

FROM MAIL TO CONFERENCING:
EXPERIENCES OF A MIDDLE MANAGEMENT GROUP

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ABSTRACT

The advent of CoSy, an electronic conferencing system which facilitates sophisticated electronic communication on several levels, has precipitated significant changes in communication patterns among middle management staff in the Library of the University of Guelph. Meeting, telephone time and paper flow have been significantly reduced, and communication efficiency markedly improved with the creation of a staff of regular, frequent system users.

The University of Guelph Library system is based on a subject divisional structure housed in a central library. The Library's management system can be described as consultative, in that all librarians and other professional staff (to greater or lesser degrees dependent on their position within the Library's personnel classification system [Table 1.]) participate in the decision making process, within the framework of mutually established library goals and objectives. Recommendations for action in the area of concern of a committee or task force are sent forward (through minutes or similar form of communication) to the Library Administrative Council or to the Division Heads Committee. The Chief Librarian is ex officio member of all committees. The Library Administrative Council (Chief Librarian, Associate and Assistant Librarians) is responsible for policy, planning and budgetary matters, as well as participating in various University-wide and other external committees and functions. The Division Heads are directly responsible for the day-to-day operation of the Library system and participate in broader management through the Library's committees and task forces; members of this group may also serve on University level committees.

Before 1982, our communication patterns were fairly traditional: formal meetings followed by minutes; conversations that sometimes became informal meetings, usually followed by various memos; telephone conversations and inevitable rounds of telephone ping-pong. Several members of the group had access to one or more electronic messaging systems, but use was not widespread and tended to be restricted for technical and budgetary reasons.

Early in 1982, the Computer Communications Group of the Trans Canada Telephone System initiated the one-year iNet Field Trial. The iNet Gateway is an intelligent network concept offering a single point of access to meet business information needs. A wide range of features - electronic directories of available services, automatic access to connected hosts, electronic mail, individual user profiles recognized by the network and consolidated billing - create a user-orientated information environment. The iNet Gateway was designed to simplify the process of gathering, using and communicating information, and can be entered from any location in the country using standard alpha-numeric or alpha-geometric terminals via Datapac, DDD (direct distance dialing) or dedicated circuit service. Through Datapac access, iNet can link to the United States and other international packet switched networks. Beginning in July 1982 (though not fully operational for several months) the field trial involved some 250 Telidon units plus about 150 alpha-numeric terminals with gateway access to the features of the intelligent network.

As a member of the Bibliographic Interest Group, the University of Guelph Library participated both in the iNet Field Trial and in the Market Trial that followed. This Common Interest Group was co-ordinated by the National Library's Office for Network Development, and included the Canada Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (CISTI) as

well as the libraries of Carleton University, Université de Québec, University of Guelph and the University of Waterloo. The Bibliographic Interest Group's overall objective was to demonstrate the extent to which new telecommunications technology could facilitate access to library and information resources, and various projects were undertaken to support fundamental tasks performed by libraries to meet the information needs of their users - information provision, cataloguing and inter-library lending.

In addition to the group projects, the University of Guelph Library decided to mount an in-house project: to make electronic mail available to its management group in a test setting as near to ideal as possible. That is, to place a terminal on each manager's desk, at least as close as the telephone; to link this terminal to Datapac and iNet via the campus communication network, and to remove any cost restrictions to the use of electronic mail. The first two conditions were accommodated within the Library's budget, and the third was provided to us by the Computer Communications Group as part of our participation in the iNet Gateway Field Trial, and was the electronic mail service now known as ENVOY 100.

Twelve of the thirteen iNet-allocated accounts were assigned to members of the Division Heads Committee. Unfortunately, for technical reasons, the number of accounts per institutional member was severely limited, and we were unable to include all members of the Committee (which resulted in a less than ideal situation for a variety of reasons). The last trial account was reserved for the interlibrary lending project.

During the iNet Field Trial, most members of the Division Heads group became committed electronic mail users: signing on regularly to check our mailbox, becoming more comfortable using a keyboard, and contributing and responding to messages. The time-independent feature of electronic communication was much appreciated, as was the ability to communicate with travelling members of the group, whether momentarily away from the office or actually out of the building or off-campus for a more extended period. As the group became seasoned electronic communicators, moving from passive to active users, we began to force the mail system beyond its design capabilities. For example: a message that began as a communication between two, perhaps copied to one or two others, would be forwarded by one of the recipients to several others; each recipient might then respond within one group or layer, but participants in the other layer were often missed - or copied more than once! And the 'copying' and 'forwarding' duplicated text unnecessarily. The forwarding function also reversed the natural chronological order of the messages, so that one frequently saw the answer(s) before the question.

Fortunately, at the same time as the twin needs for wider availability and more sophisticated methods of electronic communication were becoming apparent, the campus computer conferencing system was moving through its development stages. Two members of the Library group were actively involved in its initial development, and continue to be

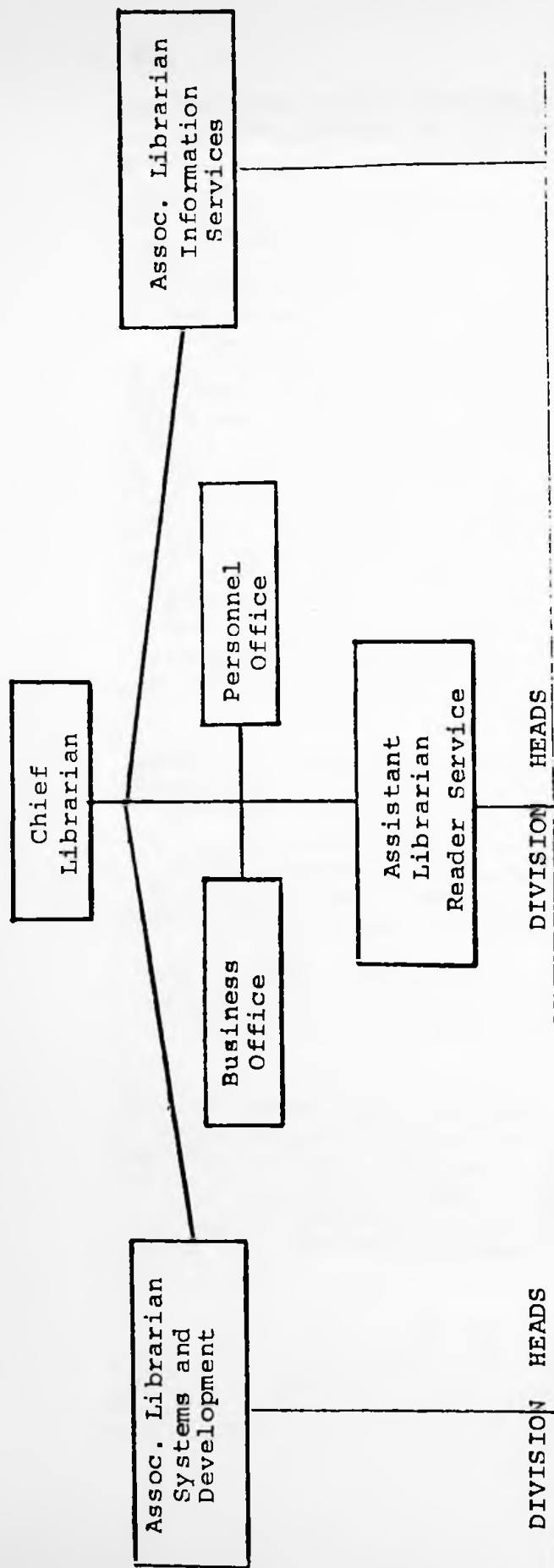
vigorous CoSy users. Because of our iNet experience and our expressed needs, the Library group was asked to participate in testing, and we moved from electronic mail to computer conferencing.

Again, there was a change in communications patterns. The conferencing facility permits chronological communications, and allows newcomers to a discussion to read the history before contributing. The ability to add 'comments' to a specific message in a logical chain eliminates the convoluted forwarding chains of a mail system. It is now possible for several users to set an agenda and conduct preliminary discussion as a conference or conversation, before a face-to-face meeting begins. Those attending the meeting arrive more fully briefed, with each participant having the same background information on which to base decisions. In addition, conferencing makes it much easier to solicit information, comments or opinions from others who might not be attending the actual meeting. In some instances, the meeting itself is held electronically - either over a defined or limited period of time, or on an ongoing basis. The conversation feature permits one or two members of a conference to 'step outside' for a short discussion, without interrupting the meeting, and, if required, the result of the 'aside' can then be transmitted into the main conference. Also, regular use of private or confidential conferences between line supervisors encourages frequent discussions and improves the traditional lines of communication without taking either staff member from the work location.

Since CoSy has become 'publicly available,' the number of library staff users has increased dramatically, and now includes all supervisory staff, as well as most of the professional staff and several from the support staff group. Although we cannot provide workstation access for all these, terminals with campus network connection are available for public use. We have noticed that the Division Head group now uses CoSy to keep the supervisors informed and for two-way communication with them.

Although the conferencing system we are using also provides electronic mail, the one feature of the previous electronic mail/messaging system that several of our group mourned in passing was the electronic filing cabinet!

In addition to facilitating and enhancing already established communication pathways, using the computer conferencing system has opened channels that did not really exist before, resulting in broader exchanges of information among many groups of staff members. At the same time, we have noted a dramatic reduction in the flow of paper around the place, and the reduction continues as more staff members sign on to conferencing.



Co-ordinating Committees

Library Administrative Council

Collections (includes several sub-committees)

Disaster Planning

Display

Doc. Centre Materials

Division Heads

Orientation & Bibliographic Instruction

Presentation & Publications Co-ordination

Professional Staff

SIS Co-ordination

Supervisors

Systems Planning

Task Groups/Ad hoc Committees

Search Editors

Videotex

Public Service Procedure Manual

Circulation/Catalogue Systems

Interface

Library Response to the University's

Aims & Objectives Report