

Breaking down the barriers - the no desk academic library

Abstract

When entering an academic library, customers most often see a service desk. Some libraries have one desk and other libraries have multiple service points. At the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Library there is none. The rationale behind a no desk academic library is:

- to create a more user friendly environment where library staff approach and greet customers rather than the other way around
- exploit self-service technologies by providing self-service check outs, computer terminals and shopping centre-style kiosks
- ensure that the Library's prime real estate is used even when library staff are not present

.After extensive renovations the Library has become an exemplar for customer space, providing flexible facilities and services that positively respond to the needs of today's (and future) customers. The *Help Zone* is designed to be a place where customers seek assistance with staff taking a customer to a workstation/self-check machine/kiosk to undertake an activity. At the *Help Zone* customers are encouraged to find out answers for themselves with staff members acting as guides rather than the experts.

This paper outlines the design features and service model of UNSW Library's *Help Zone*. It provides details on changes to staffing work and structure, responses from customers, designing the shopping centre-style kiosks, and the intended rollout plan to other (non library) service areas of the University.

Introduction

Over the last few years, University of New South Wales (UNSW) Library has undertaken major renovations to its Main Library building. The objective of the renovations was to create modern, flexible spaces for our customers that would accommodate current and future research and study practice. From formal and informal customer feedback it was clear that the Library needed to make finding items easier (physical and online), that there needed to be more places for people to sit, longer opening hours were required, and access to WiFi, wired internet and power outlets were essential. The new study spaces and overall improvements to the Library's interior have proven to be extremely successful with our customers. Though borrowing of our print collection continues to decline, visits to the Library continue to increase with 1,459,033 visits in 2010. In 2010, the final stage of the renovations which was for the entry level of the Library, was completed. This project included building study areas similar to other levels of the Library, however, the most significant change was to remove the large service desk and replace it with a *Help Zone*. This *Help Zone* has proven to be the jewel in the Library's crown as its design reflects the Library's philosophy of being an open and friendly customer focused environment.

Background

The University of New South Wales (UNSW) is one of Australia's leading research and teaching universities. The University was established in 1949 to teach and conduct research in scientific and technological disciplines – the only Australian university founded with this unique focus. Foundation faculties in engineering, science, and built environment were followed by humanities and social sciences, business, medicine, law, military studies and fine arts. UNSW has over 50,000 students and 7,500 staff. In 2010, UNSW ranked 46th in the QS world university rankings¹.

¹ Further details at http://www.unsw.edu.au/about/pad/UNSWAtaGlance_Final.pdf

UNSW Library comprises the Main Library (consisting of ten levels of a 14 storey building built in stages between 1966 and 1975), Freehills Law Library (opened in 2006) and the College of Fine Arts Library (a small library situated in a heritage listed 1898 old school building). During 2004-2006 the Library underwent a major restructure by amalgamating the Physical Sciences Library, the Social Sciences Library, the Law Library and the Biomedicine Library. It was during this time that the law collection moved from the Main Library to a new facility on lower campus.

As it required assessing and moving collections several times, the amalgamation of the libraries became the catalyst for planning and undergoing extensive renovations to the Main Library's interior². By 2010, the Main Library's ten floors had been completely overhauled with new carpet, furniture and joinery. The "tower" of six levels became the space for the amalgamated physical collection and quiet study areas were created around the perimeter of each level. During January 2009, the Library undertook a major inventory of the entire collection and as a result, the collection became better organised across all levels and items were re-labelled with items in poor condition mended or removed. The two lower levels of the Main Library then became general study areas. Previously natural light from the large windows with views of the campus square had been obliterated by rows of shelving. Designed for group and individuals, the general study areas include small booths, seminar rooms, group study rooms, computer workstations, benches and study pods. Movable furniture such as bean bags, stools and comfortable chairs are available and powerpoints are everywhere. The number of available seating increased in the Main Library from 1565 in 2005 to 3237 in 2010.

The amalgamation of the physical libraries came at a time when changes to the Library's organisational structure also occurred. These changes evolved in response to changes in scholarly information, university priorities and user needs. This has required, for example, a greater presence in front-of-house activities such as proactively collaborating with faculties and research centres and providing consultation services for postgraduate students and early career researchers. To free up staff to offer these new or revitalised activities and services meant a change to the Library's priorities. As well as automating and outsourcing relevant processes, such as acquiring and processing of physical material, a key strategy was to exploit self service technologies. As a result, the Library introduced self-check machines, including in high use areas where users borrow and return short-term loans and borrow reserved material. A compulsory online information literacy tutorial for new undergraduates and online self-guided pictorial library tours were also created.

Planning the Help Zone

In early 2010, planning for the refurbishment of the entry level to the Main Library commenced. The success of transforming primary library real estate from shelving to productive study and research space, including using the popular self-service facilities, influenced thoughts about how the entry level should be designed. The Library's goal was to create an entry that was spacious, modern and welcoming. The three key objectives were to:

1. enable library staff to approach and greet customers rather than the other way around
2. continue to exploit self-service technologies by providing self-service check outs, computer terminals and shopping centre-style kiosks
3. ensure that the Library's prime real estate was used even when library staff were not present. This objective was very important as the Main Library is open for several hours before and after library staff are available, ie the Library operates under a security presence before 9am and after 8pm.

As with most other academic libraries, and indeed libraries in general, the Main Library's entry consisted of a large loans desk with shelving and staff areas behind it, and a smaller separate reference desk. To achieve the Library's objectives it was envisaged that the physical barrier of a desk should be removed. After reviewing what activities occurred at these staffed service points, the Library first considered designing modular tables that could be stored away from the area or modules where library equipment could be locked away leaving clear desktops for general use. However, after consulting with various furniture and library suppliers, looking at other library set-ups and the architect's initial designs, the general consensus was that the Library would still have a desk or perhaps, a 'nest of desks'. The result would be a more flexible use of space using self-service

² See projects' overview at lahznimmo architects: <http://lahznimmo.com/projects/main-library-tower-unsw/> and <http://lahznimmo.com/projects/main-library-ground-floor-unsw/>

technologies but did not meet our first objective of improving the Library's interactions with its customers.

The Help Zone concept

It was the Library's architect, Andrew Nimmo, who first mooted the idea of a zoned area. His suggestion was to redefine the model of service to be less 'library-centric' and be more in line with current retail models, such as the Apple stores and general department stores, and in similar developments with check-in areas of airports where travellers use self-service kiosks to get boarding passes and to check-in luggage. In these environments, staff are not behind desks but are roaming the space and approaching customers to offer assistance. Staff are clearly identifiable, are professional in dress and conduct, are well informed about services, and are often equipped with mobile devices to connect to relevant online services. Spaces are large and spacious and are designed to minimise queues (lines). Self-service equipment is modern and easy to use.

With the Library's *Help Zone*, the concept was similar (see Figure 1). The *Help Zone's* space would be large enough to accommodate a steady flow of people and provide access to a variety of activities such as quick look-ups on a computer, reference interviews, private reference consultations, and staff-only terminals for checking borrower records. The space also needed to accommodate customers, including people with disabilities, waiting to be assisted without the need to queue. Self-check borrowing machines and directional kiosks would be strategically placed to encourage self-service and for basic transactions in the hours when no library staff would be available. Throughout the *Help Zone* staff would be free to roam and approach and assist customers. They would then take the customer to the most appropriate facility, seek assistance from another staff member, and/or advise on where to go in the Library. As this concept met the three objectives for the Library's entry, the Library agreed to go ahead and the *Help Zone* was opened at the commencement of semester one (March) 2011.

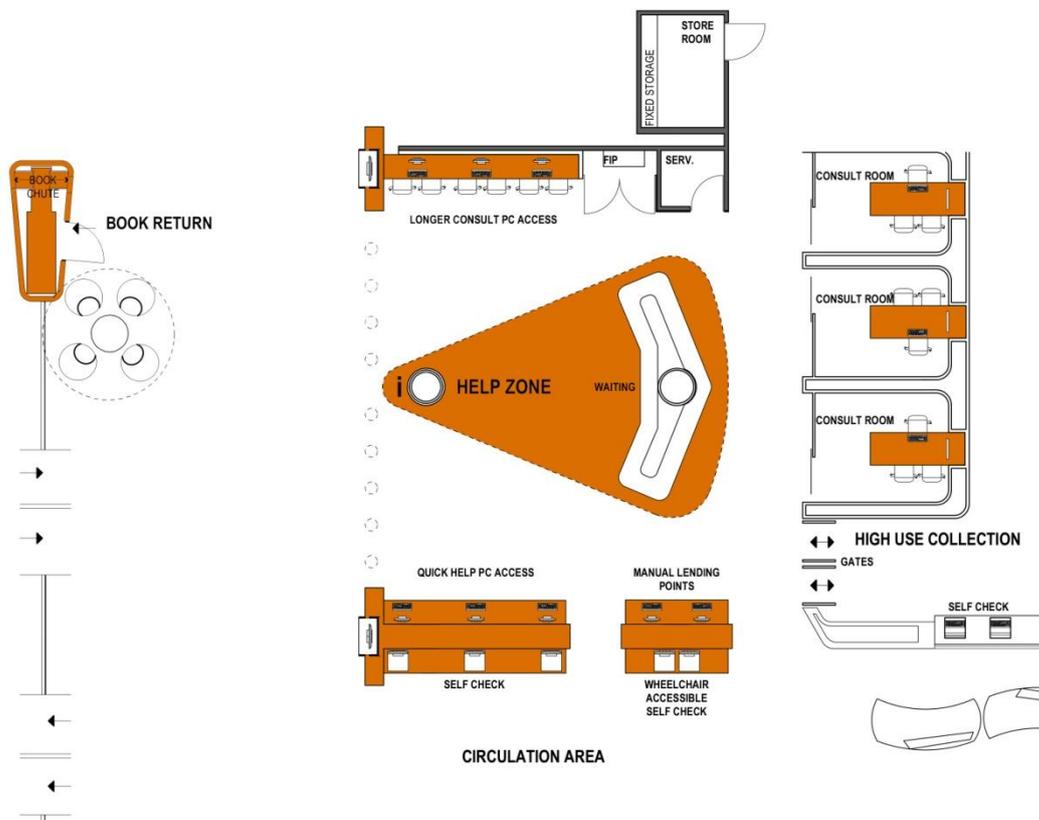


Figure 1: Plan of Help Zone

Planning prior to opening

Of course with any change there is a degree of trepidation about the implications a change will bring. When library staff were first shown the plan of the *Help Zone* concerns were raised about how the facility and service would operate. Interestingly, it was the removal of a desk that caused the most consternation. To staff, the desk was literally a physical barrier that protected them from customers. There was a great deal of discussion around aggressive and angry customers and feeling vulnerable to physical assault, particularly in evenings and on the weekend when there was only one staff member on duty. No barrier meant concerns about health and privacy of staff from being too close to the 'public'. Staff were worried that there would be nowhere to put personal possessions and nowhere to put special material waiting for collection – many had not noticed the secure area on the plan. It was envisaged that in busy times it would be hard to manage dealing with queries without a queuing facility and that customers would 'creep up' and frighten staff. Ergonomic issues were also raised about standing for long periods of time.

To alleviate these security and occupational, health and safety (OHS) concerns, a risk assessment of the *Help Zone* was undertaken by an external consultant. His recommendations included providing further training in dealing with difficult customers, ensuring that duress buttons were installed and ensuring that documentation of safe work practices were up-to-date and easily accessible by all staff. His report made it quite clear that the *Help Zone's* design did not breach any OHS guidelines and practices, and did not cause greater security/OHS risks than the former area of counter/desk.

However, the proposed *Help Zone* also provided new opportunities. Library staff were pleased with the three purpose built research consultation rooms and the variety of computer workstations that were included in the design. They supported the inclusion of the self-check machines and directional kiosks and were committed to making sure that customers tried using the self-help facilities for themselves. They agreed that there was no need for a customer to know who was a librarian and who was not; librarians were willing to learn how to help with basic loan transactions and customer support staff learned how to assist with simple reference queries. To assist customers to identify library staff, staff agreed to wear name badges.

The Help Zone in operation

From the moment of opening, the *Help Zone* has proven to be a major success and has transformed the concept of customer service within the Library. By simply removing the barrier of a desk, the physical barrier between customer and staff member has been removed too. By working side-by-side, library staff are 'enablers' rather than experts and conversations are less formal and far more collegial. When using computers, library staff have relinquished the mouse and handed over navigation to the customer so that they can learn for themselves – this approach is much easier when sitting together. As one staff member reports:

I think the Help Zone is a big improvement. I have noticed that clients feel less apprehensive to approach me with a question, and are more forthcoming in the services they require. I have also noticed an increase in eye contact used with customers and better opportunities to use different communication skills. Customers are ready to converse and clarify with me the services they require, which is a situation I have found very different from a desk service environment. They also seem happy that there is no barrier between myself and them, and appreciate that I respect their personal space when conversing with them.

The design is intuitive with customers easily knowing what to do within the space. The area is roomy and it is easy for people to move in and out. It is clearly identifiable when entering the building and the *Help Zone's* brightly lit "i" pillar welcoming to customers, particularly as this is where library staff stand and greet customers. The large couch is comfortable and provides a useful place to wait for assistance, particularly as there are plenty of powerpoints for laptops. The number of computers and variety of facilities are well used and allow library staff to offer the types of reference and research services that are requested by customers. Locking away telephones and library terminals/computers means that the security of university networks are not compromised when the *Help Zone* is unattended and allows for the *Help Zone's* computers, consultation rooms and sitting areas to be used during the entire time that the Library is open. Not only is prime real estate used at any time, it is also more aesthetically pleasing not to be confronted by an empty desk with an 'unattended' sign or a

gate pulled down closing off the area. The area is often described as being a 'friendly' area, as one student states:

I love the new Help Zone. The staff are so friendly and it's really nice that they come up and want to speak to you. Normally when I go into a library the librarian behind the desk looks bored and I don't feel comfortable asking any questions. I really like the big couch, the whole space feels open and inviting.

The fact that library staff are moving about has also increased collegiality between staff members. Staff converse with one another more often and support each other when assisting customers. A customer may move between staff depending on the requirements of the request and the expertise of the staff, but this is actioned in a seamless way with less demarcation between librarian and non-librarian roles.

The placement of the self-check machines and directional kiosks has also proven to be successful. The percentage of Main Library self-loans is well over 90% with some weekends having 100% of loans processed via the self-check machines. As expected, the fact that the directional kiosks are the same design as what can be found in major shopping centres means that customers intuitively know how to use them. To assist with this, in designing the Library kiosks, the words and phrases used by shopping centres, for example "Find by name" and "Find by category", were kept.

Issues

As with many new innovations, the *Help Zone* has also raised a few issues. At times, the spaciousness of the *Help Zone* can be a disadvantage particularly during busy periods when one staff member may assist several customers simultaneously for extended periods. For example, a staff member might leave a customer viewing a database to assist with a quick catalogue check. This may require the staff member to walk back and forwards from one side of the *Help Zone* to the other which can get tiring after a time. Approaching and talking to customers requires library staff to be proactive in their dealings with customers and the more introverted library staff found this intimidating at first. Moving customers out of the *Help Zone* also requires staff to be confident in dealing with people, however, there has been little resistance to these requests as customers understand the *Help Zone's* purpose and there are now many alternatives within the Library to go.

During busy times there has also been a need to put up a small queue barrier to prevent customers wishing to query loans etc from congregating around the Library terminal. This has helped with concerns around customers viewing personal details of others. To remove needing the barrier, the intention is to move the Library terminal away from the entry of the high use area (see Figure 1) to a less congested part of the *Help Zone*. Shields placed around the computer screen will also assist in preventing personal information from being viewed by third parties.

Despite wearing name badges, the most common complaint from customers is the inability to differentiate library staff with customers. For many, a desk or a counter is a physical feature that represents where you will find assistance. Confronted by 'no desk' immediately causes some to become disorientated and even alarmed, particularly for those who are familiar with traditional library services and facilities. As one postgraduate student states:

Today I stepped into the library to find myself amazed. The library must have spent quite a lot of money on the removal of the information desk. I question how effective this transformation is for aiding students and staff. We are meant to search for library staff around the help point area. However, it is extremely difficult to see library staff, when there are crowds of students walking around and using the computers. When there was an information desk, we were able to distinguish the library staff from students and other UNSW staff members (such as academics). We stood in a line and waited our turn.

Over time it is expected that customers will become accustomed to the change in physical layout and service model. When thinking how to improve distinguishing library staff, it was considered requiring staff to wear a uniform when working in the *Help Zone*. However, in feedback from library staff it was unanimous that staff did not want to wear a uniform. They argued that the name badges were quite obvious and that the new service philosophy meant that the staff member should be the one seeking the customer rather than it being the other way.

Conclusion

As the Main Library is situated directly across from the University's Chancellery, the changes to the Library have been noticed and appreciated by University Executive and other senior members of the University. They now look upon a vibrant, colourful library space which is always full of people, and the Main Library is now often the feature of campus tours for visitors to the University. As the University continues to streamline its services, the features of the *Help Zone*, such as the directional kiosks, are being considered to improve customer service beyond just describing the Library's facilities. In the meantime, the *Help Zone* concept is moving to lower campus as the Library is currently planning minor renovations to the Freehills Law Library (FLL). FLL is a small library (two floors) and hence the *Help Zone* will be on a smaller scale than the Main Library but it will include the various workstation configurations, a directional kiosk, self-check machines, and one consultation room. Most importantly, FLL's *Help Zone* will have no desk providing yet another opportunity to break down the barriers within an academic library.

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