Job of a Lifetime

Danianne Mizzy

Where innovation is the order of business

by Danianne Mizzy

If you're someone who is always coming up with ideas about how to make things better, then working at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Research Library might be your job of a lifetime. Nancy Allmang has been a reference librarian at NIST's Maryland campus for the last three years. As an agency of the Department of Commerce, "the National Institute of Standards and Technology develops technologies, measurement methods, and standards that help U.S. companies compete in the global marketplace." The NIST Research Library supports about 1,500 scientists and guest researchers working in laboratories focusing on areas from materials science to physics, information technology, and building and fire research.

Not just a desk job

The popular concept of the duties of a reference librarian answering questions at a reference desk or at his or her own desk does constitute an important part of Allmang's job. "I serve as a liaison to the Materials Science and Engineering Laboratory. If a scientist from that area has an in-depth question that will require more than normal reference-desk assistance, he or she can contact me. I'll meet with them, run the search, and do whatever else is required." In addition to identifying information, she also analyzes, packages, and delivers it to the scientists and management. "We very often do try to add value to information," she explained. But in talking with Allmang, it quickly becomes apparent that, at the NIST Research Library, outreach is an important reference activity that is broadly defined and vigorously pursued. She enthusiastically described some initiatives in which she has played a central role.

"I was originally involved in establishing a library advisory board a few years ago and I continue to act as its monthly meeting facilitator. NIST is organized into operating units or laboratories that perform research in a variety of fields in the "hard" sciences. Each unit has representatives to the advisory board. The collection breadth required to serve these diverse groups makes it a little like being the Library of Congress, only in science. We formed the board to enhance our contact with customers. Members act as liaisons to the library. At the same time they're ambassadors to their own labs, and carry back news about library resources and services. It has worked out very well. We've gotten some great ideas and feedback from them."

Nancy Allmang, reference librarian at the National Institute of Standards and Technology Research Library's Maryland campus.

Sometimes it's the little things

It's one thing to solicit feedback, another to have the support to respond. Allmang gave this example, which may seem small, but has proved a big boon to researchers. "An advisory board member mentioned how nice it would be if the library had a scanner that the scientists could come in and use to create PDFs. The board member cited an ad hoc scanner setup in her building with a computer on one floor connected to a scanner on another. Getting it to work entailed walking back and forth and calling upstairs to ask somebody to 'Push the button.' We really hadn't given much thought to providing a service like that. But as a result of that suggestion, we now have a PDF scanner near the entrance to the library's main floor and people are using it like mad. For the most part they're coming in, scanning an article they've found in the library, and e-mailing it to themselves to use at their desktops."

The NIKE (NIST Integrated Knowledge EditorialNet) project

Allmang was chosen as the team leader for an ambitious project. "We were tasked with analyzing NIST's editorial review and publications processes and making recommendations for streamlining and digitizing the manuscript submissions workflow. This project evolved into NIKE—the NIST Integrated Knowledge EditorialNet, which is slated to go live by the end of 2005."

Allmang described that "the team was made up of seven staff members from across the Information Services Division who brought to the effort different types of specialized skills and knowledge in areas such as library science, knowledge management, electronic composition, and writing/editing." She led them through gathering customer requirements, examining software options, and developing functional and business requirements. "In the end, after looking at many search engines, we concluded that the most efficient search engine was our OPAC. We wrote up a huge document defining database, server, Web interface and other system requirements. We submitted this to our IT advisors. Now a new team and leader are working very closely with them to make NIKE happen." She recalled, "As the team explored alternatives, we discovered and added other features such as manuscript tracking and report generation. It was a very challenging, exciting, and rewarding experience."

Government agency research librarian
What: The National Institute of Standards and Technology

A small cog in a large wheel

When I asked Allmang what it was like to work in a government library, she laughed. "The only other library I've worked at was a small hospital library where I was a solo librarian. I can't compare it to working in an academic library." After pausing for a moment, she reflected, "As a government librarian you're aware that you're part of a large organization. You're also aware that what you're doing has a place in your department—in my case the Department of Commerce—and you have a sense that in helping your customers you're contributing to the overall good as a small cog of a very big wheel. As a hospital librarian, I felt I was helping patients get better. As a librarian at the NIST Research Library, I feel on some level that I'm aiding the economy and moving the U.S. forward, though in very tiny ways. I suppose a huge number of small contributions is really what progress is all about."

Exploring emerging technologies for possible application

Not everyone would embrace a charge like "exploring emerging technologies for possible application," but it clearly suits Allmang. "It's a wonderful thing to have as part of your performance plan. The organization as a whole and the scientists who work here are driven by ideas. And there's an important place in our library for ideas; looking at solutions, considering solutions, and dreaming up solutions. This is an exciting time. The library is being pushed and pulled by technology that is opening up new avenues. I didn't expect as a reference librarian I would have so many opportunities to think of new and better ways to do things." Allmang is currently working on implementing a pilot instant messenger/virtual reference tool for the library. Her advice: "Don't be afraid to take a chance."

Danianne Mizzy is assistant head of the Engineering Library at the University of Pennsylvania. Have an idea for a "Job of a Lifetime" story? E-mail: danianne@seas.upenn.edu