



# Your Library Users—Are They Ready for Real-Time?

According to the Pew Internet Project reports, about 126 million American adults are using the Internet, **66 million on an average day**. What are they doing when they are online? Not surprisingly, most are using e-mail

(93%). The next largest category of Internet usage is for finding information. **From 69% to 85% say that they use the Internet to find information** on a variety of topics (research a product before buying, obtain medical information, search for maps or driving directions, get current news, etc.) That's more than the percentage who say that they surf the Web for fun (67%)!

Although e-mail is the preferred medium of communication, **46% of all Internet users have tried instant messaging** and about 25% have participated in chat rooms or online discussions.

**The Pacific Northwest is the most wired region in the country**, with 68% of adults in Washington and Oregon using the Internet. (The national average is 59%.) This region also has many veteran Internet users—half of all users have three or more years of experience online.

In February and March 2002, four focus groups were convened to elicit ideas about virtual reference in Washington State. The groups were diverse—re-entry workers in Post Angeles, seniors in Bellevue, Hispanics in Monroe, and teens in a chat room. Here's [what they concluded](#):

In terms of service delivery, normal library hours of 9 to 9 no longer work in a 24-hour society. In an environment where public libraries are facing stiff

competition from bookstores, cafes and the Internet and people are time-deprived, librarians need to change traditional ways of delivering services to respond to changing demands. Patrons need assistance after 9 pm and on weekends. Those patrons accessing information from home often get bogged down in their searches and would welcome online assistance from a library professional.

How can you determine if your library users (and potential users) would value real-time online reference services? What do you know about your community and their online preferences? **Which of the following is true for your community?**

- Most holds on library materials are placed by remote users.
- Our library serves a large number of 18 to 24 year olds.
- Our library serves adult distance learners.
- Our users are interested in online book groups.
- Broadband connections (DSL and/or cable) are available.
- Our library's email reference service is increasing in usage.
- Our library is experiencing changing patterns of usage—decrease in walk-in reference, increase in Web page hits, decrease in non-fiction book circulation—that indicate more remote use of library resources.
- We offer a wide variety of online databases.
- User surveys or focus groups indicate the desire for more online services.

**If several of these statements apply to your library, you have a population of users who may benefit from chat reference.**