



*Virtual Dave Lankes*

P r e s e n t a t i o n

<http://www.DavidLankes.org>

**TITLE:** Costs and Benefits of Virtual Reference: Is it Worth It?


**AUTHOR(s):** R. David Lankes

**PUBLICATION TYPE:** Presentation

**DATE:** 2004

**VENUE:** Ontario Library Association's Superconference, Toronto, ON Canada.

**KEYWORDS:** Virtual reference, digital reference, cost, reference, librarianship,  
evaluation



# Costs and Benefits of Virtual Reference: Is it Worth It?

R. David Lankes


Executive Director, Information Institute of Syracuse  
Syracuse University

Visiting Fellow, National Library of Canada

<http://www.DavidLankes.org>



Yes




# Costs, Benefits and Value

- Costs and Benefits are Ultimately About “Value”
  - Relative
  - An Agreement, not an Absolute
    - Those Who Give
    - Those Who Mediate
    - Those Who Use
- Costs are More Than Money
  - Money
  - Staff
  - In-Kind
  - Reputation
  - Etc.

# Virtual Myths

A vertical image on the left side of the slide. It features a green-tinted globe in the upper half and a hand holding a 100 Euro banknote in the lower half. The banknote is partially visible, showing the number '100' and the word 'EURO'. The background is a light, textured pattern.

- Myth 1: Names
  - “Virtual Reference”, “Digital Reference”, “eReference”, “Real-Time Reference” are Different
- Myth 2: Features
  - All Virtual Reference Must Include Chat and Co-Browsing
- Myth 3: Costs
  - Virtual Reference Costs A Lot
- Myth 4: Digital Difference
  - Virtual Reference Costs More Than Traditional Reference
- Myth 5: Obligation
  - I *HAVE* to Do Virtual Reference



# Myth 1: Names

- Language, Particularly in a New Area, is in Transition (and some Jostling for Position)
  - Why Dave Prefers Digital to Virtual
- “The use of human intermediation to answer questions in a digital environment” - *The Digital Reference Research Agenda*
- An Agenda to Reinvent, and Reintroduce Reference to our Communities

## Myth 2: Features

- All Virtual Reference Must Include Chat, Co-Browsing, Knowledgebase, Inference Engines, Infinite Improbability Drive...

	E-Mail	Chat/IM	Help Desk	Special
Example	Eudora, Outlook, Mail, etc.	AIM, ICQ, Yahoo!, MSN, Jabber	24/7, Tutor/LSSI, QuestionPoint	VoIP, Screen Control, QuestionPoint
Pros	Threading, Time to Work, Answer Deferment, Low Entry, Wide Availability	Real-Time, Wide Availability, File Transfer	Co-Browsing, Real-Time, CRM, Searchable Knowledge base	Video, Audio, Run Custom Apps
Cons	Asynchronous, Leaky Inbox	Queuing, Interoperability	Interoperability, Firewalls	Platform Dependent

# Myth 3: Costs

	E-Mail	Chat/IM	Help Desk	Special
Range of Functions	Individual Accounts on a Machine <-> Web-Based Workgroup	Simple Text Exchanges <-> Video Conferencing	Chat, CRM Functions, Co-Browsing, Page Pushing, Slide Shows	Varied



# iChat AV



# Myth 3: Costs

	E-Mail	Chat/IM	Help Desk	Special
Range of Functions	Individual Accounts on a Machine <-> Web-Based Workgroup	Simple Text Exchanges <-> Video Conferencing	Chat, CRM Functions, Co-Browsing, Page Pushing, Slide Shows	Varied

# Myth 3: Costs

- Per Seat Licensing versus Package Licensing versus Site License
- Reselling Other Products

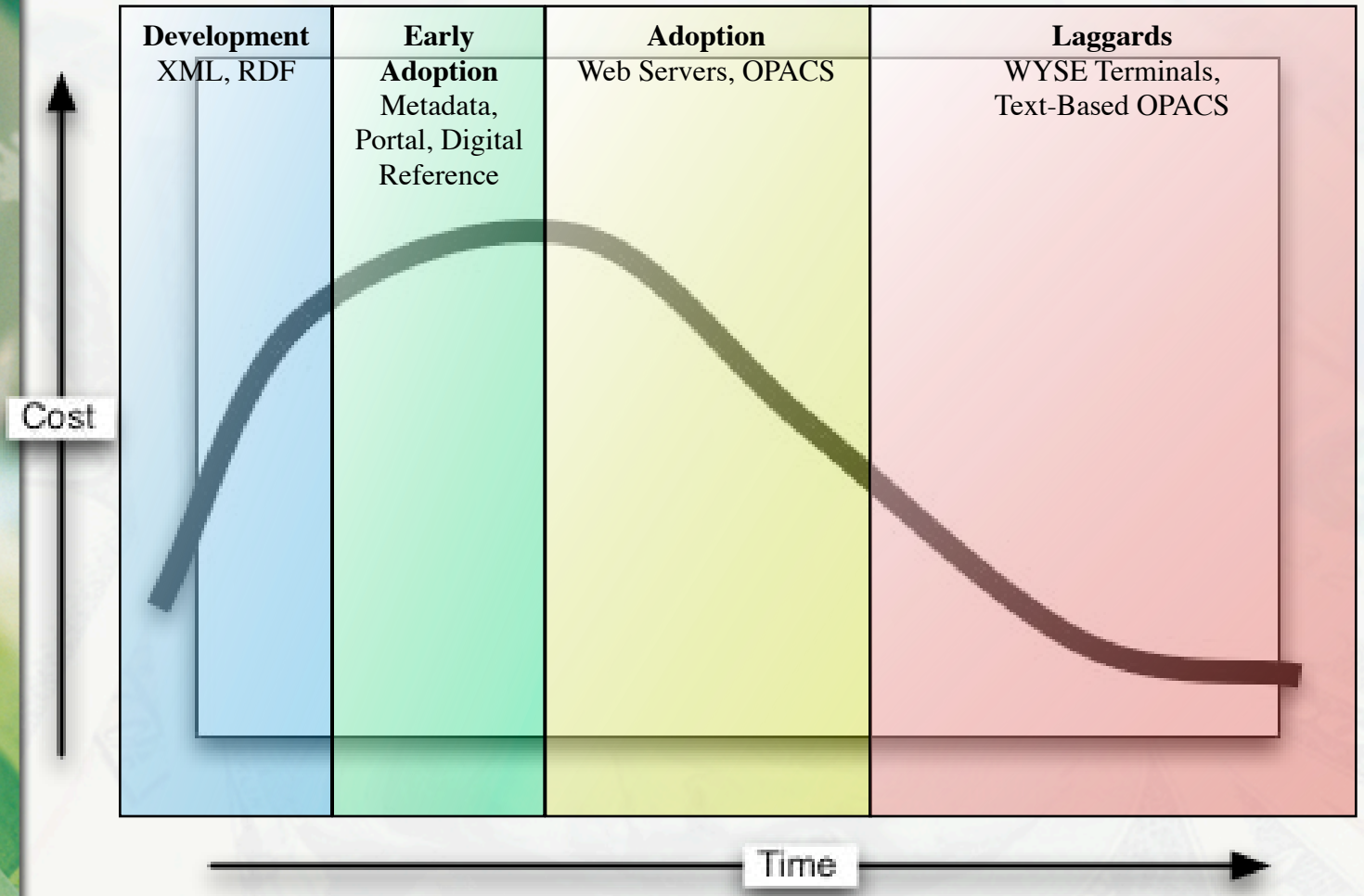
	E-Mail	Chat/IM	Help Desk	Special
Range of Functions	Individual Accounts on a Machine <-> Web-Based Workgroup	Simple Text Exchanges <-> Video Conferencing	Chat, CRM Functions, Co-Browsing, Page Pushing, Slide Shows	Varied
Cost Range	FREE <-> \$10,000	FREE	~\$6,000 per seat per year	FREE<-> \$1,000



# Another Option: Create Your Own

- The Library Field is Not Always Well-Served by Vendors from Other Communities
  - OPACs and Databases
  - Digital Reference and Help Desks
- Cutting Edge Open Standards
  - Dublin Core, NISO AZ, OAI
- The Bar for Development is Lowered
  - Open Source Alternatives
  - Powerful Scripting Services

# Costs on a Curve






## Myth 4: Digital Differ- ence

- Virtual Reference Costs More Than Traditional Reference...
- ...and how much does traditional reference costs exactly?!
- No Common Criteria Leads to Divergent Estimates
  - \$.50 to \$50
- Why?
  - Stuff+People/Questions=Cost
  - What to Include in Equation
  - Getting Valid and Reliable Data



# Dig\_Ref Gives Us Hope

- “Minable” Objective Record
  - Questions and Answers
  - Time
  - Resources/Collections Used
  - Other Resources
- Automation and Tools for Better Reporting
  - Web Forms, Metadata, etc.
- Bibliomining
  - Moving Away from the Aggregated to the Aggregate (From Sums to Patterns)



# The Benefit Side of Cost/Benefit

- External
  - Serving a More “Wired” Constituency
  - Serving a More Influential Community
  - Divorcing Service from Time and Space
  - Reintroduce Reference
- Internal
  - Train Staff (even Remediate)
  - Challenge Staff
  - Cooperate
- A Quality Service in a Good Enough World
  - In Your Face Librarianship





# Myth 5: Obligation

- I *HAVE* to Do Virtual Reference
- Only If Your Community Needs It, and
- Only If You Do It Well
- The True Obligation: Fulfilling the Promise of Reference



# Questions?

Slides at:

[www.DavidLankes.org](http://www.DavidLankes.org)