciences Center.

BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

REFERENCES

1. Association of Research Libraries. Office of Management Studies. Electronic mail in ARL libraries. Spec Kit 106, July-Aug 1984:100.
2. Kelly EA, Halbrook B, Igielnik S, Rueby C. BACS: evolution of an integrated library system toward information management. Bull Med Libr Assoc 1985 Jan;73(1):9-14.
3. Kittle PW. Putting the medical library online: electronic bulletin boards . . . and beyond. Online 1985 May;9(3):25-30.
4. Weise F. Personal communication.

Received June 1985; accepted September 1985.