Competence Clusters for Virtual Information Service

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Background
Virtual reference services provide users with access to guidance from a librarian while searching for information. Through the Internet and by the use of chat and co-browsing the librarian can assist the user as if they were in the same room. There are two consortia in Sweden for providing virtual reference service.
The academic libraries co-operate in the network Librarian On Duty. Aimed towards students and faculty, Librarian on Duty provides a general reference service. In the case of required specialist competence the software allows the “librarian on duty” to transfer the user to a colleague or to another library within the network. More than half of the academic libraries in Sweden are members of the Librarian On Duty consortia.
The public libraries of Sweden have offered virtual reference services for several years. In 1995 an e-mail service started that now consist of 36 libraries. More than 15 of these take part in a consortia providing a chat service similar to the academic counterpart.

The two consortia share the same software, VRLplus from Docutek and the systems are linked together through a software bridge. The “systems bridge” allows for new, geographical region or subject based services to be created dynamically. It also allows the libraries to exchange and transfer users. By linking the libraries together trough software and users, a foundation has been set for further development with sophisticated competence clusters. Drawing and organizing competence from both library types and making them accessible for the users.

The organization of competence clusters through software co-operation and mutual reference services plays a major part in a application for funds submitted to the four year EU programme eContentplus. The application raises the issue of developing competence clusters on a regional, national and European level trough similar co-operation as in Sweden.

A new model for collaboration between libraries
The libraries using the VRLplus software are capable of running their own instance of the software. They are also members of a larger context through the mutual consortia. By being members of a library-type wide consortia they can interact with each other, collaborate, expand and solve mutual problems, keeping a local perspective. Through the systems bridge libraries have access to another network of libraries. Even though they are not of the same type they can find natural ways of working together. By providing mutual references between the two library types and consortia a new model for collaboration and service is accessible. Within the same framework a regional, national, international and inter library type reference service can be provided to offer users reference service regardless of time of day or nationality.

The new possibilities for cooperation allows each organization to define new collaborative partners on a national or international basis. Creating brand new virtual information services. These services may consist of universities, research organizations and governmental institutions within a region, e.g. "Ask Scandinavia", or organized by competence. It may also be a subject-based cooperation within a European Union area, e.g. "Ask ECDC". Other examples may include cooperation between different competences and professions, e.g. “Ask EUROPE DIRECT”.

This gives increased possibilities for specialization and development, whole new collaborative constellations between libraries and other community-based services can emerge while still maintaining the basic responsibility for the local users.
Organizing and accessing Competence clusters
The implications of the organizational model for working with a virtual reference service in our context goes beyond being just a software co-operation. We are in the process of developing a model for creating competence clusters. In the model, guidelines are established on how to conduct a knowledge inventory and making knowledge accessible. Competences in this case include language, subject knowledge and socio-cultural insight. The mapping of competences is a dynamic process where new competences can be and are defined all of the time.

The result of a knowledge inventory should result in defined competences with searchable metadata. When there is a need for a new service, the metadata provide a simple method to find operators with suitable competences. Through the organizational and software co-operation these can be connected with the new service.

The metadata is also useful for back office work when, e.g., a question demands a competence which is not found in the original service. An operator with the right competence can be searched for and the user can be transferred to her/him within the system seamlessly.

Competence clusters for virtual information services with models for cooperation between national and international services and the establishment of competence profiles, allows for the creation of new development possibilities for information and virtual reference services.

eContenplus
Our application to the four year EU programme, eContentplus, raises the issue of developing competence clusters on a regional, national and European level through similar co-operation as in Sweden. The application will serve as a pilot project to test our reasoning of the benefits in sharing software and through the organization making knowledge accessible to libraries and end users.

The application describes the concept of information hubs where the user’s language, background and cultural context are considered. In the project, the goal is to establish five information hubs with a well thought-out geographical spread in order to obtain as wide a language breadth as possible.

These information hubs will be connected to a network of adjoining countries. Each information hub will be supervised by a coordinator who is responsible for the creation and continuous maintenance of the networks. The responsibilities will include the identification, creation and maintenance of competence clusters. As support function and source of inspiration there will be a chief coordinator who has the responsibility for the education of coordinators and quality assurance by following up on statistics, documentation and information diffusion and, not the least, the role as coach.

Goals
The goals for developing and establishing competence clusters can be summarized as follows:

- Guidance suited to the needs of the questioner
- Creative reference and information work
- Competence development for the information professionals
- Rationalisation of scarce resources
- Higher quality of information services, both off and on campus