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PROFESSIONAL MUSLIM ACADEMIC REFERENCE LIBRARIANS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: The paper aims at giving an overview on the best qualities or attribute a qualified academic Muslim librarians should possess for him or her to provide a relevant functional reference services in an academic library environment at the present dispensation. The qualities that Muslim reference librarians should display in their career as information professionals are emphasised. Some of the fundamental qualities include approachability, ability to communicate fluently, determination to do a good job, respect users, show care to users, observing Islamic dress code, willing to promote Islamic resources and collections, subject knowledge, ICT skills and reference interview skills. The paper draws the guideline on the best way to behave, provide appropriate and relevant information, and demonstrate good ethics at the reference desk. This will go a long way in providing quality reference services.

Keywords: Professional Muslim Academic Reference Librarians, Reference Librarians, Reference Interview Skills

INTRODUCTION

In current academic library environment, amidst the advancement of ICT, the references and information services have transformed. Most of the conventional references and information services provided at the reference desk may still include: ready reference, bibliographic verification, information and referral services, research and term paper services, counseling, selective dissemination of information, compilation of

bibliographies, indexing and abstracting, and answering reference queries. Despite the fact that the nature of reference services offered to library users today changes with technology, however, the need or essence for providing the reference assistance to library users still remains the same.

ROLE OF AN ACADEMIC REFERENCE LIBRARIAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Academic reference librarians work in public services area, answering questions posed by library users at a reference desk, or by telephone, email, chat service, or other means. They are expected to provide assistance in accordance to the ethics of library profession. They must understand users' needs and perceptions. Academic reference librarians sometimes act as subject selector and library liaison with faculty in their subject areas. They must know how to help, inform, instruct users and demonstrate an exemplary character to their colleagues. They must possessed up-to-date ICT skill, research skill, information literacy skill so as to meet the needs and expectations of their library users. Academic reference librarians are image makers and also eyes and ears to their institutions. In an Islamic institution the same work environment, qualifications, skills and qualities of service are also expected from the Muslim academic reference librarians.

QUALITIES OF MUSLIMACADEMIC REFERENCE LIBRARIAN

In the modern era, Muslim academic reference librarians must provide complete reference services to their library users, avoiding any negative things that can undermine their services, hence, always be guided by the principles and the teaching of the Holy Quran and Hadith of the Prophet (SAW). Some of the main aspects they should possess are: knowledge, skills and characteristics. Thus, the discussion of this paper dwells extensively on the characteristics aspects which make up a Muslim academic reference librarian in the 21st century.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A MUSLIMACADEMIC REFERENCE LIBRARIAN

The entire behavior and actions of a Muslim academic reference librarian is guided by the Islamic teachings and is obligatory to abide by the instructions as stated in the Holy Quran and Hadiths of the Prophets (SAW). Muslims believe that Islam is a complete way of life. *Al-Islam* in Arabic, means submission and peace, for it is submitting to God's will that human being gain peace in their lives in this world and in the hereafter (Al-Aali, 2008). Islam is a comprehensive religion and its ethical system is considered to be complete. Thus, a Muslim academic reference librarian should exhibit the following characteristics:

i. Approachability

Muslim academic reference librarians should always convince users that they are welcome to ask, and are more welcome to come back the next time. A Muslim academic reference librarian has an obligation to professionally fulfill his responsibilities in the reference section, thus, he should try to avoid any barrier to a good relationship with his users. He should always put on a welcoming face, be friendly to users and makes the relationship a happy one.

The attention of a Muslim academic reference librarian is drawn from a Hadith that shows the negative side of being unapproachable and exhibiting negative character to users, where the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said Allah makes the blasphemy stronger by ill-nature. This can be interpreted that, if a reference librarian behavior toward his users is not satisfactory; he will not succeed to provide reference services to users (Al-Ali, 2008).

ii. Ability to Communicate

A Muslim academic reference librarian today should have a good command of the language used in the library environment. He should also apply body language during the course of the interview to facilitate understanding of the user's question. Full attention should be given to the user when asking a question and reference librarian should response in a clear and straight forward manner. Library terminologies should be carefully used or else there will be a communication problem.

iii. Determination to do a Good Job

A Muslim academic reference librarian should always develop a positive mind to provide an excellent reference services to users. With the available tools, skills, and knowledge he possessed he should be ready to face any query that come his way and answer it in a professional manner.

iv. Respect Library User

A Muslim academic reference librarian should have high respect for his users irrespective of their race, colour, religion, and educational background. The user's view should be respected. When he assumes himself higher than the library user, it makes the relationship hard and consequently affects the reference interview session. As soon as the usersrealised that the academic reference librarian is proud of himself and give

of annoyance and shake hands with a male user in order to strengthen the relation as stated in the Hadith.

"The Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)
said, "when two Muslims meet and shake hands with each other, both of them
will have their sins forgiven (by Allah) before they depart" (Abu Dawud).

However, for a female library user, it is not allowed for a male Muslim academic reference librarian to shake hands with her but rather needs to say Salam, as stated in the hadith.

"Shaking hands (and touching) with members of the opposite sex when not
related, is not permissible for Muslims according to the teaching of Islam" (Just
ask Islam, 2013).

vii. ICT Skills

The development of digital reference service is having an impact on the Muslim academic reference librarians in providing reference services in the present time. The increasing complexity and sophistication of information technology requires a high degree of specialized technical knowledge for the Muslim academic reference librarians. They should master the skills for searching information via the library OPAC and databases so as to explore ways in accessing and using digital materials. Many library operations including reference services are facilitated by the power and speed of electronic computer and communication technologies. Examples of these technology facilities include IM, Mobile devices and social networking (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.)(Chowdhury, 2002).
Above all to be successful in providing reference services, Muslim academic reference librarians need to not only understand but also embrace current and emerging technologies affecting reference functions and the information needs of the library users.

viii. Knowledge on Islamic Sources and Collections

Muslim academic reference librarians should have knowledge on Islamic sources and collections. They should be able to link users with appropriate sources of information. They should also have knowledge on the alternative sources to consult in order to answer reference quires. Such sources include: people, organisation, agencies, reference tools, etc.

Besides, they should keep on reading not only library materials but also on Islamic information sources so as to be up to date on trends and development in the reference services. Islam encourages everyone to seek knowledge and Muslim academic reference librarians are no exception. It was narrated by Anas Bin Malik said: "The messenger of Allah said "Seeking for knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim". Similarly, the Holy Quran said "Are those who know and those who do not know alike? Only the men of understanding are mindful (Surah Al-Zumar 39:9).

ix. Observing Islamic Dress Code

Another attribute of the present Muslim academic reference librarian is appearing decently all the time. Islam being a complete way of life has described how a man and woman reference librarians respectively should appear before their users. Muslim librarians are expected to dress in an acceptable manner as stated in the Holy Quran "say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them. And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say that the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty that they should not display their beauty except to their husbands, their father, their husband's fathers their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brother's son or their sister's son or their human, or the slaves whom right hand possess or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex, and they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And o Ye Believers, turn ye all together towards Allah that ye may Bliss (Al-Nur verse 30-31). The above verse implies that both man and woman (Muslim Librarians) are expected to be guided by the Islamic dress code while providing services to their users.

CONCLUSION

From the relevant literatures reviewed, it is clear that Islam is rich in characteristics, knowledge and skills that Muslim academic reference librarians in the 21st century can imbibe to improve his professional qualities. It concludes that; Muslim academic reference librarians should be God fearing, polite, kind, truthful, intelligent, respectful, modest and committed to the job. Relatively, they should employ other skills such as listen attentively, speak confidently, treat users fairly, provide service with a smile, so on and so forth.

This paper attempts to highlight the human aspect of providing reference services as espouse by the Islamic teachings which also adjust well with the secular western

practices. Emphasis is made on the librarians' attitude and personality because library users are concerned on these attributes and if not employ, library users will seek assistance elsewhere. Nowadays, there are few alternative offering such services which are available on the Internet, either free or fee based. Such services are offered by commercial search engines like Google, Yahoo, Ask Jeeves, Electric Library, and other web-based expert services. These commercial search engines are competitors to library services; however, they all lack the personal human touch. Here the library reference services if offer professionally, and imbue with Islamic values can be a clear choice for library users.

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