



Ask Us 24/7 Software Pilot 2013

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Ask Us 24/7 launched as a WNYLRC project on September 1st, 2003. During 2013, a series of events recognized the 10th anniversary of the service including press releases, a Facebook contest, and a “birthday” celebration at the NYLA conference. In advance of the anniversary date, a meeting was held at the CLRC office in Syracuse to discuss the future of the service. Current members of the Ask Us 24/7 advisory board, as well as other long-time users and enthusiastic supporters were invited to the August 19th meeting. Our hope was that we could ensure that our service did not stagnate, simply staying with our setup out of inertia, without at least considering other possibilities.

The discussion was facilitated by me, Jaclyn McKewan, project manager for Ask Us 24/7. The agenda included discussion of the future of the service, where our participants would like it to go, and thoughts about possible software alternatives. Ask Us 24/7 has run on OCLC’s QuestionPoint software since its launch, and at the time it was the only available option for chat reference. 10 years later, there are alternatives available, and these were also explored at the meeting.

Vendors from 3 chat software vendors met with the group virtually at this meeting: LibraryH3lp, Mosio, and LivePerson. Mosio has been known for their “Text a Librarian” text-messaging reference program, and had recently launched a complimentary chat service. Existing Mosio users (for texting) expressed satisfaction with the service, but the group felt that some features (such as policy pages) were lacking. LivePerson was determined to be a service more suitable to the business world. LibraryH3lp received favorable comments from the group, due to having policy pages and question “roll-up” similar to QuestionPoint.

Overall, the meeting participants expressed that they were happy with QuestionPoint, and although there were features that could be changed/improved, no one felt a strong desire to change. WNYLRC Executive Director Sheryl Knab suggested that, due to the promising look of LibraryH3lp, we could test out the software in a pilot program, just for comparison.

The start of the pilot program was somewhat delayed by a planned vacation that I took shortly after the Syracuse meeting, but in September, potential participants of the pilot were contacted. This included attendees at the meeting and other librarians suggested by our participating library councils. Unfortunately, it took a bit longer than expected to collect a sizeable number of participants. The number of interested testers from the Syracuse meeting was a bit small, and I had set a goal of having 3 public library systems and 5 academic libraries participate.

Eventually, after many conversations through phone and email with the meeting participants and other librarians, we ended up with 4 academic libraries and 3 public library systems:

SUNY Fredonia
Syracuse University
Cayuga Community College
Tompkins-Cortland Community College
Mid-York Library System
Onondaga County Public Library
Southern Adirondack Library System

A review of current Ask Us 24/7 chat statistics showed that the most chat requests were received during 10am and 4pm eastern time. To keep the pilot manageable, we decided to run it for 4 hours per day, 10am to 2pm, Monday through Friday. I created a Google Calendar to keep track of each participants' selected hours. Each library was asked to select 1 or 2 hours per week that they could staff the LibraryH3lp service. During this time, we planned for the QuestionPoint service to continue running as usual – only the libraries participating in the pilot would have an alternate chat link on their website that pointed to LibraryH3lp instead.

Some follow-up with the participants was needed by me, to ensure that everyone had selected their shift(s) and that there was no overlap. For the purposes of the pilot, it was not necessary to have more than one librarian of each type (public/academic) per shift. Those hours not covered by the pilot participants were covered by LibraryH3lp's "ChatStaff" service, which provided backup coverage similar to QuestionPoint's backup librarians.

During this time, I received training materials from Phil Blank at ChatStaff, including documentation and videos showing how to login to the service and access various functions. I read/watched the materials and passed them along to the participants. We planned to run the pilot for at least 2 weeks, possibly 3. Unfortunately, once everyone's hours had been selected, and everyone felt comfortable using the software, we were approaching Thanksgiving, a time when the chat services were not likely to get much use. We decided to begin after Thanksgiving.

The pilot officially commenced on December 1st. This is admittedly much later than I had originally anticipated. I and the participants acknowledged that the service was not likely to be as busy as during October or November, but we decided to go ahead with the pilot test. During this time, I entered the chat as a patron several times to ensure that all the participants got some additional practice time, and got enough chances to use the software in a real chat setting. After 2 weeks, I asked the participants if they'd like to continue with a 3rd, and those who responded indicated that 2 weeks was enough time.

The pilot ended on December 13th, and I held off on further meetings due to the approaching Christmas holidays. In early January I asked the participants to email me their comments on the experience, and also to pick a date for a conference call when we could discuss it further.

Comments received by email included:

“Honestly, all of us here at OCPL Central Library were not very impressed with LibraryH3lp and do not think it is a viable alternative to Questionpoint.”

“[R]egarding our concerns with the LibraryH3lp Program[:] First, it is not very intuitive. Second, the lack of available scripts. Third, it lacks a lot of functionality that is present in QuestionPoint. Although the trial period was brief, we both agree that QuestionPoint is a better option than LibraryH3lp as it currently stands.”

“I think it could be confusing with the chats popping up through LibraryH3lp, as I appreciate the orderly fashion they appear through QP. It’s good that we’re able to receive text messages through LibraryH3lp, but I’m not sure if there are other benefits to use that instead of QP.”

A Doodle Poll (www.doodle.com) was used to select a date for the conference call, but in the end, only one participant besides me was able to come to the meeting, a librarian from the Mid-York Library System. She and I discussed the pilot experience as well as the comments previously received. She agreed with what had already been stated.

In summary, the points that our participants raised are:

- QuestionPoint may be an overly complex chat system, but LibraryH3lp was overly simplistic.
- LibraryH3lp lacked some features of QuestionPoint such as chat follow-up through the web interface, and scripted messages.
- Participants liked the way chats rolled up, where each library effectively has its own private queue (considered an extra feature in QuestionPoint, with an additional cost)
- The LibraryH3lp interface was seen as not as intuitive as QuestionPoint.
- LibraryH3lp is overall, an adequate service, but no one felt that the benefits were so great, or the problems with QuestionPoint so bad, that we needed to make a switch at this time.

It is possible that issues with intuitiveness of the software, and lack of some features, could be overcome once everyone got used to it, but without a compelling reason to switch, we decided to stay where we are.

I am keeping LibraryH3lp in mind as a possible chat software alternative if QuestionPoint should become unavailable in the future, but we are staying with our current setup for now.