

Titel: Archival Access from the User's Perspective

Julia ROMIJN-WIXLEY¹, Aron DE VRIES², Jaap KAMPS³

¹Archief Eemland; ²Regionaal Archief Gorinchem; ³University of Amsterdam

Topic:

Yakel and Torres (AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise, American Archivist, 2003) argued that to make archives more accessible we should take the user's competences into account. Some users are experts in historical research while others are first time users of archival collections. Some are experienced in finding information through Internet, while others are not. What is the exact importance of these competences on the search experience? In order to answer this question we conducted an exploratory user study with test persons with varying degrees of experience in archives, and with varying degrees of experience in online search.

Content:

The study focused on two aspects of online finding aids. The first aspect is their effectiveness for locating relevant archival material. The results indicate a gap between users and metadata, in particular in the used terminology. We also found a gap between the user's question and the user's ability to translate this into a workable query. A third gap was formed by deviations between "normal" search behavior and the search behavior in websites of archival institutions. The second aspect is a comparison of archival descriptions created by professionals versus those created by the users themselves. We asked the test panel to make descriptions of archival material, and found that users described the content in a more detailed way. They used terms that help to locate information in the archival documents. The archivist's description is more systematic, but on a more abstract level. Many users had problems with the descriptions of the archivist, due to the terminology, a lack of detail about the content, and the fact that background information was not found at all levels of record description.

Insights:

We found that users with competence in archival research found online finding aids more helpful and enjoyed the searching experience more. Competence in online search determined the search behavior and the understanding of the search system. Users were willing and capable to describe archival material that they are familiar with. Our user study resulted in detailed findings about the relative impact of user competences and the usability of archive retrieval systems. These should stimulate archivists to take their role as a guide more seriously. The focus should shift to the design of effective and user-friendly archival retrieval systems that help users to develop the needed competences.

Key words: Archival access, Competences, Finding aids, User study.