

The Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) is a mobile device that is increasingly being used to access Web-based content, including a library's Web site. Because of this need for information while "on-the-go", library literature is lending increased attention to delivering information to this mobile demographic, particularly in relation to the medical profession. PDA's, as they are most frequently referred to in literature, are often mentioned along comparable mobile devices, such as the Blackberry and web-enabled cell phones. The technology enabling web information to reach a cell phone or PDA is relatively new; however literature in the library science field has kept pace well with these developments and discussed the many ways that mobile technology can be used in a library setting.

Currently there are misconceptions about the benefits and usage of PDAs regarding libraries and librarians (Johns and Tucker 2003). One common misconception is that PDAs have little to offer library patrons, yet PDA users can use their mobile device to download information about their account or the library (hours, contact information, etc.), and some can also be used to access library catalogs, materials, and databases. The use of PDAs can be of benefit to librarians as well; an agenda function is available to manage meetings and set alarms and reminders of important events. Also, Microsoft Office can be used on a PDA, which allows a person to create and edit documents from a PDA and later easily transfer the documents to a PC.

Information about the use of PDA's in relation to information seeking behavior is most prominent in the medical library literature. Medical professionals are using PDAs to remotely access medical reference materials in addition to their uses for patient care management and the other features offered (Rios 2004). Considerations of screen resolution and size should be a factor

in design decisions of Web pages and the catalog, and PDA-readable formats should be an offered alternative (Cuddy 2006). Although, according to Tenopir (2004), physicians are “less concerned about small screen size than memory limitations”. While medical professionals were not using their mobile devices to download articles in Tenopir’s 2004 study, PDA’s are now being used in some libraries to download and read e-books (Gillfillian and O’Rourke 2006).

One way in which PDA’s could be used in the future for reference is in conjunction with chat reference. Many libraries are already using chat reference, and many web enabled mobile devices are capable of using popular chat programs like AOL’s Instant Messenger. Chat reference through mobile devices is one way librarians can be more accessible without being chained to a desk, and offers another option for on-the-go users to communicate with librarians. Additionally, a reference librarian could use a PDA to access the catalog or databases while helping a patron in a part of the library that is not near a computer.

I also imagine that in the future, as more people use mobile devices, librarians and library catalogs will receive more queries from within the library itself. A patron within the stacks of a large library ask questions of a librarian or check the catalog to refine their initial search without having to run back and forth between a computer, the reference desk, and the shelves, and not have to write down or print out a large list of books. They could simply have the list available on the screen.

Also, the PDA combined with other technologies, such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) and Global Positioning System (GPS) technology, could be very powerful within the library setting. A patron or librarian, who finds themselves unable to find a book in the stacks, equipped with a PDA could potentially view a map of the library showing the relative location of themselves to the book.

References:

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