

**Serving People at a
Distance:
Extending User Support
Services Beyond the Library**



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The University of Toronto Library offers a wide range of electronic information services to members of the University community. It now provides access to over 8,000 licensed and public journals and to a wide range of other electronic information resources.

As the University has increased its network capacity, as the general use of personal computers in departments has increased, and as the number of public computing sites has increased, we have seen a shift in the use of our electronic information services from within the Library to external locations.

Today, the use of many of these resources is primarily by people working outside of the Library. For example, more than 75% of the user of the Elsevier journals on one of the Library's servers is by people working at a distance. About 66% of the use of the Library's electronic information resources server is by people outside the Library.

One of the challenges faced by the University of Toronto Library and by other libraries is how to support people working far from traditional service points. The Library has initiated a project to provide interactive, web-based support for people working at a distance.

Access to most of the Library's electronic information resources, whether mounted locally or through remote systems, is restricted to people working within the University's network domain. To support people working in our affiliated teaching hospitals or using commercial internet service providers, we operate a proxy server. The people who access the Library's electronic services via the proxy server are the ones targeted by this experimental service.

People connecting to any of the Library's web pages via our proxy server are given a "LiveContact" link. This link, which is based on the Balisoft "LiveContact" software enables people at the remote locations to establish a "chat" session

with Library staff. Full duplex voice-over-Internet communication is also possible if the PCs at both ends are properly equipped

Staff support for the project is being provided by the staff of the Library's Information Technology Services Department supplemented by a small number of staff from two of the Library's traditional service units. This service is offered from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday.

During this project, which will run until the end of May 1999, the Library will attempt to look at:

- the kinds of questions asked by remote users
- the skills needed by the people who answer questions
- how to develop an "knowledge base" out of the answers provided
- how to extend this "knowledge base" to others to minimize their need to ask questions
- the impact on staff resources if this service were extended to a wider population

It is hoped that we will learn enough from this project for the Library to extend this support to a broader group of people. It is also expected that at the end of this project the support for people working at a distance will be moved from Information Technology Services into one or more of the Library's traditional service units.

<http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/eir/summary.cfm>

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