



# THE LIBRARY HELP ZONE

**T**he University of New South Wales (UNSW) Library was one of the first libraries in the world to make radical changes to the traditional service desk model. *SHAUN O'DWYER reports.*

We completely redesigned our client service space in 2011. The refurbishment of the service desk area was the last in a series of sweeping changes that have transformed UNSW Library under the leadership of Andrew Wells from the mid-2000s onwards.

The Library Help Zone concept emerged from a study of new developments in client services across all service sectors, not just libraries. Our investigation revealed that what was happening in the banking, airport and retail sectors, and particularly in retailers such as the Apple Store, was leading the way in innovative client service. Some very clear common trends had emerged in these sectors over the last decade: a strong emphasis on self-help technologies, co-production, knowledgeable staff providing assistance as required, and more imaginative use of space.

We applied these ideas to the library environment and the Help Zone concept emerged from the brainstorming that followed. Three key strategic goals were established to inform any change. We needed to:

1. create a user-friendly environment where library staff approach and greet customers rather than the other way around
2. transform the service model from staff assistance to self-service by providing self-service check/return machines, computer terminals, shopping-centre-style kiosks, online and mobile knowledgebase information applications
3. ensure that the library's prime real estate is used even when library staff are not present.

After much planning, construction took place in the summer of 2010–11, and when the hoardings came down a very different client service space was revealed. On entering UNSW Library, our clients now see a welcoming area; a brightly lit pillar with information and help zone signage; a variety of PCs to work at, either standing or seated, on their own or with staff guidance; a large, comfortable couch with plenty of power points; consultation rooms; self-service check/return machines; and an information kiosk modelled directly on those found in major shopping centres, as we wanted the client to immediately know how to use them.

Clients are greeted by a Client Services Unit staff member acting as concierge, who ascertains their needs and guides them to either self-help tools or library staff assistance. Clients and staff work side by side to resolve issues without the barrier of the service desk. This all happens in a space that is always available to library users.

The change from a service desk to a Help Zone model is now very popular with all clients, both student and academic, despite initial concerns. The Help Zone concept was quickly rolled out in the UNSW Law Library as well with similar success.

The thought and planning that went into the initial design continues to benefit both clients and library staff, and other areas of the university have sought to emulate the Help Zone model. The major lesson from our experience is that libraries need to firmly establish the strategic goals for the redesign and then adhere to them, never compromising even if faced with resistance to change. 🌟

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**SHAUN O'DWYER**  
UNSW Library  
s.odwyer@unsw.edu.au