

## **LIBRARY WEBSITE CHAT: JUST DIVE IN AND SWIM**

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The Monash Health Library Service provides information services and support that enables the health service's employees, particularly health professionals, to access quality information rapidly, at any time and place for patient care and research. While the Library Service stretches across five physical branches along the south-eastern corridor of Melbourne, library patrons predominately access resources online and start their information seeking at the library website.

A tendency towards online access has been increasing in the health service for many years, in line with the growth in online resources. Statistics on this trend skyrocketed when the Library re-designed its website in 2019 to be patron centred and user friendly. The trend has continued since – statistics in the last 12 months alone have shown that library website visits have increased by 279% and there were more than 70,000 unique visits in 2019.

To ensure help is available at this popular point of access, the library implemented a website chat option integrated with the existing LibGuides content management system. The implementation began tentatively in January 2020 until the COVID-19 pandemic and the first working from home order in Melbourne demanded a new approach. With only 3 days warning, the library team had to reshape access points to continue to respond to the needs of library patrons and implement what was needed to deliver the existing range of services remotely. Website chat was brought to the fore as a crucial business continuity measure and the fast tracked project was completed in less than a week. The library team was asked to dive in and swim!

This article discusses the implementation of webchat in a hospital library service, system functionality and resourcing. It also provides an analysis of how webchat is used in a hospital environment, its successes and challenges.

### **How it works**

The webchat feature is hosted on Springshare's *LibAnswers* platform, which library staff access via individual Springshare logins that use personal names and have professional photos attached. For simplicity the team is organised into only one 'Library' group (comprising 8 staff). The chat platform shows all active (logged in) users with two distinct sections – patron chats and internal chats. Logged in library group users can answer patron chats and send messages to the library group or one another.

Website visitors can initiate a chat throughout Library's website via a widget embedded on all pages. This widget indicates when librarians are online and has a single 'chat now' button. When librarians are offline, the button is replaced with an offline message and the library email address. When a chat is initiated by a website user, they are prompted to provide a name (though this is optional) and their question, at which point an alert sounds on the library side of the interface for all logged in users. Whoever is free to claim the enquiry, can do so. Other logged in users can see from a quick glance that the chat has been claimed and by which operator.

Once a chat has been started, it is easy for the chat operator to manage the conversation. Having distinct sections for 'patron chats' and 'internal chats' within the same interface allows the operator to quickly switch to the library group chat to consult or ask for help if needed. Response scripts for the most common questions are available from a 'canned messages' button, ensuring quick and consistent answers. If the patron's question is outside the scope of the operator's knowledge, a transfer option allows the operator to re-allocate the chat to another logged in operator, e.g. a more senior member of the team. If follow up is required by a specific staff member (e.g. for an inter library loan request) there is an option to send the chat transcript by email after the session has ended.

### **Modifications for COVID-19**

As library staff worked from home during Melbourne's 2020 lockdowns, enquiry desks in each branch were unstaffed for weeks and then months. It was no longer feasible for patrons to obtain in person assistance without an appointment. Signage directed on site health care workers to the library website and contact points, including webchat. During this period, webchat was modified to display a pop up box that appeared in the centre of the screen within seconds of a user arriving at the library website. It asked if the user needed help as "Monash Health Librarians are online". The user had to click 'chat now' or 'no thanks' before proceeding. Under normal circumstances, this pop up box might have been seen as invasive. During COVID-19 it signalled that the organisation's librarians were still available to help in spite of their physical absence.

### **Resourcing**

All members of the library team have been provided access to, and trained in the use of, the website chat platform. Staff are expected to be logged into webchat for the duration of their shifts, though they can set their status to 'away' or 'offline' if they are working on tasks that require their full attention without distraction.

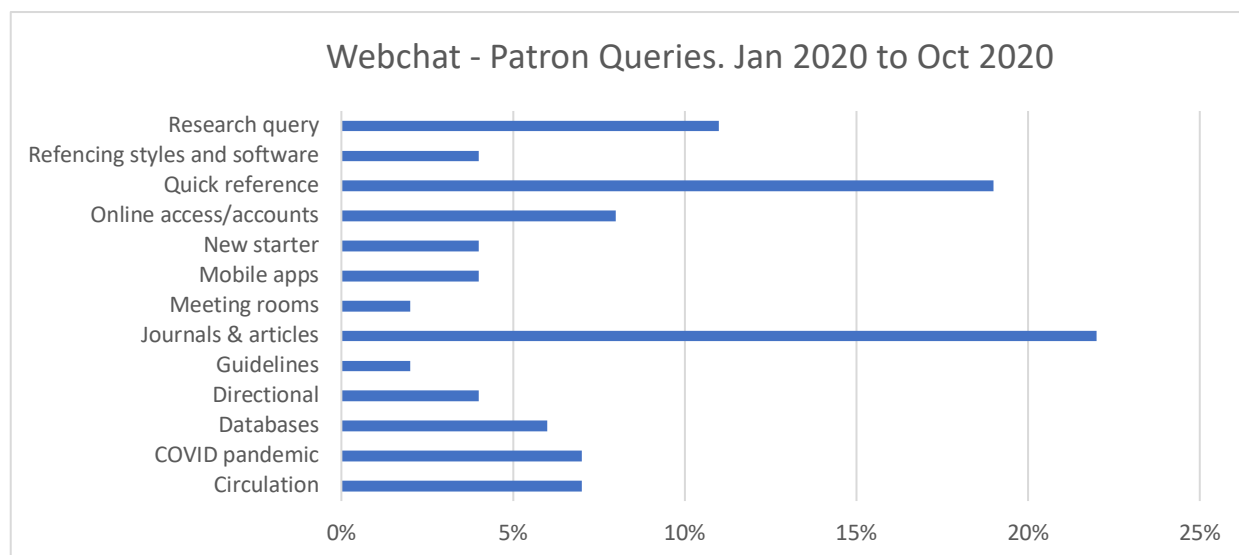
Collaboration and clear communication between staff to ensure seamless operation is essential. A minimum of two staff are required to monitor website chat on any given day, so that there is always one person available to respond to patron queries if the other needs to leave for any reason. Operators negotiate break times to ensure

that it is fair and reasonable for everyone, and an effort is made to ensure that the same person does not answer every incoming request.

### Analysis of queries

Patrons have most commonly used webchat to ask about journal access with questions about journal holdings or needing a journal article in full text. Many of these queries were forwarded to the library’s document delivery staff. Quick turnaround reference queries were similarly frequent, where operators point the requestor to a relevant library guide or recommend a suitable resource from the catalogue or database list. Patrons commencing a research study were also regularly inclined to use chat to make an appointment for a research consultation or ask for advice.

The following table provides a summary of the types of queries received from webchat from 1/1/2020 to 31/10/2020.



### Successes & challenges

Chatting with patrons and within the library group is a user friendly experience, similar to modern messaging applications with the inclusion of basic text formatting tools, emojis and the ability to attach files. For patrons the inclusion of staff photographs alongside names also turned out to be surprisingly important - it established that the chat connected to a real person in the library team, rather than automatic replies or ‘bots’.

Webchat ensures that health care workers can access assistance with information services at the point of need; they are no longer limited to visiting in person, phoning from a busy ward desk or waiting for an email response. When webchat sessions are initiated by patrons, the response time from library staff is almost

instantaneous. Previously, patrons may have waited up to 1-24 hours for an email response.

From the outset, the team was urged to view webchat as a new form of electronic communication, dissimilar to email where you might finish what you are doing before reading a message and responding. It was important that webchat was viewed akin to an in-person enquiry requiring instant interaction. And yet, at first, the same team members tended to respond to the chat alarm. Library management followed up with individuals to explain that all logged in users were expected to treat the chat alarm as if someone had approached their desk, in person, with a question. This was more of a challenge for staff who typically worked in quiet branch libraries, accustomed to fewer interruptions.

Other concerns expressed early on by some library staff related to inexperience with online communication tools. The sudden response mandated by COVID-19 saw the library team dive in before these worries could be properly explored. The quick implementation allowed everyone to experience the benefits of team chat and observe the quick help provided to patrons who might have otherwise lost time looking for what they needed. These benefits outweighed earlier concerns and everyone in the team was won over by the system's success.

All manner of patron queries are received in webchat, including those better suited to email or phone communication. Questions whose answers rely heavily on detailed instructions (e.g. how to structure a literature search or set up referencing software) are not optimal for the style of communication provided by webchat. When this occurs, operators are encouraged to refer the patron to email or phone communication for a meaningful resolution. This also helped overcome reluctance by some library staff who were wary of picking up complex queries beyond their area of expertise. All operators were encouraged to use functionality for re-allocating chats or to request patron contact details for offline follow up.

Occasionally patrons would move away from the chat window mid-chat and this creates an "abandoned chat" which operators debated about closing. The team devised a script for ending such chats which described how to start a new chat or contact the library by email to complete the query.

The team communication supported by the private library group within the webchat interface was a side benefit of immeasurable value during Melbourne's lockdowns. Operators used the webchat platform to cooperate on group projects in individual chat rooms and to easily exchange documents if needed. Another unexpected and welcome benefit has been a reduction in team emails, as resolutions for many operational issues are now achieved quickly through group or one-on-one chats.

### **Key takeaways**

As the library service continues to respond to the trend towards digital, the webchat platform is here to stay. The system's functionality has brought benefits that were both expected and surprising. It is responsive, easy to use and functional. It makes library expertise available at the most visited service point regardless of the requestor's physical location. Its ease of use and functionality ensured library patrons could begin using webchat immediately - without a launch, any fanfare or training.

The utilisation of webchat beyond its primary purpose of assisting website users has helped the library service overcome burdens arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and working from home. In particular, the team found the group chat useful for an occasional joke exchange, latest news, weather and daily pet reports. It has supported collaboration with zero delay and enabled the flexibility the library needed to continue to operate throughout 2020 in spite of the changed working conditions.

Through collaboration between all members of the library team, and a willingness to dive in and swim, the webchat project became a major success. Its responsiveness and promptness is much needed in a time poor, high pressure hospital environment where easy access to critical information and assistance is key. It signals how library services can be delivered into a digital future.