

## A Survey on the Use of Email for Electronic Reference Service in Some Nigerian Universities

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**Abstract** *This work is a survey on the use of email for electronic reference service among selected Universities in Edo State, Nigeria viz: University of Benin, Benin City and Benson Idahosa University, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. With the aid of questionnaire, the population of the study consisted of twenty-seven academic librarians of both institutions. The collected data was through questionnaire. The results from the data analysis show that most academic librarians do not use email for electronic reference. This might be because it is not a matter of deliberate policy in any library.*

**Keywords:** *Survey, Email; Electronic Reference; Nigerian, Universities.*

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### 1. Introduction

E-mail reference service refers to a library reference service offered through electronic mail messages exchanged between a patron and a librarian. E-mail reference service is a relatively recent in development. This is because its occurrence is within the last 15 years (Bristow and Buechley, 1995). E-mail reference service is currently used by a variety of patrons that are assumed to have access to the internet and do also operate an email account. However, electronic mail reference service can only be considered as an addition to the other established means of in-person and other inter related reference services. The email provides an option in how library users can have their reference questions attended to in the most comfortable and convenient way. Some of the advantages of email for electronic reference service are pointed out by Bristow and Buechley (1995). These include:

1. It can give simplicity of access to those who cannot physically contact the library either due to geographical or physical constraints.
2. It can help to alleviate some of the constraints of non-communication
3. Library patrons and respondents can be held more accountable for their answer.
4. It can provide a type of anonymity not possible with in- person reference service. For the patrons who are "too shy or too proud to ask for help in person," electronic mail reference can be a welcome option.

However, in spite of these obvious advantages, there are some disadvantages such as replacing the person-to-person reference interaction between a patron and a librarian. This interactive nature allows for on the spot clarification of unclear issues, though this may equally be possible with an electronic. The electronic mail can't provide that psychological feel of talking with a person a getting emotionally connected in ways which impersonal means cannot. Information is disseminated through several media which are both verbal and non-verbal. Other, non-verbal routes, such as body language, voice inflection, physical gestures and paralinguistic devices are quite necessary which email may not readily afford. According to White (1995): "The reference interview plays a critical role in information retrieval systems. It is an adaptive mechanism, i.e., it allows for adapting the system to the client or vice versa so that a reasonably congruent match between what the client needs and what the system can identify occurs."

## 2. Literature Review

Still and Campbell (1993) affirmed that reference librarians have been investigating ways of integrating email into the reference process. They cited the example of Academic and Research Libraries Spec Kit that received 79 responses to a survey concerning the use of email in research libraries. Of those 79 responses, 16 used email for reference questions. Some of the services that libraries offer over email include, requesting items to be borrowed or suggestions for purchases. A 1988 survey of academic libraries concerning the use of electronic mail in reference service found that "of those 79 responses, 16 (20.25%) used e-mail for reference questions" (Still and Campbell).

Abels and Liebscher (1994) in their study locates the use of email for electronic reference in its remote service offer of library service. It observed that an email survey conducted to determine which institutions offer electronic reference services indicated that few libraries offer such services. With some exception, those that do, appear to attach less importance to these services. For example, almost all respondent libraries report offering only 24 hour turn-around-time for queries. This may not be acceptable to many users and may result in the low usage reported by libraries offering the service.

Bushallow-Wilbur, Lara, et al. (1996) concluded that email reference is a very convenient way in which patrons can access information from librarians because they can be at home or at the office, and the time of day does not matter.

Roysdon and Elliott (1988) dwelt extensively on the inherent problems involved when it comes to reference services by email. While they agree that a reference interview/negotiation can be done, they submit that it is reliant on upon how often patrons and librarians check their email.

Tomer (1994) in his study was concerned with determining who uses email reference; what types of questions are asked; when they are transmitted and from where; and whether those who use it prefer it to the more conventional means available. Tomer, (1994) asks how successful electronic reference services have been to date. And he concludes that there is no conclusive data.

Philip (1994) citing Wilson Library Bulletin (1993) noted that respondents of a survey indicated their intention to try using email referencing. They however contended that electronic mail reference service may be more germane to school libraries and not public libraries

Alan (1993) in the study observed that Indiana University began offering electronic mail reference in 1987.

Sloan (1998) in the study pointed out that electronic reference service has no professionally prepared and accepted guidelines of operation. It revealed that, of the nearly forty guidelines and standards studied not one of them related to electronic reference service.

O'Neill (1999) says that: "[e]mail reference is a logical extension of library services. Libraries have traditionally responded to reference requests using the mail and later using technology including telephone, and, still later, fax, so e-mail is merely another vehicle to make services available...It has also been suggested that e-mail reference helps reduce barriers by providing a means for clients who read and write English more fluently than they speak it to better communicate their information needs".

## 3. Justification of Study

Library is a public institution meant to adopt and adapt methods that can help them reasonably respond to the needs of their patrons. Since technology has grown in leaps and bounds and email has become a daily means of communication worldwide, the use of email for electronic reference is a veritable tool to make the library relevant in information driven age. Email reference is another aspect of personal service, and with all the competition that exists in the information world, "personal service and equal access is an advantage" (O'neil, 1999). This makes this study valid.

#### 4. Research Questions

The study sought to provide answers to the following questions

1. Is your library fully automated?
2. What is the coverage of internet connectivity?
3. Where do you have access to internet connectivity?
4. Do you have an e-mail account?
5. Do you use e-mail for electronic reference service in your library?
6. Do you use e-mail as a reference resource for teaching and research?

#### 5. Methodology

This study is a descriptive survey and consequently employs a descriptive design. The use of questionnaire was the principal research instrument for data generation. The questionnaire was primarily distributed by hand and collated by hand. The research population consisted of 27 persons spread across both universities viz: University Librarian (2); Deputy University Librarian (1); principal librarian (5); Senior librarian (5); Librarian I (1); Librarian II (10), Assistant Librarian (4). Of this number University of Benin (UNIBEN) has 21 while Benson Idahosa University (BIU) has 6.

#### 6. Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Staff profile

STATUS OF ACADEMIC LIBRARY STAFF	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE		UNIBEN GENDER DISTRIBUTION		BIU GENDER DISTRIBUTION	
	UNIBEN	BIU	Male	Female	Male	Female
University Librarian	28 yrs	36 yrs	1	-	1	-
Deputy University Librarian	37 yrs	-	1	-	-	-
Principal Librarian	14 – 36yrs	-	1	4	-	1
Senior Librarian	16 – 38 yrs	24 yrs	4	-	-	-
Librarian I	37 yrs	-	1	-	-	-
Librarian II	2 – 37 yrs	14 yrs	2	4	3	-
Assistant Librarian	2 – 10 yrs	-	2	1	-	-
Graduate Assistant	-	14 yrs	-	-	1	-

Table 1 shows the staff profile of the respondents in both the University of Benin (UNIBEN) and Benson Idahosa University (BIU). Being a first generation Federal government-owned University established in 1970, UNIBEN had a preponderance (21 or %) of the sample population, while BIU, a private owned University established in 1995 constituted 6 or ( %) of the sample. The cognate professional experience of the respondents ranged between two to thirty seven years.

Table 2. Library Automation

Question	Institution	Answer	
		Yes	No
Is your Library automated?	UNIBEN	21	0
	BIU	0	6

The data above signifies that only the University of Benin, Benin City services library automation. The automation program dates back to 2002 donated by MTN Nigeria as part of her corporate social responsibility with 120 computers. MTN also carries training of staff and students in the use of the data base that services the library. The two campuses of the University of Benin: Ugbowo and Ekehan are linked by radio to effectively carry out the service. Benson Idahosa University, Benin City on the other hand is not automated, though book details are entered into several data base. However, full automation is still a work in progress.

**Table 3. Internet Connectivity**

Question	Institution	Answer	
		Always	Sometimes
Do you have access to internet connectivity	UNIBEN	20	1
	BIU	2	4

Internet connection is the locus on which email reference and other ICT related services stand. In the above table while 20 UNIBEN academic librarians (95%) have internet connectivity always, only one respondent (5%) claimed to access the internet sometimes1 does sometimes. 2 BIU academic library staff are also always connected which constitutes 40% while 4 sometimes do which is 60%. Therefore of the 27 total respondent's population 22 always have internet connectivity with 4 sometimes.

**Table 4. Location of Internet connectivity**

Question	Institution	Answer		
		Office	Home	Both
Where do you have access to internet connectivity	UNIBEN	10	11	11
	BIU	3	3	3

In table 3 on location of internet connectivity, among the 21 UNIBEN library academic staff, 10 (45%) have internet connection only at home while 11 do both at home and office making 55%. Among the BIU staff, 3 (50%) have internet connectivity at home while 3(50%) have both at home and the office. This makes it 50% each for the respondents regarding internet connectivity which is the ground upon which electronic reference would run.

**Table 5. Ownership of Email Account**

Question	Institution	Answer		
		Yes	No	Thinking of having
Do you have an email account?	UNIBEN	19	2	2
	BIU	6	0	0

As shown in Table 5, a preponderance of the respondents (25 or 92.6%) had email account, a pre-requisite for accessing the internet while 2 ( 7.4%) are just thinking of opening an email account. It is probable that this group is not fully computer literate.

Email most often written in addresses as e-mail, is actually electronic mail, a method of receiving, sending, and storing electronic messages. Each email account has a unique address. A general format for an email address is: user's name @a-computer-name ([www.webdevelopersnotes.com](http://www.webdevelopersnotes.com)). Among the 21 UNIBEN library academic staff, 19 have email accounts while 2 do not. This is relatively surprising in spite of its almost seemingly insignificant number because, as an ICT driven profession, each academic librarian is expected to have an email account whether for official or personal use. Of the 6 BIU academic library staff, 6 (100%) have email accounts. This does differ from the UNIBEN respondents where we have 19 (80%) of the 21 respondents.

**Table 6. Use of email for electronic referencing**

Question	Institution	Answer		
		Yes	Sometimes	No
Do you use email for electronic reference service?	UNIBEN	1	1	19
	BIU	3	3	0

An email message consists of two components, the message header, and the message body ([www.livinginternet.com/e/ei.htm](http://www.livinginternet.com/e/ei.htm)). The message header contains certain information such as an originator's email address and one or more recipient addresses. Usually additional information is added, such as a subject header field. The Email is has become one of the main methods of business communication worldwide due to its flexibility which makes it a veritable tool for electronic reference service for any library. Whereas in UNIBEN electronic referencing is not fully in place or used by the academic librarians which constitute 19 or 90.5% of the 21 respondents, in BIU, 6 or 100% academic librarians use the internet for references services and purposes.

**Table 7. Use of e-mail as a reference resource for teaching and research.**

Question	Institution	Answer		
		Yes	Sometimes	No
Do you use email as a reference resource for teaching and research?	UNIBEN	1	5	15
	BIU	4	2	0

Shannon, David M., Johnson, Todd E., Searcy, Shelby , Alan Lott (2002) subscribe to the use of electronic mail for research because of its ability to save time for the researcher. However this advantage amongst others does not appear to be explored by several respondents in this survey. Of the 21 academic UNIBEN library staff, only one respondent (4.8%) use email as reference resource in teaching and research, while 5 ( 23.8%) do sometimes and 19 or 90.5 % of the respondents do not. Among the 6 BIU library academic staff, 4 or 66.7% use it and 2 or 33.3% sometimes do with this institution recording 0 among those who do not.

It is highly appalling and surprising that of the total 27 respondents in UNIBEN and BIU only 5 or 18.5% of the research population consistently use email as a reference resource for teaching and research. This means that 22 or 81.5% of the respondents do not explore this resource. Academic librarians are supposed to be deeply involved in research, but, the data shows that majority (22 or 81.5%) do not make use of the vast reference resources provided through the internet in teaching and research. This may explain in part the

average services offered to library patrons on one hand and low level educational offered students who are exposed to teaching/interaction by such academic librarians since they may not be current with the latest developments in the field of library education and services.

## 7. Recommendations

1. Electronic referencing through email should be made a part of the compulsory service offered in libraries as a matter of policy for library staff
2. Library staff should be given proper education and enlightenment into the use of email as a method of offering referencing service to library patrons.
3. Improved ICT education be made a regular part of library staff training which would equip them to explore and offer electronic reference service through the use of email.
4. Internet connectivity should be readily available to all library staff in any location to adequately respond to the email solicitations of library patrons.

## 8. Conclusion

Electronic referencing through email must utilize principles of sound library policy and design. Librarians and institutions must focus on the adaptability of such electronic reference service for patrons so that both patrons and professionals can take full advantage of the benefits of such service without sacrificing the integrity of their services and placing patrons at risk in terms of access and productivity. As issues pertaining to the modality and implementation of electronic reference service are refined, they will be used more frequently to meet the needs of library patrons and also to conduct scholarly research. This means that institutions will encounter increasing numbers of proposals and policies pertaining to electronic reference service and other types of ICT based library services using the Internet. Libraries and academic librarians in Nigeria should be ready to adjust to revolutionary changes in offering services to library patrons and one of such is the use of email for electronic library reference.

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