

Receiving, responding to and recording research and reference enquiries electronically – the new 3Rs in enquiry services

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the implementation of a Lotus Notes Research Information Management System – know as RIM-r – at the State Library of Victoria. This system captures, stores and indexes all extended research and reference enquiries with the aim of making that knowledge database available for access and re-use throughout the organisation. RIM-r has enabled the State Library of Victoria to receive, respond to and record enquiries electronically and to improve its ability to achieve its aim of being a major research and reference institution.

Introduction

As a major reference and research institution, the State Library of Victoria offers an extended reference enquiry service for enquiries unable to be answered on the spot.

At the State Library of Victoria, the extended research and reference service forms an integral part of our overall service delivery in the area of information access. Our Reference Services Policy states that “The Library offers specialised reference collections and services for most of its major collection strengths including Australian history and literature, newspapers, arts and maps, many of which are being enhanced by multimedia and digitising technologies.

Remote access to the State Library of Victoria is available by telephone and email, and through its Internet presence on the World Wide Web, which offers extensive coverage of the Library’s, services, collections and public programs.

We believe that by supporting the user’s need for a “back-up” detailed reference service, as opposed to the day to day desk and telephone reference services, we are increasing the use and knowledge of the depth of our collections and resources. We believe the wider the use of our resources the more the library can play a key role in providing access to information resources throughout the world. We are keen to promote the significance and extent of our collections as noted in our Mission: where the phrase “*Creating a knowledgeable society*” is supported by the first goal of

“collecting, preserving and making available Victoria’s recorded heritage and providing access to the world’s information resources”.

Certainly if the information is readily available in the user’s own state or country we will alert them to resources closer to home. In a digital age however boundaries are artificial and so we accept the responsibility of being a key reference and research organisation and answer enquiries from anyone who needs us, as long as the enquiry fits within our guidelines for answering extended enquiries. Again by promoting the expertise of our staff in the depth of our collections and resources we are highlighting our specialist strengths and services.

Background

At the Online On Disc Conference in Sydney in January 1999, staff from the State Library of Victoria viewed an electronic database created in Lotus Notes for the Australian Department of Defense. This database was discussed in a paper entitled “Delivering ‘Information Capability’: The Application of Knowledge Management in the Defence Library Service” presented by Iain Brown and Lee Williams. Anne Beaumont, the State Library of Victoria’s Applications Support Coordinator, investigated this database further and determined that, with modification, the application would provide the State Library of Victoria with the means to establish an electronic knowledge database, compiled from information researched in answering the 3000 extended research and reference enquiries received each year. It also provided the potential to capture the Library’s intellectual capital by automation, and this in turn becomes a knowledge asset for the Library as well as the user.

The software known as RIM-r (Research Information Manager), was duly purchased and installed and became operational on July 1 2000. Prior to this, significant work was undertaken by the Science/Technology team at the State Library of Victoria in evaluating and trialling the database and modifications were made to enable the software to reflect our requirements wherever possible. We have endeavoured to make the database more open and user friendly and so, for example, changed the field for Rank, as required by the Defence Department, to Title, the field for Search Classification to Subject Area, etc.

The example below shows a typical front page of a research work form. From this page, we are able to generate reports on the Program Code, Group Code, Geographical Code, and Turnaround Time.

New Research Request - Lotus Notes

File Edit View Create Actions Text Help

Welcome Liz A Jesty - Inbox Rim-r - 2. Completed Requ... New Research Request Research Work Form notes

Save & Back Exit

LAJ1-32F421 Un-Allocated

Client Details

Prefix : Ms
 Name : Liz Jesty
 Library Service : Email inquiry - Deferred
 Program Code : Arts
 Group Code :

Client Contact Details

Phone : 8664 7185
 Fax : 9639 3854
 Mobile phone :
 Internet Email : ljesty@slv.vic.gov.au
 Postal Address : 328 Swanston St, Melbourne
 State : Vic
 Post Code : 3000

Others Details

Melbourne Metro :
 Other Victorian :
 Other Australian :
 Overseas :

Date Received : 10/09/2001 16
 Date Due : 10/09/2001 16

Search Request
 What is the Clients Postal Address?

Start Puppy Microsoft Excel - Liz J... New Research R... Microsoft Word Office 12:55

The RIM-r database helps us to widen the access even further by providing instant retrieval of information which has previously taken some time to find. In essence RIM-r has 4 main functions:

- As a system for avoiding duplication
- As a tracking device to know who is doing a particular enquiry and what has been done on it
- As a basis for building a database for use by staff of useful resources – defined in the broadest sense and including both printed and electronic resources.
- As a basis for building a database for use by all users to locate information quickly and remotely so that mediated service is not always necessary.

The final function is one that will take some time to realise, as privacy and security controls will need to be implemented before we can transfer the information to a publicly accessible database. This will be worked on over the next year. When achieved, it will also facilitate one of the 3 Rs (Respond to) demonstrating how a key organisational objective of the State Library of Victoria, - “fast response to perceived user demand” – is being implemented as a significant improvement in service delivery. In general the database supports the thrust of the State Library of Victoria’s market research which shows that users access the Library for three main reasons – to conduct tertiary/school related research, private research (including family history), and work-related research. RIM-r will provide our users with an additional information resource tool available instantly and at any time. This will also coincide with the Library’s strategic move into the Virtual Library world, which can be seen in trials already being presently undertaken with “chat” software.

Operational changes

The extended enquiries service provides 3 methods of response:

- Immediate
- Deferred
- Fee for service

Where practicable, emails, telephone enquiries, and personal (i.e. taken at the desk) enquiries are dealt with immediately. If this is not possible, enquiries are taken on a deferred basis where the librarians are able to spend up to two hours researching the enquiry and delivering the answer in the appropriate form (i.e. by email, telephone, fax or letter). If the enquiry is unable to be answered within two hours contact is made with the user and our fee for service section, Express Information, suggested as an alternative.

Prior to July 2000, all recording of extended research and reference enquiries was undertaken manually. Registers were kept by accession number of all enquiries, which made any tracing of them fairly laborious some time later should a user wish to pursue the enquiry further. It also meant that research would need to be undertaken again for any similar enquiries so that duplication of effort was not uncommon. A FAQ database was established, known as Fugitive Facts, but this did not cover the wide range of enquiries received and was not particularly user friendly. In addition, as providers of an expert reference service, the State Library of Victoria delivers an outreach service known as Vision, which supports the Public Library system in Victoria by answering reference enquiries which the Public Libraries have been unable to resolve. This team was keeping their FAQs on an Access database to assist with duplicate questions. This database has now been transferred to RIM-r.

As a result the decision was made to bring together all the disparate sections of the Library who undertake research and reference enquiries and inaugurate a common methodology for responding to enquiries. This was not as easy as it might appear as each section over a period of time had built up individual ways in which to respond, often necessitated by the type of enquiry they received. A Project Plan was developed which gave some terms of reference for the project and enabled preparation work to begin. The purpose, objectives and outcomes are listed below:

Project Plan for RIM-r

Purpose

The purpose of implementing this software is to enable fast, direct access to a bank of reference inquiries built by reference librarians in State Library Services.

Objectives

To establish a systematic approach to working on extended inquiries which will result in a consistent standard of research.

Outcomes

*Efficient collection of statistical data that will assist management reporting.
Track and quantify the research effort which will assist in even distribution of research effort across the division.*

As a result of this plan, in October 1999, a project team was formed to oversee the initial training and gradual implementation of RIM-r into the extended research and reference enquiry process. This required extensive planning and it was decided to train each team on a team by team basis so that individual variances could be taken into account. We soon discovered that initiating a new system like RIM-r posed a series of challenges, not least breaking habits such as recording any information searched on pieces of scrap paper in coded form understandable only to the librarian involved!

Managing change

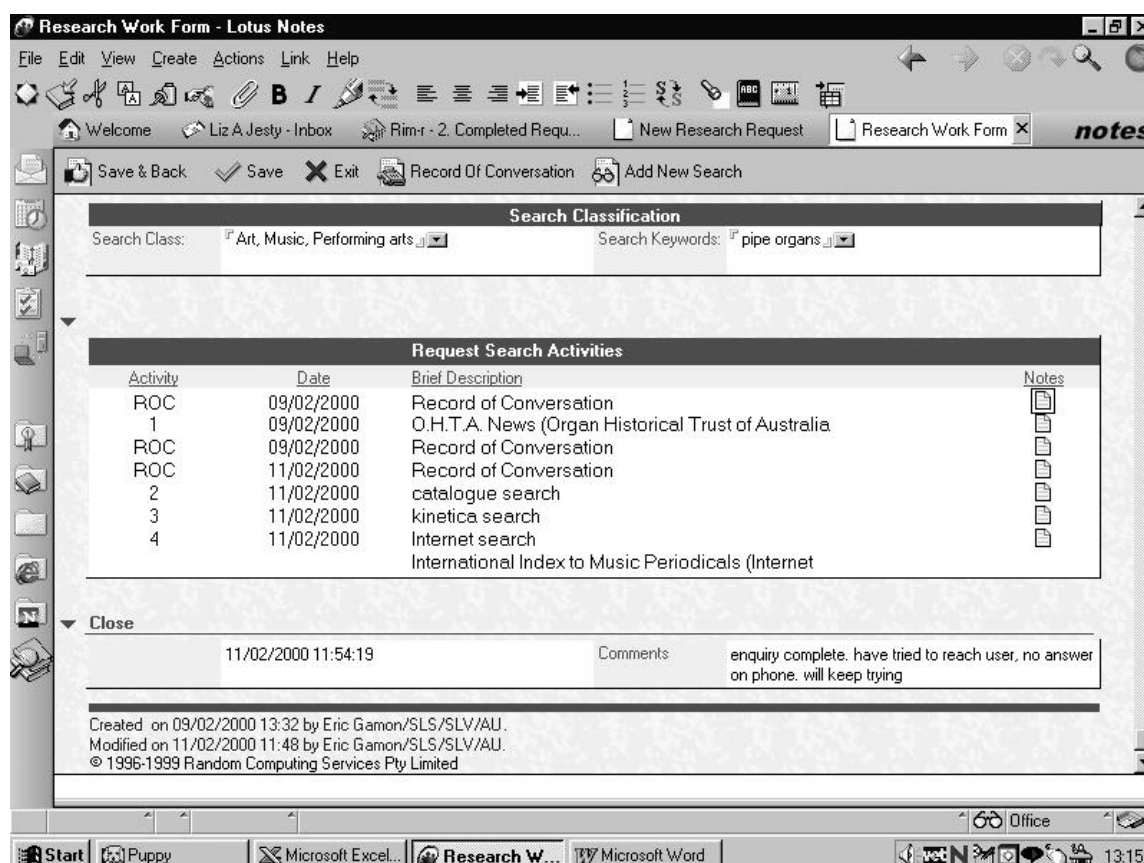
Promoting the benefits of RIM-r to the Library staff has been a gradual and ongoing process for me. Overcoming initial resistance to changing habits of many years was a challenge and one that took a good year to achieve. Some of that is due to the fact that the software did not initially allow much flexibility in its use which seemed to the librarians to mean that far from improving the time they took to respond to enquiries it was in fact lengthening it. From the date of implementation in July 2000, one of the State Library of Victoria's most experienced reference librarians, Jan McDonald, has monitored the software and worked closely with Anne Beaumont to endeavour to rectify any glaringly clunky parts of the software.

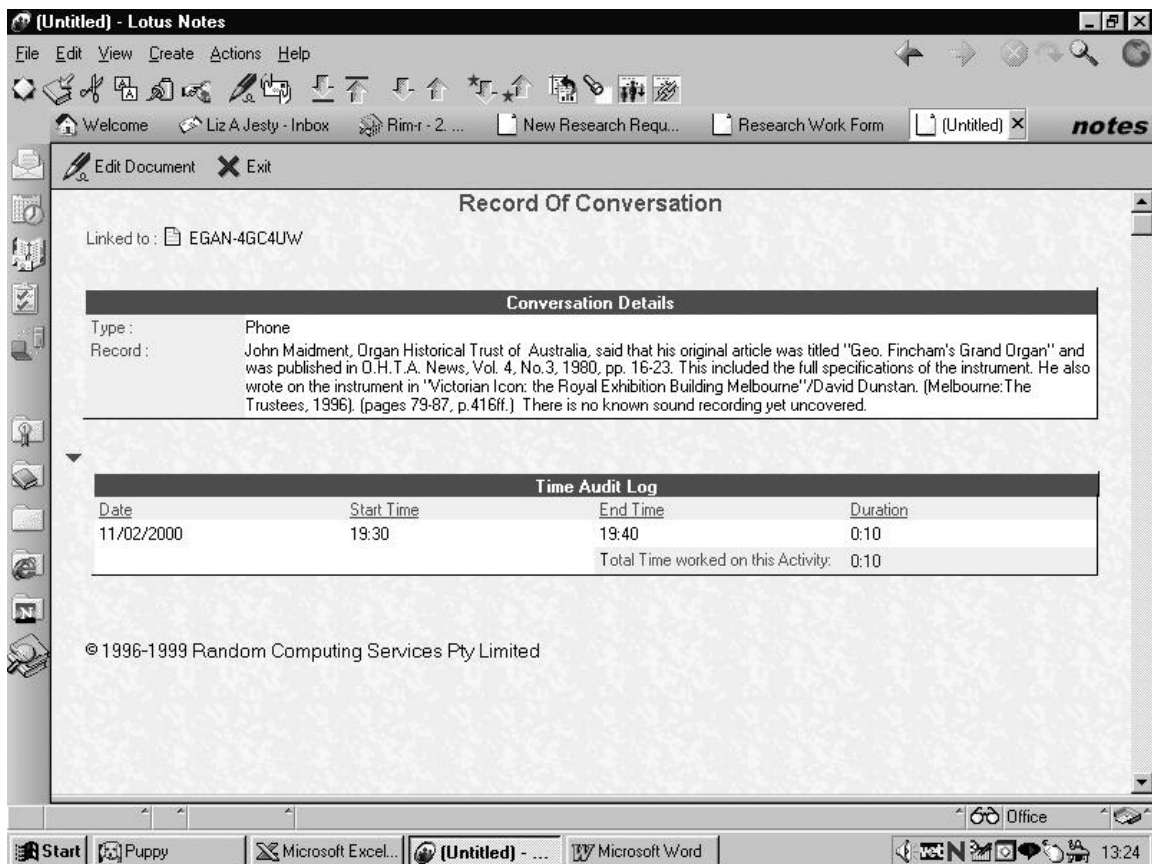
The librarians now need to ensure that the following information is available on each enquiry entered on RIM-r:

Necessary information

- **Who is the request for?**
- **How can the user be contacted?**
- **What does the user want to know?**
- **When does the user need to know it by?**
- **Who is handling the request?**
- **What work has been done on the request?**
- **Has the answer been sent?**
- **How was the answer sent?**
- **What was the answer?**

The aim with all entries is to be able to look on the RIM-r database and check for the user that for example, “your request on information on the pipe organ, now destroyed, which once stood in the Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne, is being handled by Eric Gamon from our Arts team. He tried to telephone you on 11 February 2000 but receiving no reply has since sent a reply to you by email. The answer listed 2 journal articles and 2 websites which would be of use to you. I have a copy of the email here which I could send to you again or print out and send to you by mail or fax.”





In addition to changing work practices by the introduction of RIM-r, the method by which extended enquiries are received at the State Library of Victoria has been altering rapidly. Previously the main forms of contact were by letter or telephone but email has now overtaken these as the most popular method of contact.

	July – Dec 2000	Jan – June 2001
Total email	449	817
Personal	77	69
Telephone	400	482
Letter	72	126
Fax	13	318

This has led to a necessary change in responding processes. Generally speaking, a user would receive a complete answer within 10 working days on receipt of a letter or telephone call. Emails tend to be briefer and less specific initially requiring an intermediate response to flesh out the real nature of the enquiry. It is possible that users using email are in fact posting their email to varying sources, which of course is much easier to do than by letter or telephone.

This is where RIM-r is particularly useful as initial details of the user and query are listed on the database so that if a response or follow up query should come into another librarian, by checking user details on RIM-r duplication of work is often saved.

It is also entirely possible with RIM-r to answer the query from your desk as information can be obtained from Internet or other electronic sources and cut and pasted into RIM-r and then emailed to the user.

Significance of service

Despite the fact that each week sees a proliferation of new “reference enquiry” sites, it would seem that users still choose to access the State Library of Victoria on a regular basis. Many of these enquiries reflect the specific strengths of the Library such as information on Ships, Patents, etc. An increasing number of enquiries are from overseas and in line with the State Library of Victoria’s goal of increased access to both virtual and onsite users we aim to answer these queries to the best of our abilities within our own guidelines and policies. RIM-r enables us to clearly see geographically and by format (email, fax, letter, telephone, personal) where our users are based:

Jan – June 2001	Email	Fax	Telephone	Letter	Personal
Overseas	98	3	1	28	1
Interstate	128	12	47	44	1
Regional Victoria	189	142	115	38	11
Metropolitan Melbourne	397	141	352	30	66
Source unknown	224	3	35	30	11

It should be noted from these figures that there is a large number of source unknown. This is partly due to the nature of users’ email addresses which are not always helpful in identifying where they are based, and partly due to the librarians forgetting to tick the source code box. We are working towards making this an automatic check which will not allow the librarian to proceed until the information is entered.

Anne Beaumont has also worked closely with the developers to enable us to achieve the reporting statistics essential for our Key Performance Indicators (KPI). In addition, reports in the following areas are also of interest to us in analysing the numbers of staff required to operate the service effectively:

Group Code by Turnaround Time, by Geographical Source.

(Group Code = Subject team)

Program Code by Turnaround Time, by Geographical Source

(Program Code = Format enquiry received in)

Jan – June 2001	Australian History & Literature	General Reference
Overseas	43	39
Interstate	112	51
Regional Victoria	73	66
Metropolitan Melbourne	115	239
Source unknown	73	30
Total	416	425

Jan – June 2001	Australian History & Literature	General Reference
Under 10 days	238	321
Over 10 days	178	104
Total	416	425

These reports indicated a problem in attaining the required turnaround KPI in the Australian team, and so the General Reference teams (incorporating subject areas of Science/technology, Law/Government, and Humanities), offered to pick up some of the Australian team's enquiries as they were able to achieve their turnaround times due to a larger pool of available staff. Thus the reports become an extremely useful management tool as by interpreting the data closely we could see where best to concentrate our resources.

Serendipitous searching often seems to be the way enquiries find us and by recording these queries electronically it is becoming much faster to respond to if the information is already in our database. Undoubtedly our user base has broadened significantly, as has the breadth of enquiries received. In addition, the introduction of a new Information Management System – Voyager - has seen the email reference service headlined on every screen which, we anticipate, will significantly increase our service in this area. Subject specific pages on the State Library of Victoria's web site too have seen the email reference service headlined which again encourages remote users to access our service. Far from attempting to downplay our extended research and reference service, as would be appear to be the case in some other libraries, the State Library of Victoria is keen to enhance and encourage use of this service. This reflects the priority being given to the Virtual Library service offered at the State Library of Victoria which is operated closely in conjunction with its significant role as a major research institution in Victoria.

Future potential

I do not believe that ready reference services digital or otherwise pose a significant threat or are in real competition with a research enquiry service. Of course as advances are made in the digital recording of reference resources a great deal more will be able to be answered quickly and electronically. This is where RIM-r will be of advantage to our Virtual Reference service as the data collected there brings together the Library's subject expertise and resources which will now be readily available to librarians undertaking telephone or chat reference sessions. Research enquiries will continue to be added to RIM-r so a wide range of topics will be gathered together in one database, making "instant" answers more possible than they are at present.

Once privacy and security issues have been overcome, we will make available a database of selected enquiries in the public areas and online. The aim would be to encourage users to search the database first for information along with the Library's Information Management System and Public Menu. We will set up a select field in RIM-r so that the librarians can determine at the point of completion whether the inquiry will be of use on the database for future researchers. We would hope to establish this later this year or early in 2003.

Knowledge Management is seen as the key resource now in organisations where technology is viewed as an enabler to deliver results quickly and efficiently to support the organisation's goals. The intellectual capital built from strong knowledge management forms a substantial asset to any organisation's charter and knowledge management tools such as RIM-r can only enhance the Library's mission to remain a leader in the field of information services. An expansion of this view can be found in Hope and Hope's "Competing in the third wave: the ten key management issues of the information age". Hope notes that "the third wave economy is dominated by service organizations, which now provide the vast majority of added value and jobs in all industrialized countries - - - in most service companies the *intellect* of the people is now the primary resource". How this resource or "knowledge asset" is accumulated and deployed is the key factor in maintaining a competitive edge. Thus RIM-r becomes a crucial tool in assisting the State Library of Victoria to maintain an efficient and fast response level in its delivery of its reference and research service.

References

Brown, Iain and Williams, Lee (1999). Delivering 'Information Capability': The Application of Knowledge Management in the Defence Library Service. Ninth Australasian Information Online & On Disc Conference. Sydney, NSW. Available: <http://www.csu.edu.au/special/online99/proceedings99/brown-williams.htm>

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