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Mobile Technology for Mobile Staff: roving enquiry support at Warwick

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Introduction:

The Warwick Enquiries Support Team came into existence in October 2009, and currently includes an Enquiries Support Officer (me) and 4 Library Advisors. Amongst an array of other duties, we provide a front of house roving service over 7 floors of a very busy building, picking up users in need of help or direction (or occasionally a full-on orientation session!) and making referrals to other teams as required.

There is no longer a traditional enquiry desk at Warwick, but there are HelpDesks run by the Customer Support Team. The HelpDesks deal primarily with circulation and account queries but also field the majority of other front of house enquiries and also make referrals to specialist staff. The roving Library Advisors are there to complement this service, offering additional flexible support around the building, and we aim to assist the HelpDesks by queue busting at key times and providing additional enquiry handling skills and referrals advice as needed.

One of our considerations when setting up the roving service was the kind of equipment the Advisors might need while on the move. We very quickly realised that mobile phones would be vital tools to enable Advisors to contact other staff quickly to make referrals or request help if needed for complex enquiries, so basic handsets (Nokia 3109 classics) were made available very early on. We also set up an "Information Point" on the main floor, with a staff only PC which Advisors could take students to when they needed to look things up to help with complex enquiries. This did provide much needed internet access, but meant that Advisors had to bring students to a certain desk to access it.

While the roving was going well, and Advisors were certainly able to assist to some extent at the point of need, we were a bit limited as to what we could do when access to the OPAC or internet was required to answer a question. In early 2010, based on our own experience, and that of other libraries and librarians (for examples see Cheetham (2007), Owens (2010), Alcock (2010)) we came to the conclusion that we should make use of the wireless internet and get some more sophisticated mobile technology involved.

Enabling roving Library Advisors to access the OPAC and other useful beasts online while on the move certainly seemed like a step in the right direction. As well as being a useful tool, we also expected that improving our mobile technology, and taking a step away from our somewhat outdated handsets, would improve our image and help us to engage with students who had already started to turn up in the library, smartphone-in-hand, ready to check their online reservation details.

Identifying value: How would we know if the technology we were trialing was actually assisting the service?

The Enquiries Support Team uses 3 broad categories to record enquiries we handle:

- Simple enquiries are those we can answer off the top of our heads "What are the opening hours?" or "Where are the science quartos?"
- Complex enquiries are those which require us to look something up, (for example checking book details or help with accessing e-resources), or ask someone else,

(perhaps quick questions that an Academic Support Librarian can answer over the phone).

- Referred enquiries are those which we have fully handed over to another person for completion, (such as requests for help with literature reviews or issues relating to IT accounts).

We expected that an internet enabled mobile device would be most useful for handling “complex” enquiries as it would enable both the looking-up of information (via internet access) and (in the case of smartphones) contact with other members of staff for assistance (as the basic handsets already did). So this is what we measured: How much was the device used for dealing with complex enquiries?

We were also interested in staff feedback on the devices relating to any benefits or disadvantages they presented to staff working with them but also ease of use and the student reaction to them.



Smartphone Trial:

We started by trialing a Nokia E72 smartphone. Whilst it was not our first choice of smartphones it was the best one available to us that was supported by our IT Services department. The smartphone replaced the basic handset we had been using whilst roving, and we expected that, it in addition to keeping Advisors in touch with other staff, it would also allow us to search the internet and access the OPAC etc. so enabling us to deal with additional complex enquiries into the bargain. After obtaining the handset, setting up the trial plans and a short period of staff familiarisation with the device we boldly stepped out onto the floors of the library on March 1st 2010, ready to rove with our new mobile technology in

hand.

Results:

- The smartphone was in use for a total of 105 hours over 3 weeks
- Total front of house enquiries handled by Advisors: 562
- Complex enquiries handled (which we might expect the smartphone to be useful for): 77
- Number of times the smartphone was actually used: 9
- % of complex enquiries resolved by use of the smartphone: only 11%

The staff feedback explained why the usage was so low. Advisors commented on the small size of the screen and the difficulty this created for web browsing, it meant they could not show students what they were looking at easily, so the element of user education during catalogue searches etc. was lost.

Almost more worrying though, was the student perception of the phone. It seemed that students were not expecting library staff to be using mobile phones in this way, and so assumed that Advisors were using it for their own personal communications. “They think we’re texting our mates” was one Advisor’s comment. There was also concern about the connection and web browsing speed; one Advisor described an attempt at helping a student to find a classmark

which ended with the student finding and using an OPAC machine before the Advisor could even load the web page. So, all in all the E72 was not a huge success.

Early iPad investigations:

It wasn't long after our smartphone trial that Apple released the iPad. We were lucky that our Academic Services team were very early in buying one, so we had the opportunity to borrow theirs in July 2010.

The initial staff reaction to it was much more positive than it had been to the smartphone, and we took the iPad onto the library floors for a week to see if it might be useful while roving. It wasn't the immediate success we had hoped for. Staff identified 4 major issues:

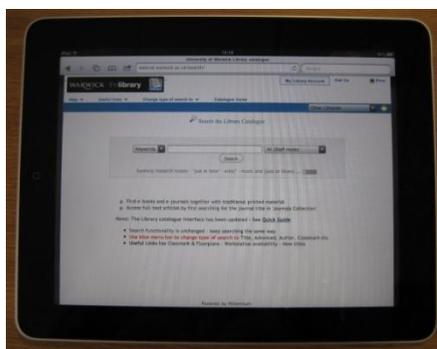
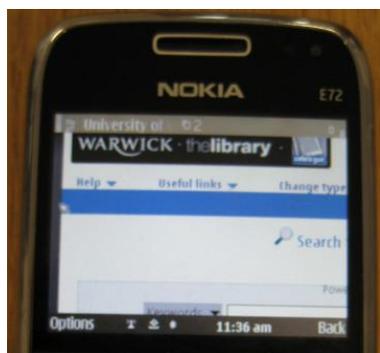
1. catalogue access
2. security and practicality
3. statistical recording
4. and of course, the iPad is not a phone

Catalogue access:

Our AirPac mobile catalogue was already live, so because the iPad automatically informs our wireless network that it is a mobile device (which was something the E72 didn't do) it was the AirPac version of the catalogue it loaded. This meant the Advisors only had access to a keyword search, which, while great for basic searches for students, limited what Advisors could do to help those with more in depth questions.

The problem was resolved by Graeme Leng-Ward, one of our Metadata Librarians, who altered the way the catalogue links worked so that the iPad defaulted to the full version of the OPAC. Graeme also inserted a new link into the AirPac interface so that iPad users loading that version could link back to the full OPAC if required.

These images show the improved view of the OPAC on the iPad (right) compared to the E72 (left), once the iPad was loading the full version of the OPAC.



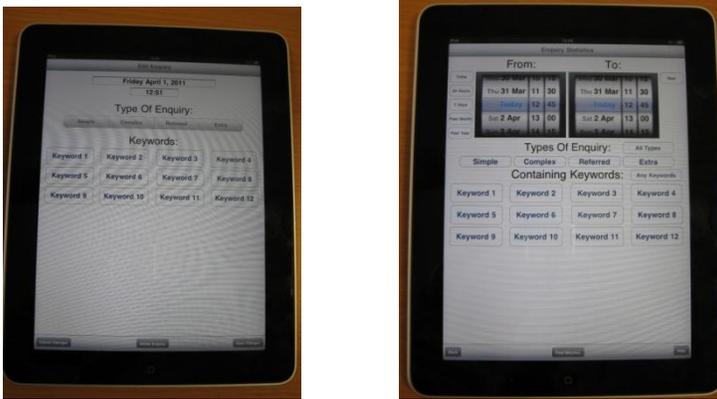
Security and practicality:

Advisors perform a range of tasks front of house which require both hands to be free, such as unjamming photocopiers and replacing self issue receipt rolls. This meant they had to put the iPad down and this made them very concerned about it getting stolen. The Advisors were also worried about dropping it, or damaging it in some way. Shortly after the iPad was released a whole range of accessories for it became available, including various bags, screen covers, protectors etc. so this problem was relatively easy to solve.

Statistical recording:

Up until now the front of house enquiry statistics have been tallied on clipboards. Carrying an iPad AND a clipboard has two unfortunate effects. Firstly it's cumbersome and annoying and secondly, it does nothing for the cool image we hoped the iPad would bring with it. We threw around some ideas about using a notes app on the iPad to create a similar tally to the paper one, or using a spreadsheet app to record statistics on the move, but these options were not very user friendly. We approached our Digital Infrastructure and Learning Technology team for advice, thinking they might know of, or be able to track down, an app we could purchase to help us out. We got an unexpected response - about a week later Richard White (who also built the Warwick Library app now available from the Apple store) appeared in the office with a test version of an app specifically designed around our existing statistics recording sheets, and with built in options to further edit it should we want more specific keywords etc. in the future. We all loved it immediately! A few testing sessions later and the app is nearly finished, it now also pulls up statistics reports and creates graphs.

The recording screen (left) and reporting screen (right) from the statistics app are shown here:



Phone calls:

We still needed Advisors to be able to contact other members of staff, and the iPad, of course, is not a phone. But it wasn't too much of a problem for the Advisors to carry the iPad and a phone, especially if the phone handset could be carried in a holder and clipped to a belt. It was felt that phone holders would be useful iPad or not, so we ordered some.

The iPad Trial:

Once it was clear that the 4 issues identified could be resolved, the iPad was starting to look like a useful tool, rather than just a funky accessory. So we decided to trial it properly and borrowed an iPad again for a week in January 2011 and recorded how many times it was used.

Results:

- The iPad was in use for a total of 35 hours over 1 week
- Total front of house enquiries handled by Advisors: 230
- Complex enquiries handled (which we might expect the iPad to be useful for): 56
- Number of times the iPad was actually used: 26
- % of complex enquiries resolved by use of the iPad: 46%

Given that the iPad is not a phone it makes sense that not all of the complex enquiries could be resolved by its usage. It's also interesting to compare this to the 11% resolved by use of the smartphone (which of course, is a phone!)

The staff feedback from the trial revealed that the real value of the iPad was in the improved flexibility, ability to meet demand at point of need, and increased student engagement. Library Advisors said:

"Most students were quite impressed, able to help them whilst on the move."

"Really useful for checking classmarks whilst in the stacks"

"Students were very interested in it and quite positive and enthusiastic about me using it. Some seemed surprised that we would have one to use. It was certainly better received than the smartphone when people thought I was texting on it and not being helpful!"

". . .even students who had not used one before seemed to find it easy to use and I didn't receive any negative comments"

Outcome:

There are still a couple of points of concern, mostly related to the wireless coverage in specific areas of the building, rather than to the iPad itself, but on balance the benefits of using the iPad as a supporting tool for roving are quite clear. We have decided to start using it as a tool for roving Advisors.

We have just received our 2 iPads and 2 bags for them, and are now in the process of installing the required apps and setting them up ready for term 3. We expect that they will be in full use, alongside a mobile phone, as part of our roving service at the end of April 2011.

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