

Title: Making a virtue out of virtual communities: working electronically with an advisory panel of library users

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All libraries need an effective process of governance to guide the planning, development and improvement of resources and services. Library committees must be able to relate both to the high-level strategic policies and vision of their parent organizations and to the day-to-day needs and problems of their users. Combining these requirements in a single library committee can lead to difficulties for three reasons: it may be hard finding members who are equally well qualified to give advice on both strategic and day-to-day questions; the most useful committee members are often also the busiest and therefore those most likely to miss meetings; and in a multi-disciplinary library, a committee that is truly representative by including members drawn from all the various user groups will be far too large to function efficiently.

Cambridge University Medical Library, which serves three distinct but inter-related main communities - university, hospital, and government research laboratories - has encountered all these problems. In response it has adopted a different approach, creating a separate policy advisory group for its major stakeholder organizations, and addressing the day-to-day service issues by forming a User Advisory Panel that relies almost exclusively on electronic communication. The Panel has been designed to allow the library's management to hold regular informal two-way discussions with a virtual group drawn from a broad cross-section of users, seeking their views on a wide variety of issues, both urgent and longer-term.

In mid-2007 invitations were distributed widely to users and non-users within all three main communities, inviting volunteers to serve on the Panel. Respondents were asked to provide basic information about themselves, and to identify any special interests or concerns. They were told that they would not be expected to attend any meetings; that they were under no obligation to respond to every query sent by the library to the Panel if they were too busy or had no interest in the subject under discussion; and that they would not be expected to act as formal representatives of a particular group of users.

This paper will describe the process of forming the Panel, analyzing the initial and continuing response from users and reporting on the successes and problems encountered during this period. It will also offer general conclusions on the likely benefits and drawbacks to other libraries considering such an approach.