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Review

*Implementing Virtual Reference Services: A LITA Guide*


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This edited volume consists of eight short chapters on various aspects of virtual reference. The first chapter presents an overview of important considerations for virtual reference services and commonly used technologies. Three chapters focus in more detail on specific technologies: Twitter, Google Voice, and various tools for instant messaging services. The remaining four chapters describe specific virtual reference services: a national text messaging service, a state-wide collaborative virtual reference service, an embedded academic librarian in a first-year university course, and the evolution of services at University of Nevada Las Vegas Libraries. References are included at the end of each chapter. There is also an index with key terms, features, institutions, and names of referenced authors.

This book is most directly relevant for academic librarians, since four chapters primarily describe academic library case studies, but its usefulness is limited by the narrow, anecdotally-driven character of the bulk of its case studies. In most chapters, the...
authors are careful to include examples from public or school libraries, and several
types of libraries are involved in the collaborative virtual reference and text messaging
services. Even so, librarians from public, school, or special libraries may need to
extrapolate and infer considerably in order to apply the examples from this book to their
situation.

The intended audience is those who want to implement virtual reference. This could
include librarians who have never provided virtual reference as well as those who want
to add a new technology or a new component to their service. Librarians who have
implemented any form of virtual reference service will not find much here that is new—
the examples provided describe the status quo for virtual reference services and
technology in North America—although they may come away with ideas for
modifications to their library’s services. For librarians who have never provided virtual
reference, this book would be a useful guide to commonly used technologies, which are
explained primarily by means of examples of how other libraries have implemented
them. Both free and fee-based technologies are described.

Some of the technologies described are library-specific, such as LibraryH3lp,
LibAnswers, and Tutor.com’s Ask a Librarian. However, most of the technology
described is in use by the general population; this includes Twitter, Facebook, text
messaging, Skype, Second Life, and various Google applications, among others. A
particular challenge of technology-related books is the currency of the technology being
described; most of the technology in Implementing Virtual Reference Services is still
current and in common use, although Second Life, in particular, has declined in
popularity and relevance for libraries. Screenshot images are provided, which can be
helpful even though they, too, will become outdated as companies change their
interfaces.

While a focus on technologies is useful and important, the implementation of virtual
reference services requires more than just access to technology. Implementing Virtual
Reference Services also aims to provide “[i]nformation on staffing, training, and
assessing the services” (ix). Unfortunately, these aspects are not covered
comprehensively enough to be of any practical use to readers. For example, the book’s
editor rightly states that “techniques for each technology are perhaps the most
essential—and sometimes the most difficult—part of the training” (p. 5), but the book
fails to present specific techniques. Rather, authors list broad goals when describing
their training programs, such as “[e]mphasis was on effective communication using IM”
(p. 72). This is analogous to a book about physical reference services describing
reference desk setup in great detail and omitting any explanation of the reference
interview beyond a brief mention of its importance. Librarians who are new to virtual
reference, or who are considering expanding virtual reference to a new technology, may
not yet have a practical understanding of the established norms for communicating
online. Yet the book fails to introduce or outline these techniques and norms, or even to
offer reference to other sources. For a fuller discussion of virtual reference interactions,
including specific strategies for virtual reference providers, I recommend the research
Similarly, the book’s practical usefulness would have been greater if each chapter included specific guidelines or considerations for others. Most chapters rely on examples and anecdotes that describe what has been done in certain libraries. Only one chapter, “AskColorado: A Collaborative Virtual Reference Service,” situates the example within the larger context of virtual reference services and therefore gives readers a clear sense of the range of issues they would need to consider when setting up a similar service. For example, there is a description of the AskColorado software selection process and how it evolved over time, as well as a list of guidelines for other consortia—guidelines that both include and expand on the AskColorado experience.

At the end of the book is a section offering Suggested Reading. The category ‘Virtual Reference: General’ is most directly relevant to virtual reference services. Several of the categories—Website Usability, Marketing and Advertising, and User Needs Analysis and Satisfaction Studies—are important for virtual reference services but also generally relevant for online library services. These topics receive only a passing mention elsewhere in the book. Finally, there is a Keeping Up With Technology section, which lists websites and listservs of interest.

In summary, Implementing Virtual Reference Services is a reasonable introduction to the considerations involved in providing virtual reference services, and it gives a useful overview of commonly used technologies. Individual chapters are likely to be more helpful than the book as a whole, especially for librarians who are interested in reading about examples of how a particular technology or type of virtual reference service was implemented. However, the contributed chapter format over-emphasizes anecdotes and individual librarians’ experiences and therefore limits the book’s usefulness overall as a one-stop source for information on virtual reference services.

Reference


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