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Volunteers acting as information providers to citizens

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Volunteers acting as information providers to citizens

Volunteers as
information
providers

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Abstract

Purpose – Citizens Advice Bureau (SHIL in Hebrew) is an information and referral service dedicated to serving the needs of citizens by providing easy access to information about citizenship rights and obligations. Many people turn to the offices of SHIL either for help or to volunteer as advisors. This study seeks to examine the information seeking behavior of SHIL volunteers supplying information services to citizens.

Design/methodology/approach – The theoretical foundations of the study are based on two existing models of information searching related to everyday life problems, Foster's non-linear model of information seeking behavior and Bates's berry-picking approach. This research employs a qualitative method. A total of 35 advisors in different SHIL branches were interviewed and the content of the interviews was analyzed, mapped and organized into categories by using concepts and terms revealed in the data.

Findings – Findings show that volunteers at SHIL search information in a way that integrates the two models mentioned above, the berry-picking model and the non-linear model. In addition, findings point to difficulties that the advisors face in solving problems of the clients. These difficulties are connected with the different aspects relating to the flow of information both within and outside the organization and with organizational and administrative aspects at SHIL.

Originality/value – The information seeking behavior of volunteers acting as providers of information services has yet to be investigated at length and the understanding of their information behavior can be of value, since volunteering carries great importance in a democracy.

Keywords Information seeking, Volunteering, Information referral services, Information source selection, Information retrieval, Information services

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Being part of the information society confronts us with the daily challenge of managing a sometimes overloaded information environment. As a result, users sometimes turn to professional organizations for assistance in order to make sense of

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all the information they encounter when trying to solve a problem in their everyday lives. There are several types of institutions that provide free information and referral services to citizens to help them deal with issues such as unemployment, social security benefits, quarrels between neighbors and more. One of these organizations is the Citizens Advice Bureau (SHIL in Hebrew). SHIL is a voluntary organization operated by the Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services in collaboration with municipal governments. There are more than 50 SHIL's branches across Israel serve as local information centers for the citizens. Many of the volunteers are retirees or people not connected to a specific workplace that donate their time to help their communities. The purpose of the study is to identify the information sources used by volunteers and the obstacles they encounter when seeking for information.

The contribution of this study is useful since it provides a glimpse into a number of elements in the information behavior of a particular group of information mediators and we have not found any previous works on the information sources used by intermediaries working as volunteers, helping to solve everyday life problems of their clients.

Literature survey

Information and referral services

Information and referral services have a significant role in an age where people are confronted with huge amounts of information when trying to solve a problem or resolve an issue in their lives. This is why getting assistance from an expert in finding the relevant information to solve a problem can be an invaluable service in a time of need. An information and referral service is an active process that connects an individual's problem or need with a service or an external source that will help him solve the problem or fulfill the need (Jones, 1978). These external sources can be social centers, community organizations, government offices or private organizations. The two main purposes of information and referral services are to improve the public's access to social services and to accessible information (Long, 1973). Information and referral services can become a source for support and assistance as Baruchson-Arbib (1996, p. 9) states:

The help that can be provided through the provision of information is no magic solution but it can lead to a positive attitude, creativity, openness and understanding. Providing support through empathy can lead to the provision of the right information at the right time, and allows individuals that find themselves in distress to regain control of their lives.

The purpose of this study is to examine certain elements in the information seeking behavior of volunteers working at an information and referral service in Israel. Understanding the information seeking behavior of volunteers as intermediaries between users and an intimidating world of information is important since they are perceived by users as gatekeepers that gather and disseminate information and therefore represent a reliable and easy to access information source (Sturges, 2001; Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). A number of studies have investigated the different roles played by volunteers as non-professional information providers in different library settings. These studies have examined the work of volunteers in public libraries (Hyams, 2011; Nyren, 1985), hospital libraries (Calman, 2010; McDiarmid and Auster, 2005), academic libraries (Schobernd *et al.*, 2009) and school libraries (Walters, 2007). Additional papers showed that volunteers were able in the maintenance of a journal holdings list on the

library's web site (Pulsipher and Henry, 2002), they were able to complement the professional staff in rural and small public libraries (Buchanan, 2008; Freund, 2005), helped a libraries in developing a consultation model of communication (Nicol and Johnson, 2008) and created and maintained English-speaking programs of activities such as reading, workshops, singing session for babies and toddlers and a youth club (Buttle and Wood, 2007). Conhaim (2003) proposes setting out "virtual volunteering" programs that will allow volunteers to offer services from their home computers such as website design and maintenance.

Professional online searchers can also be viewed as intermediaries between users and information. Fidel (1991) investigated different searching styles of experienced online searchers and found three dimensions of searching behavior:

- (1) level of interaction;
- (2) preference for operational or conceptual moves; and
- (3) preference for textwords or descriptors.

Although the roles played by volunteers in libraries have been extensively investigated over the years their information seeking behavior as intermediaries has yet to be examined at length. Research in the information behavior of intermediaries has focused mainly on librarians and information specialists. Brown and Ortega (2005) investigated the information seeing behavior of physical science librarians and found that they rely on personal communication and online discussion groups for information to enlighten their practice. Salvador Olivan *et al.* (1998) highlighted the role of the information professional as an intermediary between the scientific information contained in databases and the end-user. In a later study Perryman (2008) asked to rank the information professionals' preferences among 11 resource types as sources supporting daily business, including personal communication, conference attendance, electronic mailing lists, and scholarly journals. He also found that physical science librarians preferred peer-reviewed journals over all other sources for research dissemination, resembling the preferences of scientists, and second, that peer-to-peer consultation predominate for practice-oriented decisions. Hover (2006) performed an exploratory study of the cross-cultural, cross-language information-seeking behavior of a group of 84 academic and public reference librarians from Egypt and the USA. This study proposes a detailed description of the design rationale for the interview model, which includes a cultural background questionnaire providing data designed to enable comparative analysis of the search performance of sub-groups.

Information seeking models

Wilson (2001) distinct information seeking behavior as "the purposive seeking for information as a consequence of a need to satisfy some goal. In the course of seeking, the individual may interact with manual information systems (such as a newspaper or a library), or with computer-based systems (such as the world wide web)" (p. 49). The present study investigated the information sources SHIL's volunteers use in their work within the context of a voluntary organization. Information seeking behavior is not isolated from the context within which the user works.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on two models of information seeking behavior related to everyday life problems. The first model is a non-linear model proposed by Foster (2004, 2005) that describes different contextual elements to

information seeking behavior related to time, to the project or issue to be resolved, to navigation issues, to the accessibility of sources and to social networking and organizational elements. The model describes three core processes (Opening, Orientation, and Consolidation) and three levels of contextual interaction (Internal Context, External Context, and Cognitive Approach), each composed of several individual activities and attributes. The interactivity and shifts described by the model show information seeking to be non-linear, dynamic, holistic, and flowing. The social networking context is one of the more significant elements; Foster found that it can bolster or reduce the access to information sources and positive organizational culture can encourage the collaboration between the volunteers. Following is a description of the core processes of Foster's (2004, p. 232) non-linear model:

- *Opening.* This core process comprises the activities such as: breath exploration, eclecticism, networking, keyword searching, browsing, monitoring, chaining and serendipity.
- *Orientation.* This core process comprises the activities such as: problem definition, picture handling, reviewing, identify words, identifying the shape of an existing research
- *Consolidation.* This core process comprises the activities such as: knowing enough, refining, sifting incorporation, verifying, finishing.

Foster's (2004) model is adequate to analyze the information seeking behavior of volunteers working in information and referral services because this model conceptualizes interdisciplinary information-seeking behavior that is associated with the need to use a diverse range of activities and sources and in doing so perform a higher number of inquiries. This interdisciplinary information work is the basis of the referral services provided at SHIL in which volunteers attend to information request in a wide variety of subjects.

The second model is Bates's (1989) "Berry-picking Model" that proposes a successive and interactive search. In this model different searching modes can be used simultaneously, while each new piece of information the user encounters may give him new ideas and directions to follow, and users adapt their information behavior to the specific stage of the search. This model contrasts with the traditional idea of a single query presented by the user, matched to the database contents, yielding a single output set. In real-life searches users may begin with just one feature of a broader topic, or just one relevant reference, and move through a variety of sources. Each new piece of information they encounter gives them new ideas and directions to follow and, consequently, a new conception of the query. At each stage they are not just modifying the search terms used in order to get a better match for a single query. Rather the query itself (as well as the search terms used) is continually shifting, in part or whole. This type of search is here called an evolving search. Furthermore, at each stage, with each different conception of the query, the user may identify useful information and references. In other words, the query is satisfied not by a single final retrieved set, but by a series of selections of individual references and bits of information at each stage of the ever-modifying search. A bit-at-a-time retrieval of this sort is here called "berry-picking". This term is used by analogy to picking huckleberries or blueberries in the forest. The berries are scattered on the bushes; they do not come in bunches. One must pick them one at a time.

Research questions

The present research investigated different elements of the information behavior of volunteers at Counseling Services for the Citizen (SHIL) a free information and referral service. The research questions examined the processes that volunteers go through when seeking information to answer clients' questions and the obstacles they encounter during these processes.

- Which information sources volunteers use when looking for information to solve a client's problem?
- Are there any differences in the information behavior of volunteers that work in different areas?
- What obstacles do volunteers encounter when seeking information to solve a client's problem?

Methods

The present study is a qualitative inquiry into the information behavior of volunteers working at SHIL. This method of study was chosen because it can refer to research on people's lives, narratives, and behavior, as well as studies of organizational functioning, social movements, or interactional relationships (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Namely, rather than trying to quantify different factors in the information behavior, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of volunteers working at SHIL in order to understand how they perceive and interpret their jobs as volunteers. Qualitative methods are often used to describe phenomena that have yet to be researched in depth and to capture meaning in the form of individuals' thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Data collection

The present study used open-ended interviews to elicit personal narratives from a group of volunteers at a voluntary information organization called SHIL. Interviews were chosen as a method of data collection because they allow the investigator to probe, to clarify and to create new questions based on what has been already heard. Interviewing is an especially important means for data collection because, as Weiss (1994) explains, "interviewing gives us a window on the past. We can also, by interviewing, learn about settings that would otherwise be closed to us: foreign societies, exclusive organizations, and the private lives of families and couples" (Weiss, 1994, p. 1). The interviews were conducted in 2009.

The interview survey consisted of two main sections:

- (1) In the first part of the interview participants were asked to provide personal and demographic data including prior and current employment, expertise, country of origin and years of experience in volunteer work.
- (2) In the second part of the interview participants were asked to describe their work as volunteers at SHIL, including the strategies they used to seek and organize the information they use in their work, they were asked to provide examples of the problems they were asked to address by their clients and the strategies they use to elicit information from them.

Population**SHIL**

Counseling services for the citizen was founded in the 1950s by an Israeli social worker that visited the British CAB organization who in 1957 convinced the mayor of the city of Haifa to fund the service. Today SHIL has more than 50 branches in Israel operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Welfare. For many people, the local SHIL branch aims to act as a starting point for unraveling the complicated maze of laws and regulations regarding civil rights and duties in Israeli society and it functions as a guide to the Israeli government system. SHIL provides individuals of all races, genders, religions and nationalities with an opportunity to receive free, effective and confidential counsel. The organization provides different kinds of services such as a 24 hours telephone service center, mediation services, assistance for Holocaust survivors, radio broadcasts, academic cooperation and information and referral services (<http://shil.info>). SHIL has an internet site that provides up-to-date information on a variety of subjects from different sources. Information at the site is provided in Hebrew, Arabic and Russian and has a search engine and a forum where clients can post a question and receive immediate answers (SHIL, 2009).

SHIL has about 1,000 volunteers in 55 branches around Israel. There were three types of volunteers that participated in the current study:

- (1) *General advisors*: these volunteers are at the forefront of the service. They are the first to receive the clients' request for information and their function is to answer simple questions or to refer clients to the relevant experts on the subject of their query.
- (2) *Experts in specific areas*: these volunteers are professionals such as lawyers, social workers, bankers etc. who contribute their time and expertise.
- (3) *Law students*: as part of their curricula requirements law students are required to volunteer at SHIL branches.

In addition four branch managers were also interviewed, mainly on their views about the volunteers' work processes. Branch managers are employed by the Ministry of Welfare.

The sample of volunteers that participated in the study consisted of 31 volunteers working as advisors in different areas with a least one year of experience working as a volunteer at SHIL. Of the 31 participants 17 were women and 14 were men. The majority of the volunteers were pensioners between the ages of 50 to 70, three were under the age of 40 and two were over the age of 80. All volunteers have vast experience in areas such as social work, education, banking, law, librarianship, human resources.

To receive assistance from SHIL, the clients have to make an appointment usually by phone. In this first interaction the volunteer asks the clients about the nature of their problem, advise them about the documentation they need and refers them to the next step in the process. When the client meets the volunteer face-to-face, the volunteer will try to elicit as much information as he or she can from the client in order to understand all the details of the problem. In the next stage of the process further examination of the problem is needed and this is achieved by asking the client to fill out forms, by reading the documentation related to the case when at the same time the volunteer keeps looking for information to complement what the client has said. After the first

appointment the ongoing services can be done by email, phone or through additional face-to-face interactions.

Data analysis

Data from the interviews were analyzed using the content analysis method (Creswell, 2007). The content categories were based on a survey of the literature on the subject of information seeking behavior and on the analysis of the data elicited during the interviews. The content of the interviews was analyzed, mapped and organized into categories by using concepts and terms used by participants. These categories reflected participants' feelings, thoughts, beliefs and knowledge. Hence, the category scheme allows us a glimpse into the volunteers' experience as information providers and intermediaries. The categories that resulted from the analysis of the data reflect the volunteers' interpretation of their work at SHIL and their interactions with their clients. The connections between the categories are based on the data collected from the interviews and the category scheme as a whole conveys a theory of information behavior. The category scheme comprises the following categories:

- Sources selected by volunteers. The analysis reveal four types of sources used, human sources, the internet, organizational sources and printed sources.
- Differences in the problem solving strategies of volunteers that work in different areas. Volunteers at SHIL come from different backgrounds and professions, and strategies are used by each group of professionals.
- Obstacles volunteers encounter when seeking information to solve a client's problem

Findings

The following section presents the findings that resulted from the content analysis of the interviews.

Information sources

The first research question examines the information sources SHIL's volunteers used in order to solve their clients' problems. The categorization of the information sources revealed in the analysis was based on Savolainen's (2008) source scheme resulted in four different types of information sources: human sources, networked sources, institutional sources and printed sources.

- (1) *Human sources*: this category included people in the immediate circle of the participants, friends, family members, and colleagues.
- (2) *Networked sources*: this category included all types of information sources in networked form such as internet sites of all types, search engines (specifically Google), academic databases and networked reference materials.
- (3) *Organizational sources*: this category included experts or professionals who have a clear area of expertise and have a professional or personal relationship with the volunteer.
- (4) *Printed sources*: this category included all types of information sources in print form such as newspapers, books, magazines and reference materials.

The content analysis of the interviews also revealed contextual factors that influenced the information seeking behavior of volunteers at SHIL.

Human sources

In-house sources

Participants reported consulting with other volunteers and with the branch manager, in their branch and volunteers from other branches. Volunteers working the same shift understand the importance of sharing information with their colleagues and recognize them as reliable sources of information as described by participant no. 1 “our knowledge is usually enough” or participant no. 18 “I seek help in the knowledge of others”. In addition to consulting with colleagues, volunteers turn for assistance to their branch managers. Managers are considered expert information professionals because of their daily exposure to different kinds of problems and issues to be resolved. Volunteers see their branch managers as knowledgeable mentors that can help them understand and disentangle the many subjects that SHIL deals with. Managers update their volunteers constantly, sending them updates by email as one volunteer describes: “we get updates all the time, our branch manager sends us email containing updates, news and information about new volunteers.”

Outside sources

Volunteers bring with them not only their knowledge and expertise but also their contacts in other social networks. As participant no. 13 explains “sometimes I will call the bank and ask people I know there about the best way to help a client.” Students volunteering at SHIL will sometime turn to their lecturers for advice: “I will sometimes call my advisor at the university for advice.” Sometimes volunteers communicate with the relevant people at a specific organization through electronic mail as volunteer no. 13 explains: “I communicate with my clients mainly through email and telephone, sometimes I answer them myself and sometimes I’ll refer the question to an expert.” The use of previous social relations was central to the information behavior of volunteers who rely on social networks as sources of information.

Networked sources

The vast amounts of information available on the internet were revealed as a major source of information for participants. Volunteers accessed the SHIL site, searched for freely accessible information on the internet and used subscription-based databases available at the public library.

- *SHIL site.* The national SHIL site presents information on a variety of subjects related to civil rights and obligations. Branches have the opportunity to have a regional site that addresses municipal issues. However, participant no. 25 an expert on labor relations described these sites as useful sources of information: “I almost never use the national SHIL site, I usually turn to the original source of information like the Ministry of Justice.” SHIL’s site has a forum that allows the public to post their question to consultants on general issues and these consultants provide the first pieces of information and refer the client to the branch in his or her area.
- *The internet.* The internet with its vast amounts of freely accessible information represent an important source for up-to-date information as volunteer 13 an

expert in the banking system explains “I found the answer to a problem while surfing the internet” or as volunteer no. 31 who is an expert on insurance said: “I search sources like the internet, sites about insurance, I search for new laws, known insurance policies, new standards of the industry etc.” Sometimes volunteers turn to the public library and its collections of databases. “I search the internet and use the library services such as the virtual librarian that performs the search for me on multiple databases on different subjects, the librarian then sends me the updated information.”

External organizational sources

- *Private organizations.* Private organizations are important sources of information for SHIL volunteers. There is one particular company that provides business information on three levels: consultancy legal services by phone, access to legal databases, printed sources and weekly updates. As volunteer no. 22 an expert on the labor market as general volunteer explains “If I am not sure about something’ I can call the lawyer at “Hashavim” to verify the information.”
- *Public organizations.* On many occasions SHIL’s volunteers will act as intermediaries between the client and the different government or public institutions. Volunteers will look for the right person or department to solve the client’s problem and connect between the two, as branch manager no. 26 describes “I try to understand the client’s problem and refer him to the right person that can help him.”

Printed sources

All SHIL branches have small collections of printed materials on different subjects that do not appear to be in frequent use. The information is classified by subject and volunteers sometimes update the files on a subject with a recent newspaper clip or a flyer. These files serve as a source for current awareness or to learn on a new subject: “I read the file ‘Kol Oved’ to keep up to date with information on labor law so I read the printed file on the subject from time to time.” If the SHIL branch is close to the public library then the volunteers’ access to printed information increases as branch manager no. 27 describes “because our SHIL branch is situated in the same building with the public library we have no problem getting access to literature on a wide range of subjects, there is a strong relationship between the public library and SHIL.”

Problem-solving strategies

In addition to the volunteers’ sources preferences the content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that volunteers used different strategies when answering queries on different subjects. Some of the people working on legal issues are students who volunteer at SHIL as part of their curricula requirements. These students tell that law requests require lengthy talks with the clients to fully understand and interpret the problem, to consult with an expert from the academia and to follow the case through. Volunteer no. 9, a law student, describes the process: “Our treatment of the problem can take up to five sessions since we have to respond to the reactions and consult with our lecturers and advisors.” Volunteers giving advice on labor issues will sometimes learn about the problem from documents and rely less on the client’s recollections as

volunteer no. 20 who is a lawyer, notes “I ask my clients to bring all relevant documentation such as salary slips, letter of termination etc. to our meeting [...] I would rather get the information from the paper work and not from the client because then I can rely on facts of the case.” When advising on consumer issues volunteers often have to contact the other party on behalf of their clients: “when dealing with consumer issues, my job is not only to provide information but to contact the business on behalf of my client, the moment they hear I am from SHIL they change their attitude. I help starting the process and often I get very good responses” (volunteer no. 30 a consumer issues expert). When providing information on social security issues SHIL’s site provides users with the necessary forms to make different claims to Social Security. SHIL’s volunteers search the SHIL’s site as volunteer no. 28, a social security expert, explains: “Since social security law is ambiguous and prone to interpretation, we sometimes need to take the letter of law and match it to the case at hand for that I’ll contact someone at National Insurance Institute and ask his opinion on the matter.”

The analysis of the interviews narratives revealed a series of contextual factors that had an effect on the volunteers when seeking information. The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three contextual factors: conditions of the physical environment, difficulties in gaining access to computer resources and information sources, personal difficulties during the advisory process.

Obstacles encountered by the volunteers

Physical environment

The difficult physical conditions at SHIL’s branches was one of the subjects revealed in the data analysis. One volunteer complained about working in an open space environment: “I am ashamed of the place were we work, there is no privacy, the physical conditions of the place need improvement” (volunteer no. 29 a social security expert).

Difficulties in gaining access to computer resources and information sources

Volunteer no. 1, a general volunteer, noted the lack of computers at the branch that makes it difficult to provide proper service to the clients “I would like to have constant access to the internet to able to search for information at any time.” Volunteer no. 2, a lawyer, expressed his need to get access to specific databases “It will be useful to have a computer at my desk with access to legal databases [...] it is hard not to have access to a computer [...] if a client comes with a problem it takes me a about a week to complete the request, if I had a computer I could give the client all the information he needs the same day.” The lack of information professionals at the branch also represented an obstacle for the volunteers when answering clients’ requests. Participant no. 12, a branch manager, points out that “to provide a better service I would like to have an information professional working full-time at the branch that would help us have good relations with government offices such as the National Insurance Institute and, the Ministry of Justice so we can get constant updates from these offices”.

Personal difficulties during the advisory process

Volunteers might encounter personal difficulties when assisting a client as manager no. 6 explains “being exposed to knowledge empowers me, the ability to help, but at the same time it can be frustrating when I can’t help.” Or they react to what they hear

about the clients' problems "It is frustrating when we hear the same stories from clients, that the same rights are being violated, to be exposed to sad life stories, to feel powerless not to have any authority so we to take legal steps to resolve this recurring situation", as manager no. 6 explains. Three volunteers reported having trouble dealing with clients who abuse the system. Volunteers might find it hard to deal with problematic clients as volunteers no. 2, a lawyer, describes "it is important to deal with 'chronic' clients who abuse the system every time with a new story, or those who come to SHIL to check the advice they got somewhere else." Volunteers consider their lack of knowledge in computers as an obstacle "I would like to receive some training on how to use the computer to search for information." Volunteers sometimes feel taken for granted and unappreciated "SHIL does great work and that is not always recognized" as volunteer no. 3, a career counselor, explains or "the work volunteers do should not be taken for granted, they should be appreciated more; they should get some benefits such as invitations to events, trips and parties" (volunteer no. 30's words).

Discussion

Volunteers at SHIL help their clients by using their own personal knowledge on the subject and using a wide variety of information sources. Findings show that the information seeking behavior of volunteers concurs with Barzilai-Nahon's (2009, p. 1,494) definition of gatekeeper as "key individuals who are both strongly connected to internal colleagues and strongly linked to external domains." and with Sturges's (2001) assertion that gatekeepers are agents that gather and disseminate information.

Findings in this study show that the information seeking behavior of volunteers acting as intermediaries and information providers concurs with Foster's (2004) three core processes:

- (1) Opening;
- (2) Orientation; and
- (3) Consolidation.

Although Foster describes his model as a non-linear one, findings from the current study show that the majority of the volunteers started the information seeking process at Orientation by conducting activities such as asking their clients a series of questions that will help them in the definition of the problem, building a picture of the conflict to resolve (i.e. sometimes by talking to the other side or by reading documents). Foster states that a "primary component of Orientation is the process of Problem Definition, in the classic sense of defining the focus and boundaries of the information problem" (Foster, 2004, p. 234). Volunteers defined their clients' problems through a series of questions at the beginning of their interaction. Only when they have defined and understood the client's problem at a satisfactory level volunteers turn to other process or activities at the Opening stage which represent the selection and use of the information sources formerly identified such as databases, online catalogues, internet search engines, and online journals. Activities occurring at Orientation were identified as choice of keywords, selection of sources, and the initiation of combinations of other core processes, that is, after defining the problem the volunteer identifies the keywords to use and the internal and external sources accessible to.

Two activities at Opening stood out in the analysis of the data. First, Networking appeared as a main activity for volunteers who rely in human sources for updated

information (i.e. other volunteers at their branch or other branches and people they know at the different government offices or organizations). Concurring with Foster's (2004) findings, the internet, e-mail, and online discussion groups were valued for increasing the possibilities for Networking, and hence locating information and sources. The second activity was Eclecticism that encompasses accepting, gathering and storing information from a diverse range of both passive and active sources, sometimes over considerable time periods, for later incorporation and satisfaction of information needs. Several volunteers reported periodically reading and saving information on printed files such as newspapers clippings, brochures and flyers to keep the files updated about current legal and social issues for later use. The main activity revealed at Consolidation was the verification of the information obtained. Because volunteers were acting as intermediaries and information providers they took great care in verifying the information found in their search before handing it to the client. This verification often took them to consult with a more experienced volunteer or with another information source such as the organization's website or printed information.

Findings show that there is not one pattern by which volunteers search for information because each search process is based on the existing knowledge the volunteer has on the particular subject and his or hers understanding of the problem. Consequently the information seeking behavior of the volunteers also concurs with Bates' (1989) berrypicking model. As described by Bates, when looking for information volunteers tend to collect pieces of information from different sources accessible to them without a specific or preordained pattern when each piece of information leads them to the following sources and directs their search process. Although the information sources used during the search might vary, there are several stages of the advisory process that are common to all the interactions between the volunteers and the clients. Volunteers described several steps in the referral process such as the preliminary interview with the client, reviewing the client's documentations and forms or referring him or her to the relevant expert. Just as Bates described in her model, the information found at each step feeds and directs the next steps of the process; the volunteer "picks" those sources relevant at each step.

Bates model is also present in the different strategies used by expert volunteers in different areas are based mainly on their prior knowledge and experience. Volunteers doing general work will first listen to what the clients has to say, ask questions both from the client and to other people involved, and then collect information from a wide variety of sources such as internal information available at the branch, internet forums and sites, lectures, advise from colleagues and more. Volunteers who are considered experts in their fields, in addition to collecting information, will try to help solve their client's problem by writing letters, making phone calls, serving as intermediaries between the two sides, or representing the clients in small claims court, that is, functioning as gatekeepers that can provide the human touch, making people feel they have accessibility to information (Nicol and Johnson, 2008).

Volunteers that participated in the study described three types of contextual factors that impact their work at SHIL, the physical conditions at the branch, the lack of accessibility to computer resources and information sources such as databases and a number of personal difficulties volunteers encountered during the referral process. Technical difficulties and difficulties accessing information sources were also found by Bronstein and Baruchson's (2008) study in the information seeking behavior of Jewish

studies scholars and by Savolainen and Kari's (2006) study in which accessibility to networked sources is perceived as "facilitating everyday life". Meho and Tibbo (2003) concluded that getting access to information appears to be a major concern for social scientists. Access to information includes getting hold of, or access to, materials or sources volunteers need to answer their clients' queries.

Concurring with Foster's (2004) findings, the surrounding organizational climate affected their attitudes towards the place and their access to information sources. Many volunteers noted that sometimes the lack of computer resources and the poor facilities available at their branch hindered their work and the service they provided to their clients. Moreover, organizational climate was negatively affected by the lack of information professionals at the branches, the need for more guidance and training and by the need for policy formulation within the organization related to the interactions with different government organizations.

Cassell and Hiremath (2006) stated that for an information and referral services organization to function and succeed they need to have a close and working relationship with external organizations such as the public library, government offices, and public and private organizations. This study shows that volunteers feel that there is a room for improvement in flow of information within and to the organization and there is a need for a wide organizational change. This finding supports Foster's (2004) assertion that the social and organizational context in which the information behavior occurs can foster or hinder the accessibility of information.

Conclusions

This study provides primary data on a number of elements in the information seeking behavior of people with no professional information training who work as intermediaries to help others. Findings of the study show that the volunteers at SHIL collect information in successive stages using different sources at each stage concurring with Bates' (1989) berrypicking model. Concurring with Foster's (2004, 2005) nonlinear model volunteers work at defining their client's problem at the beginning of the process implemented networking strategies by turning to other people, forums and chat rooms for further information and gather and store relevant information on frequently asked questions for future use. The source selections of volunteers are based on their personal knowledge and experience and show the importance of their peer group as a reliable information source. In addition, the information seeking behavior of volunteers is affected by external factors such as the lack of a variety of resources and problems in the flow of external and internal information. The support system needed will provide guidance and support to volunteers allowing them to improve the information provision at SHIL's branches.

Recommendations for further research

We recommend further research into the information behavior of nonprofessionals acting as information providers. In an information world where a large part of users act as providers of user-generated content in social sites the information behavior of nonprofessionals as information providers is of great significance to the understanding of the information behavior of individuals both on networking sites and on organizational settings.

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