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# Challenges in Providing Reference Services In Small Archival Institutions

Aaron T. Preston

## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of a brief survey of archivists working for fifty five small archives nationwide. The purpose the survey was to examine to what extent smaller archival institutions are applying remote reference services, what type of remote services are being utilized and to identify common challenges faced by small archival institutions with different functions and audiences. It also and examine common challenges faced in the implementation of digitization efforts to support these reference services. The survey was posted via the Society of American Archivists Lone Arrangers Forum, and cross-posted it on the Reference, Access, and Outreach Forum. The makeup of the participants varied, working in museum archives; religious archives; university archives; and local historical societies. After analysis, challenges in providing remote reference services such as time management and cost are common across different types of small archival institutions, and across different reference strategies. These same challenges also appear in relation to small archival institutions' efforts to implement online access to collections as a tool for unmediated reference. The survey provided a window into challenges faced by archivists at small institutions, particularly in terms of time and cost, as they attempt to adapt their reference services to meet user preferences.

## Introduction

Reference services are a key facet in the relationship between the archivist and the user at any institution. While traditionally, archival mediation has included a face-to-face reference interview, question negotiation between the archivist and patron, and advice from the archivist on search strategies, increasingly, larger institutions with greater staff and means, have steadily progressed toward providing a variety of remote reference services in addition to traditional services in order to adapt to preferred user needs. For the purposes of this paper the term "remote reference" encompasses personalized reference services via the phone, messaging and internet, as well as virtual reference services provided via synchronous technologies. Few works have specifically addressed challenges in providing reference services faced by small archival institutions. The aim of this paper, broadly, is to examine what

reference practices at small archives (for the purposes of this paper, those defined as institutions with only one full time archivist) look like on a day to day basis. This paper is inclusive of different types of small archival institutions. This paper concedes that there are similarities and differences in the way reference services are rendered between types of institutions. This paper hopes, however, to find commonalities in the challenges faced by small archival institutions as a whole in providing remote reference services. Further, it argues these same common challenges appear again, not only when examining remote references services (in various forms), but in examining efforts by small archival institutions to digitize collections and finding aids as a tool to support these reference services. To help address these goals, a survey (see Appendix) was designed. Its purpose was twofold:

- 1) Examine to what extent smaller archival institutions are applying remote reference services, and what type of remote services are being utilized.
- 2) Identify common challenges faced by small archival institutions with different functions and audiences in providing a variety of mediated remote reference services, and examine common challenges faced in the implementation of digitization efforts to support these reference services.

## Survey Methodology and Participation

In order to gain further understanding of the reality of reference services and mediation in small archival repositories on a daily basis, I designed a survey on the topic (see Appendix). The survey was posted via the Society of American Archivists *Lone Arrangers* Forum, and cross-posted on the *Reference, Access, and Outreach* Forum. While surveys delivered via listservs have their limitations, the response rate (55 respondents) was sufficient to provide evidence as to what extent smaller archival institutions are applying varying remote reference services, and what type of remote services are being utilized. Of the 55 respondents, 19 institutions identified themselves as university archives, nine as religious archives, eight as local historical societies, four as museum archives, three as corporate archives, two as medical archives, and ten simply as “other.” Upon a closer look in the “other” category, however, seven of the 10 participants identified themselves as small libraries, and can best be placed under that umbrella. Though the makeup of the participating institutions varied, their comments were revelatory in providing insight into challenges each face while providing reference services daily.

The survey consisted of twenty-five questions and took an average ten minutes for each respondent to complete. The first set of questions asked participants to identify their name, institution’s name, position, type of archive where they worked, and how many years they had worked at the facility. The next set of questions in the survey was designed to explore the number of research requests the participants received weekly, and how each facility received reference requests. The final set of questions asked open ended questions that sought to flush out the respondents’

opinions on major challenges in providing reference services in a small archival institution.

## Physical Reference

Historically, the roles that reference archivists have played in large and small archives have mimicked one another. Regardless of the institution's size, archival mediation has typically included a face-to-face archival reference interview, question negotiation between the archivist and patron, and advice from the archivist on search strategies.<sup>1</sup> Archival materials, regardless of format, had existed only at the archive itself with patrons relying on print finding aids such as directories, textual footnotes and bibliographies, the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC), and word of mouth to glean salient information from physical collections. Even when a patron was able to identify a resource that might prove useful, she or he was required to contact the repository via mail or telephone, to ascertain its relevance. At that point, either travel on the part of the researcher or extensive copying and shipping by the archivist was necessary. When finally visiting the repository, the researcher could then engage the archivist in further mediation on the topic.<sup>2</sup> For decades archivists passed down useful hints about places researchers could find revelatory information to the next generation of record keepers, or interested users. Sometimes patrons need to better clarify what they are looking for, a process still best facilitated through face-to-face conversation. Wendy Duff and Katherine Johnson highlight this point, noting that often users come into the archives with a question that they are unaware even needs refining.<sup>3</sup> Christopher Prom echoed this notion when he noted that he finds it "unlikely...that archivist's role as mediator will cease to exist."<sup>4</sup> Despite its flaws, traditional face-to-face mediation remains a widely used means of reference service at many small archival institutions.

Eighty-five percent of the archives surveyed for this study indicated that they were "open for public visitation." Seventy-five percent of the archivists surveyed noted that they still offered "in person" reference services to visitors at their facility. Of the 14 respondents who replied that they did not, six specifically identified their institutions as religious archives (75% of the religious archives surveyed), one as a medical archive (half of a medical archives surveyed), and two as corporate archives

1. Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005).
2. Helen Tibbo, "Interviewing Techniques for Remote Reference: Electronic Versus Traditional Environments," *The American Archivist* 58, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 294-310.
3. Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson, "Accidentally Found on Purpose: Information-Seeking Behavior of Historians in Archives," *The Library Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (October 2002): 472-96.
4. Christopher J. Prom, "User Interactions with Electronic Finding Aids in a Controlled Setting," *The American Archivist* 67, no. 2 (2004): 265, [www.jstor.org/stable/40294278](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294278).

(66% of the corporate archives surveyed). It can be surmised to some extent the presence of “walk-in” reference services may be linked to the small archive’s institution type, and its predominant audience. That 75% of the surveyed archives reported utilizing face-to-face reference services indicates that traditional mediation remains in wide use, particularly among local historical societies, museum archives, and university archives. Increasingly, however, reference services are being offered remotely, via email, chat, and other virtual reference means to save time and reach a broader audience.

## Remote Reference: Email

Email reference services are provided either via an email link address to which users can send their questions, or through an online form that users can fill out for the same purposes. Email has advantages over traditional references services. As Lili Lou notes, “email reference services free users from geographic limitations, making it possible for them to ask questions wherever they are as long as they have an internet connection.”<sup>5</sup> However using email as a means of remote reference also provides disadvantages for professionals in small archival institutions. As Lesley Moyo observes, when communicating via email, “there are no visual cues” for the reference archivist, making it difficult to judge when a reference question has been answered satisfactorily.<sup>6</sup> Remote reference via email can also lead to a prolonged dialog back and forth between the archivist and user to clarify a question that face-to-face mediation might take care of in moments. Moyo further notes, “This makes the reference services long and less efficient than face-to-face, even though the actual electronic communication is faster.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite the drawbacks, email was by far the most utilized form of reference service for the small archival institutions surveyed, surpassing even traditional mediation. While only 75% of the facilities surveyed indicated that they currently offered “in-person” references services at their facility, 82% noted that they offered reference services by telephone, and 98% indicated that they offered reference services via email. Furthermore, according to the institutions surveyed, 49% of the institutions admitted that between 75% and 99% of their total reference requests arrive via email.

If email can sometimes lead to less efficient communications that actually take longer than some face-to-face interactions, as Mayo noted, why is email preferred by

5. Lili Luo, “Reference Evolution under the Influence of New Technologies”, Technical Report TR-2007-03, (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), [https://sils.unc.edu/sites/default/files/general/research/TR\\_2007\\_03.pdf](https://sils.unc.edu/sites/default/files/general/research/TR_2007_03.pdf).
6. Lesley M. Moyo, “Electronic Libraries and the Emergence of New Service Paradigms,” *The Electronic Library* 22, no. 3 (2004): 220-230.
7. Ibid.

so many institutions?<sup>8</sup> Being able to ask questions immediately via email, does not necessarily guarantee an immediate response from the archivist, as email is an asynchronous means of communication. This flexibility in when to respond leaves the archivist free to plan his or her day, leaving time for cataloging, processing, or other duties. When addressing question 20 of the survey, whether a participant feels he or she spends more hours addressing remote or physical reference requests, respondent #13, an archivist at a religious archive stated: “Email. Typically if I get an in-person or phone request, I’ll email them the answer as that’s the easiest to do at my own pace, once I have all the info gathered, in the greatest amount of detail.” Several other respondents spoke to the larger challenge of time unique to archivists working in smaller institutions.

Regardless of the archive type, when archivists were asked what they felt were the biggest challenges to providing reference services in a small archival institution, many responded with the issue of splintered time. Several respondents highlighted lack of time, and time management as their biggest challenge in providing reference services. In this way, the biggest challenge to providing reference for archivists in small institutions is their variety of responsibilities. Nearly half (see Q18 below) of survey participants noted that between 21% and 40% of their time during the day was dedicated specifically to fulfilling their patron’s reference needs.

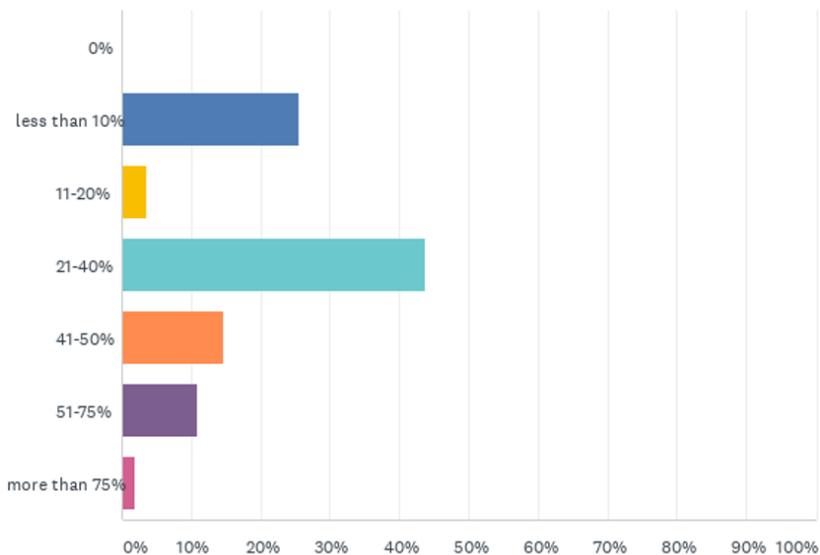


Figure 1. Percentage of the day archivists at small archival institutions feel they devote specifically to reference.

8. Ibid.

When asked to elaborate on their challenges, one survey respondent (#38), an archivist in a religious archive stated, “When I’m in the middle of other projects, it’s distracting to put aside what I’m doing for a reference question, then pick up with the other project.” Another university archivist noted:

*I am a part-time lone arranger. I have to balance all aspects of managing the archives, processing/cataloging, outreach, and reference at the same time. I have a small group of alumni volunteers who help me but that too requires management and delegation. As I am the face of the Archives within the College and without (alumni, community, general public), every reference interaction doubles as outreach and advocacy for the Archives and for the College.*

While email reference correspondence may take longer to clarify than face-to-face mediation, it serves as an attractive option for archivists working in smaller institutions by reducing time management issues. The flexibility in response time fostered by the format of email reference aids archivists working in smaller institutions deal with the anxiety of dropping everything right away to answer a face-to-face patron inquiry. Respondent #35, an archivist at a medical archive, also highlighted the issue of time management, stating that when working in a large archive, staff members could “shift reference questions depending on work load...” but... “At a small archives I have to stop whatever project I am doing to answer the question. I am unable to predict ahead of time when the questions will come in or how involved they will be.”

## Remote Reference: Chat

As the role of reference archivists has continued to evolve, remote reference began to be seen not just as a matter of providing an email address or an online form, but offering multiple alternatives for the convenience of the user. Scott Carlson has indicated that to continue to meet user preferences, reference and mediation cannot only be thought of as an interaction at a physical place, but at a virtual one as well.<sup>9</sup> Anne Lipow echoed this stating: “Library reference service will thrive only if it is as convenient to the remote user as a search engine; only if it is so impossible to ignore—so ‘in your face’—that to not use the service is an active choice.”<sup>10</sup>

Chat reference services are those where the communication between archivist and patron is an exchange sent in real-time using online chat technology. Chat systems offer several advantages to small archives, bringing users to the collection more quickly and efficiently than other methods. This method often offers the

9. Scott Carlson, “Are Reference Desks Dying Out? Librarians Struggle to Redefine and in some Cases Eliminate the Venerable Institution,” *The Reference Librarian* 48, no. 2 (2007): 25-30, [https://doi:10.1300/J120v48no2\\_06](https://doi:10.1300/J120v48no2_06).

10. Anne Lipow, “In Your Face Reference,” *Library Journal* 124, no. 13 (15 August 1999): 52.

advantage of bringing in users who are less familiar with archives and therefore less likely to follow other channels to gain information. A chat button on an archives' website may seem less intimidating than visiting the archives directly, and the ability to deal directly with an archivist may help to solidify the user's search. Certain features of many chat services, such as the availability of a transcripts for the user to consult after the reference services are rendered, and the option for the archivist to provide follow-up information to the user afterward via email are particularly inviting to users.<sup>11</sup>

Only eight of the fifty-five (11%) small archives surveyed for this work indicated that they did not currently offer remote reference service via chat. There appears to be no pattern in what type of archive offers this service. Of the eight small archives currently offering chat services, four identified as university archives, one as a local historical society, one as a corporate archive, one as a museum archive, and one as a library. Cost may be a more noteworthy factor than archives type in terms of which archives this remote reference service. Jeffrey Pomerantz, Lorri Mon, and Charles McClure outline the cost a small archives must endure simply to construct an evaluation for a chat service to justify its value.<sup>12</sup> Furthering this point, Richard Cox notes that small archival institutions must perform a cost-benefit analysis to determine if a chat program is useful for them: "For many institutions, the cost of the software and time the staff must devote to it outweigh any minimal benefits, especially if such a service is unlikely to be used regularly."<sup>13</sup> Regular use, however,

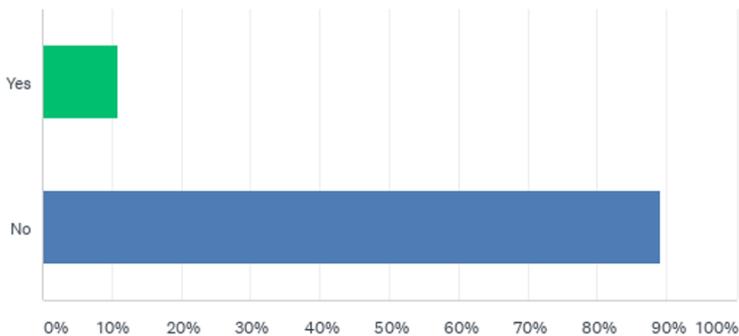


Figure 2. Percentage of small archival institutions offering reference services via online chat.

11. Moyo, "Electronic Libraries."
12. Jeffrey Pomerantz, Lorri M. Mon, and Charles R. McClure, "Evaluating Remote Reference Service: A Practical Guide to Problems and Solutions," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 8, no. 1 (2008): 15-30.
13. Richard J. Cox, "Machines in the Archives: Technology and the Coming Transformation of Archival Reference," *First Monday* 12, no. 11 (2007), <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/2029/1894>.

appears to be unique to each small archive. When surveyed, only five institutions responded that they catered to more than 20 reference requests per week, and of those five institutions only one offered an online chat system.

While a cost-benefit analysis, based on how often a chat service system is used, may point to one disadvantage of online chat systems for small archival institutions, another may be the type chat services are best set up to address reference questions. Joyce Ward, Dana Mervar, Matthew Loving, and Steve Kronen brought up this point when describing the implementation of QuestionPoint chat software at the Winter Park Library in Orange County, Florida, stating, “the Library’s chat service is intended to respond to ready reference questions.”<sup>14</sup> They note that most chat reference questions were from patrons looking for internet sources, and that if a reference question required further research, the script on the chat offered to “email or telephone the patron with the answer.”<sup>15</sup> Often in small archival institutions, less of the collection is processed, making finding aids less robust, and reference “at the fingertip” of the archival professional, more difficult to implement. Survey respondent #43 outlined this point stating, “Our collection descriptions are not described to the detail you might find at a larger institution, making reference more difficult.”

It can be surmised that if many of the questions posed through chat services to small institutions are not readily answered, chat services may not be suitable for the institution. Survey respondent #37 noted that only “poor, antiquated, or minimal descriptive work” had been done, “making chat reference difficult” at their institution. Respondent #22 hinted at this hindrance in ready reference as well stating, “The ‘Google generation’ has been trained to expect answers immediately, which just isn’t how archives research works. As I read somewhere, archives research ‘is not fast food.’” Overall, the issue of cost and number of reference requests received weekly, combined with the type of reference requests usually answered, are the most important factors to be considered in relation to the utility of chat services in small archival institutions.

## Remote Reference: Web Conferencing

Web conferencing offers an alternative method of providing remote reference for small archives, offering synchronous meetings between parties located in different physical locations. Multiple alternatives for videoconferencing include Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Skype.<sup>16</sup> Software programs are available online and prices vary by vendor, sometimes requiring an institutional license. Videoconferencing benefits

14. Joyce Ward, Dana Mervar, Matthew Loving, and Steven Kronen, “Going It Alone: Can a Small/Medium-Sized Library Manage Live Online Reference?” *The Reference Librarian* 38 (2002): 311-22.

15. Ibid.

16. For more information see: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software>, <https://zoom.us/>, and <https://www.skype.com/en/>.

include the ability to invite multiple attendees, record sessions, and talk to the patron “face-to-face”, and talk to many people at once. A webinar or web conferencing sessions can even be offered in lieu of a physical, in-person presentation, a distinct advantage being the ability to record and archive the session for patrons who are unable to attend a presentation live.

Cost, again, arises as a challenge in providing this type of service. Licensing for well-known software can be costly and small archives may not wish to shoulder the cost. Opensource web conferencing software is available at a more reasonable rate, but it may lack advanced technical features and have limited technical support.<sup>17</sup> Despite cost concerns, web conferencing remains a viable option in providing remote reference for small archivists working in small repositories.

## Online Access and Impact on Reference

With archival users becoming increasingly more casual than academic, and preferring to work more autonomously, massive digital collections and finding aids have become increasingly more widespread to meet user demand. While large swaths of collections will not be available for digitization due to privacy or copyright concern, Jennifer Schaffner suggests that the primary role of the archivist is no longer to play the role of the face-to-face mediator with the patron, but to try make digitized collections more easily searchable for the user.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the most important technological tool in supporting future mediated reference inquiries in small archives are digital collections and finding aids that allow for unmediated use, and that are readily available and easy to use.

There are numerous examples of large-scale digitization projects undertaken by archival institutions where the philosophy of stressing access to collections as a means to increase visibility is evident. These projects popularity demonstrate the growing user preference toward accessing collections autonomously, without user mediation with a reference archivist. The “Gateway to Oklahoma” (a project of the State of Oklahoma Archives) currently provides free online access to over 700,000 pages of historical newspaper content, and those statistics are growing daily.<sup>19</sup> The “Gateway” grew from 77,000 users when it went online in 2012, to 1.3 million users in 2019.<sup>20</sup> During that span, both remote reference services and physical reference to the

17. Maryska Connolly-Brown, Kim Mears, and Melissa E. Johnson, “Reference for the Remote User through Embedded Librarianship,” *The Reference Librarian* 57, no. 3 (2016): 165-181, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763877.2015.1131658>.

18. Jennifer Schaffner, “The Metadata is the Interface: Better Description for Better Discovery of Archives and Special Collections Synthesized from User Studies,” OCLC Research, 2009, <https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/library/2009/2009-06.pdf>.

19. J. A. Pryse, Archivist, Oklahoma Historical Society, personal communication, November 11, 2013.

20. Chad Williams, Director of Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society, personal communication, November 1, 2019.

archives rose.<sup>21</sup> The University of North Texas, which structured a similar project, “The Portal to Texas History” in 2002, saw similar results.<sup>22</sup> When developing their own large, public database of archival photographs at Northern Arizona University, Karen Underhill and Bruce Palmer found that the project held many benefits for reference, including that the database allowed for multiple simultaneous users, and many digital patrons “enjoy the opportunity to explore the database in an unmediated fashion.”<sup>23</sup>

Many scholars have noted the shift toward autonomy in user reference services. Sigrid McCausland observes that unlike information seekers in the past, users today prefer to search for information independently and online rather than through face-to-face mediation with the archivist at the brick-and-mortar institutions that made the records available themselves.<sup>24</sup> Schaffner agrees that most users today want to discover resources on their own, further stating that “the goal of the reference archivist lies in making better metadata, making collections discoverable and staying out of the way.”<sup>25</sup> When writing on preferences of millennial users in archives, Christopher Cox similarly states, “They’ll want information to be available in electronic format and be easily accessible, or they will ignore it.”<sup>26</sup> Wendy Scheir argues that not only did users prefer online finding aids, but they were very savvy in *using* them as well. In a study that sought to gauge the extent to which users developed archival intelligence without mediation from archivists, and interacted with online finding aids alone, Scheir concluded that users “went through a rapid self-education process.”<sup>27</sup>

In recent years, however, more research has provided insight into the unique challenges archivists working in small repositories face when digitizing their collections and finding aids. Katherine Salzmann outlines a laundry list of challenges faced by archivists working at small repositories, stating that the majority of their

21. Ibid.

22. Cathy Hartman Nelson et al., “Development of a Portal to Texas History,” *Library Hi Tech* 23, no. 2 (2005): 151-63.

23. Karen J. Underhill and Bruce Palmer, “Archival Content Anywhere@Anytime,” *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 7, nos. 1-2 (2002): 24, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J136v07no1\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J136v07no1_02).

24. Sigrid McCausland, “A Future Without Mediation? Online Access, Archivists, and the Future of Archival Research,” *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 42, no. 4 (2011): 309-19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2011.10722243>.

25. Schaffner, “Metadata is the Interface.”

26. Christopher N. Cox, “Changing Demographics: Meet the Students and Faculty of the Future,” *Defining Relevancy: Managing the New Academic Library* (Westport, CT, 2008): 3, <http://works.bepress.com/christopher-cox/4>.

27. Wendy Scheir, “First Entry: Report on a Qualitative Exploratory Study of Novice User Experience with Online Finding Aids,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 3, no. 4 (2005): 74.

collections are often unprocessed, making the job of digitization difficult; adding that small institutions are often understaffed, with large scale digitization efforts proving costly in both the technology they require and the training they take to accomplish them.<sup>28</sup> Just as cost poses a challenge to small archival institutions in relation to chat services, it also provides a challenge for digitization efforts at these institutions. In 1999, Steven Puglia estimates that digitizing an oversize map, blueprint, or a series of handwritten letters may consume as much as 40 hours of staff time and that the average cost for digitizing and creating metadata for a mixed format collection was \$24.45 per item.<sup>29</sup> Hence, should a small archive decide to digitize a collection or finding aid, there is a great deal of pressure to choose which collection wisely, or money and time will be wasted. Salzmann concludes that despite user preferences to the contrary, users in small archival institutions will have to continue “to rely on personal, individualized communication” with archivists for full access to the resources in the archives.<sup>30</sup> Cost is one challenge faced by archivists working in small archival institutions, raised when discussing remote references and generating online access to collections alike. Eighteen percent of the archivists in small repositories surveyed specifically mentioned their budget, or lack of resources, as a challenge facing their institution. Respondent #14 stated: “researchers are increasingly expecting collections to be online but being a small archive with an equally small budget, we don’t have the capability to digitize on a large scale which is increasingly making it more difficult for researchers to find and interact with us in the way they would like.”

Aside from cost, time poses another challenge to small archival institutions, both in providing remote reference services and digitizing collections. McCausland further stresses this point: “for smaller archives, digitization can mean direct competition between different program activities and more pressure on staff who undertake the full gamut of duties, not only reference or digitization.”<sup>31</sup> A solo archivist may understandably struggle to split their time between appraisal, accessioning, description, processing, arrangement, outreach, and finally reference. Susan Pevar summarizes some of these concerns in posing the question: “Can the archive even handle reference requests if it does not have the time or funds to process them? It just does not make sense to me to take steps that could lead to an increase in reference requests that we are not yet prepared to handle.”<sup>32</sup>

28. Katharine A. Salzmann, “‘Contact Us’: Archivists and Remote Users in the Digital Age,” *The Reference Librarian* 41 (October 2004): 49, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J120v41n85\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J120v41n85_04).

29. Steven Puglia, “The Costs of Digital Imaging Projects,” *RLG DigiNews* 3, no. 5 (October 15, 1999), <https://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/links/cached/chapter3/link3.10b.digitalimagingcosts.html#feature>.

30. Salzmann, “‘Contact Us,’” 49.

31. McCausland, “A Future Without Mediation?” 314.

32. Susan Pevar, “Success as a Lone Arranger: Setting Priorities and Getting the Job Done,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 3, no. 1 (2005): 51-60, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J201v03n01\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J201v03n01_05).

Across every type of small archival institutions, again, time management was repeatedly mentioned as an issue when discussing both digitization as a tool to provide unmediated access to collections, and remote reference services. Respondent #15, an archivist at a local historical society, asserted that “the public’s expectation that everything should be/is digitized is based on a complete lack of understanding about what it takes to accomplish and sustain digitization projects.” Survey respondent #53, a university archivist, furthered this sentiment stating: “I prioritize answering reference questions but it leaves me less time to process collections, digitize materials.”

Even once digitized, some respondents pointed to flaws in their own online finding aids. When writing about reference requests referred from online finding aids, respondent #22, a university archivist, stated:

*It’s very rare for me to get a straightforward request to answer. I don’t often get “What do you have about this specific person?” with a name I can just plug into a keyword search. What I get is: “What do you have from the northeast area of the state?” or “this general era” or “related to upward social mobility” (yes, that is a real question I received from an undergrad). Our catalog/finding aids aren’t set up with metadata fields that would quickly answer these questions (for instance, we don’t have geographic subjects or even general subject terms assigned). So the reality is that physical, in-person requests often take me just as much time as remote requests, and I often wind up having to take people’s contact information and telling them that I’ll have to look into it and get back to them at a later date.*

Though different types of small institutions may digitize to different degrees, due to copyright and unknown provenance concerns, small archives continue to shift toward providing greater access to their collections when possible. In doing so, the very definition of what it means to provide reference services may be rethought to a broader, more nuanced vision. Reference services may go beyond queries to include offering training on interpreting or using an archive’s digital finding aids, or refining search strategies. Despite the challenges small archives face when digitizing their collections, digitization presents the possibility for a tremendous positive impact on reference services as well. Multiple survey participant’s noted a rise in visitation to the brick-and-mortar archive once they began digitization efforts. Respondent #25, a university archivist, noted:

*I often find that even simple “I found this photo on your website” emails result in significantly longer reference transactions as we start to provide context or explore the researcher’s needs or interests which often range beyond that simple photograph. In some cases, sure, folks just find the item they need and move on. But I’d say our reference use is higher since we started putting selected materials online.*

Respondent #47, categorized as “other” from a local historical library, further backed this point simply stating: “Digitized materials bring more people in, and actually increase reference.”

## Conclusions

Based on the survey results, small archival institutions increasingly rely on remote reference in some form. An overwhelming majority (98%) of the participants currently employ email as a form of remote reference, and 81% use telephone reference services. A modest 11% even offer chat services. Surprisingly, many of the challenges faced in providing reference services are common across different types of small archival institutions. Perhaps even more surprisingly, these same challenges also appear in relation to small archival institutions’ efforts to use online access to collections as a tool for unmediated reference. The survey provided a window into the challenges faced by small archivists, particularly in terms of time and cost, as they attempt to adapt their reference services to user preferences.

Cost and time management were two important factors borne out by the survey responses that create barriers in terms of both implementing remote reference strategies and digitizing collections and finding aids as a means to increase reference requests. While chat services offer a pathway to the archives for some users who might not otherwise take advantage of the resources, a cost-benefit analysis that considers how much the service is used and what type of reference requests the institution receives is recommended before implementing it in small archival institutions. Software can also be costly for web conferencing software. Though the costs of tools for digitization projects such as scanners have decreased, the time involved for staff to devote to such projects is still costly.

Time management was the other common challenge to small archives. This challenge manifested itself in the form of a lack of staff, and a splintering of responsibilities among solo archivists. Email as a form of remote reference is considered a time management benefit for its effects on alleviating the stress of the immediacy of physical reference queries handled by small archivists. Even though time may be lost in the clarifying messages sent back and forth during the reference interview, the email exchange can be carried out at the archivist’s pace. The splintering of duties for small archival professionals affects not only reference services but digitization efforts as well. While the goal of every small institution should continue to be to match institutional reference services to user preferences, a salient point to emerge from the surveys may be that sometimes doing so is simply not easy and a line must be walked daily.

As one respondent put it, while digitization “allows greater access to the collection for those who would otherwise have none, at many smaller institutions there isn’t enough digitized at most places to obviate the need to come in for many researchers.” At many smaller institutions, less staff means less hours to process collections and generate finding aids that can, in turn, be accessed online. Forty-one

percent of participants surveyed indicated their institution had less than 10% of their collection digitized. Over a fifth (22%) indicated they had 0%. Only two percent indicated the contents of their collection was not subject to digitization, and the question was not applicable. As small archives continue to shift toward providing greater access to their collections when possible, digitization presents the possibility for a tremendous positive impact on reference services as well, increasing physical and remote reference inquiries.

## Recommendations

The future for reference in small archival institutions is unclear. While a shift toward remote reference is underway, many institutions (75%) still employ physical, face-to-face mediation. Over 25% of the institutions surveyed indicated they are presently using some form of social media as a form of remote reference. This may offer the best of all worlds to the small archives, offering the solo archivist the ability to crowdsource questions to the public, getting the user a fairly quick response, and doing so for free. Email popularity stems from the fact that it is virtually ubiquitous, and offers the ability to get answers to patrons quickly, but also to do this on the archivist's time as well, to avoid the challenge of being pressed for time to get back to the patron instantaneously. For many small archival institutions, which receive less than 25 reference requests per week, email is all that is necessary. Chat software, one feature of which has a programmable script to aid in answering reference questions while your institution is closed, is typically unnecessary for an institution receiving such a small number of requests.

Having collections digitized can help tremendously with answering quick reference questions, and aid greatly in outreach, but there are users who do not even consider that the collections they are viewing are the tip of the iceberg, and the archive holds many more resources. As a result, as digital finding aids and collections increase, the "reference" part of a small archivist's job may grow to include offering training on interpreting digital finding aids, refining search strategies, and outreach on what is available in the archives as well. Archival professionals in small repositories must continue to reflect on their audience and function, but also on their respective budgets and the time each professional allots to reference services before deciding on a remote reference strategy.

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## Appendix

### **Survey: Challenges Facing Reference Services in Small Archival Institutions**

1. What is your name?
  
2. Institution
  
3. Position
  
4. What type of small archival institution do you work or volunteer?
  - Museum Archive
  - Medical Archive
  - Religious Archive
  - University Archive
  - Local Historical Society
  - Corporate Archive
  - Other
  
5. Years at facility
  - 0-5
  - 6-10
  - 11-20
  - over 20
  
6. Is your archive open to public visitation?
  - Yes
  - No
  
7. Around how many reference requests do you receive per week?
  
8. Are you currently offering reference services via email?
  - Yes
  - No

9. Are you currently offering reference services via online chat?

- Yes
- No

10. Are you currently offering reference services via telephone mediation?

- Yes
- No

11. Are you currently offering reference services in-person to visitors at your facility?

- Yes
- No

12. Approximately what percent of your reference questions arrive via email?

- 0%
- Less than 10%
- 11-20%
- 21-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-75%
- 75-99%
- 100%

13. Approximately what percent of your reference questions arrive via online chat?

- 0%
- Less than 10%
- 11-20%
- 21-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-75
- 75-99%
- 100%

14. Approximately what percent of your reference questions arrive via telephone?

- 0%
- Less than 10%

- 11-20%
- 21-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-75%
- 75-99%
- 100%

15. Approximately what percent of your reference questions are taken by visitors actually visiting the brick and mortar institution?

- 0%
- Less than 10%
- 11-20%
- 21-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-75%
- 75-99%
- 100%

16. Are you currently using social media as a tool for remote reference?

- Yes
- No

17. If you answered yes, which social media outlets do you use for reference purposes?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Other
- Not Applicable

18. As an archivist in a small archival institution, what percentage of your day do you feel you dedicate specifically to reference?

- 0%
- Less than 10%
- 11-20%
- 21-40%
- 41-50%
- 51-75%
- More than 75%

19. How many hours do you feel you spend on reference weekly?
  
20. Do you feel you spend more hours answering remote reference requests (email, online chat, text) or physical, in-person, requests? Please elaborate.
  
21. How do you feel challenges of reference services in a small archives differ from those in a large archives? Please comment.
  
22. What have you seen are the biggest challenges to references services in small archival institutions?
  
23. What percent of your collection is available for researchers online?
  - 0%
  - Less than 10%
  - 11-20%
  - 21-40%
  - 41-50%
  - 51-75%
  - More than 75%
  - Not applicable-the contents of our collection are not subject to digitization
  
24. Do you feel digitization has de-emphasized the need for back and forth of traditional, in person, archival reference mediation? Please comment.
  
25. Do you agree to allow me to use data from this survey, with names redacted for purposes of publication?
  - Yes
  - No