

8. DEALING WITH QUERIES

This section

- (a) explains how to deal with queries in person on a one-to-one basis;*
- (b) outlines the various stages in the information-giving process;*
- (c) provides a case study for illustration purposes.*

Introduction

Previous sections have dealt with communication skills, information retrieval systems and information subjects. So far, you have had the opportunity to develop your communication skills, and become acquainted with the YIC Classification System and the Citizens Information Database as well as with the range of information available and how to retrieve it effectively. You have also looked at some specific subjects in more detail. This section explains how to apply these skills and knowledge in dealing with queries in person on a one-to-one basis.

The Process

The way we respond to queries can vary depending on a number of factors including:

- the Youth Information worker's own level of training and experience;
- the needs of the client and their expectations in terms of whether they want to browse, get in and out quickly with the specific information they require, or talk at length;
- the need for privacy (when required).

Some queries are relatively straightforward and require little, if any, clarification. In this case, the query can be answered with the minimum of formality but still in a warm, friendly manner, which leaves the client feeling free to ask any supplementary questions they might wish. Other queries are more complex and require a more comprehensive approach, which will be outlined later.

Ultimately, the visit to the Youth Information Centre should be a rewarding experience where the client finds out what s/he came to find out, if not more, and goes away satisfied and well informed.

The headings in the *Detailed Query Record*, referred to in *Section 10 Statistics*, give us a few clues as to how to deal with queries, and the stages involved in the process. They are:

- *Query Presented*
- *Clarification Process*
- *Information Sources Used*
- *Information Supplied*
- *Handouts*
- *Referrals*
- *Follow-Up (if required)*

Query Presented

The whole process begins with a client walking in the door, being acknowledged and offered assistance, as appropriate, but feeling free to browse around, gather information and/or present a query. However the client chooses to access the service, when a query is initially presented, it is likely to be brief, often very general, lacking in specific detail, and requiring clarification.

Clarifying/Asking Questions

Once a client has put his/her initial query to you, your immediate concern is clarification so that you understand the question, have all the relevant facts, and know exactly what is required and how you can help. The clarification process is crucial, particularly at the beginning of the interview, so take your time, as it is important to be in possession of all the relevant facts before you proceed. As well as listening to the client and asking relevant questions, you may need to offer regular feedback to ensure that you understand him/her correctly.

During the clarification process, you are also helping to put the client at ease, build his/her confidence and trust, and help create realistic expectations of the service. The active participation of the client in the process is to be encouraged as we work with him/her to determine the answer to the query.

In seeking clarification, how do you know what questions to ask? For any given subject, you should ask yourself what are the main issues involved? Are there any related issues that could be important in this case? Are there possible concerns for the welfare of the individual? The answers to these questions will vary depending on the subject.

Information Sources Used

Once the main issues have been clarified and you are clear about what is required and how you can help, you will then consult the filing systems/

databases (using the alphabetical/numerical indexes), the Internet and any other available resources to help answer the query. This may also be a good time to consult any colleagues who have specialist knowledge or experience. Any phone calls, which may need to be made on behalf of clients, should only be made with their consent and, ideally, in their presence. This keeps clients within the loop and lets them know exactly what is being said on their behalf. It also allows for further on the spot clarification, if necessary.

Information Supplied

Once retrieved, it is best to work through the information materials with the client. This will help to uncover the most relevant information and allow you to assist the client in applying it to his/her particular circumstances and, ultimately, to answer the query. In working together with the client, you are taking the opportunity to impart essential information skills as well as providing the information requested.

Throughout the process, you will have to work at the pace of the client and communicate, effectively, in a way the client will understand. Repeat points and summarise, at regular intervals, to ensure that the client understands what is being said as well its possible implications.

Occasionally, the client will want to sit down and go through the reference materials, themselves, perhaps with some guidance. They may also wish to take notes or make photocopies. Before leaving them to get on with their studies, you should point out that you are available to answer any further questions that may arise.

Handouts

Handout publications can be useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, for any given subject, they can gather together a lot of information in a concise, readable and user-friendly format. They can be a useful resource when answering a client's query, and are equally useful to give to the client to take away and read at a more convenient time, particularly in a situation where a client is in a hurry. Handout publications can also be used as part of an outreach/promotional programme, offering educational benefits and the opportunity to promote the Youth Information Centre in the locality.

Where a handout publication is not available, you may need to write down some of the relevant details so that the client can take them away for future reference.

When considering the production of in-house handout publications, it is well worth checking the Youth Information Centre pages on the Youth Information Website to see what publications have already been produced within the

network. If you find something of interest, you can then contact the relevant Co-ordinator to see if s/he would be prepared to send you the document as a file attachment, so that you can adapt it to your local situation and avoid duplication of effort.

Referrals

As the interview progresses, it may become apparent that a referral to a more specialist agency is required. Making referrals is an important part of our work and merits a section of its own in this Induction Pack (see *Section 9 Referral*).

Follow-Up (If required)

In certain cases, you may undertake to do some research or gather some literature/application forms to give or send to the client later. With the client's permission, you may also undertake to do some advocacy work, which may require follow-up before the client returns.

Note on Dealing with Clients under Stress

From time to time you will have to deal with clients under stress. If a client is distressed, your best response is to remain calm, acknowledge their distress, and in a caring and compassionate way gently steer the conversation to a position where you can discuss the matter in a more objective and dispassionate way.

A calm and deliberate response is equally important when dealing with difficult or obstructive clients so as to remain in control and help diffuse the situation. The objective is to restore calm and be in a position to deal with the matter in an objective, dispassionate way. Where this is not possible, it may become necessary to ask the client to leave, or call a colleague for assistance.

Training Programmes and Resource Materials

Comhairle provides a comprehensive training programme for information workers, covering a wide range of issues. It includes an interview skills development course entitled, *How Can We Help You?* with an accompanying training video and manual.

Copies of the Comhairle training programme, together with application forms and posters are available from:

Comhairle, Hume House, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4.
Tel: (01) 605 9000, Fax: (01) 605 9099
Email: comhairle@comhairle.ie Website www.comhairle.ie

Case Study - Summer Work Abroad

Query Presented

A young person calls to the Centre and simply asks, "*Could you tell me anything about working abroad for the Summer?*"

Clarification

The obvious question to ask is whether they have any particular destination in mind, or would just like to browse through the resource materials available on this subject. To help you with your task, it is useful to be able to narrow the choice down to one or two options. The most popular destinations are the USA, Britain and continental Europe, including the northern European countries and the sunnier, but usually less lucrative, Mediterranean countries of Southern Europe.

Should a client opt for the USA, based on the eligibility criteria for Student J1 Visas from USIT Now or SAYIT, you would ask if s/he is studying at a third level college or college of further education, and take it from there. Some will have the UK or a specific continental country in mind. Others may be uncertain, but appear to favour a continental destination. In that case, given the importance of being able to communicate at least at a basic level in the native language, you could, for example, ask if they speak any continental language in order to ascertain where they might consider going.

Issues relating to the welfare of the client may also need to be clarified. For example, it may be useful, in certain cases, to know a client's age, as some opportunities abroad are age specific. You will also be concerned that, in addition to being able to secure employment before travelling, or on arrival, the client makes adequate advance preparation. This should include the booking of accommodation for the first few nights, at least. You will find a very useful preparatory checklist in USIT Now's Summer Work Abroad booklet.

Information Sources Used

Some of the most useful resources on this subject include USIT Now's Summer Work Abroad booklet, which also includes a list of relevant websites (also listed, among others, in the *Travel and Migration* section of the Youth Information Website), *Summer Jobs Abroad*, published by Vacation Work, and *Working Holidays*, published by The Central Bureau. FÁS also provide resources on living and working abroad, as do some foreign embassies, which are usually located in Dublin, or Irish embassies located abroad. Budget travel guides such as the *Let's Go* or Rough Guides are also very useful.

Information Supplied

Once you have selected the relevant resources, such as the above, you are in a position to begin to work with the client to retrieve the relevant information. This will include information on potential employers or employment opportunities as well as on accommodation.

In addition to providing information on specific issues, USIT Now's Summer Work Abroad booklet includes invaluable advice, based on the results of a survey of students who travelled to particular destinations in the previous year. It provides a profile of each country, particularly in terms of employment opportunities, so that comparisons can be made. *Summer Jobs Abroad*, published by Vacation Work, and *Working Holidays*, published by The Central Bureau, can also be tremendously useful as a means of identifying potential employers and in helping with the task of securing employment in advance.

Budget travel guides such as *Let's Go* or the Rough Guides, as well as An Óige, can be invaluable sources of information when trying to identify and book budget accommodation or find practical information on the destination, itself.

Handouts

A copy of USIT Now's Summer Work Abroad booklet, plus photocopies of relevant pages from the other resources mentioned, are useful handout materials for clients.

Referrals

Useful referral agencies, in this case, could include USIT Now for ISIC/IYC cards and travel/insurance, the Passport Office, and An Óige (for membership, and possible use of their international booking network to arrange advance accommodation).

Follow-Up

No particular follow up is required, in this case, other than the possible collection of some further information to fill any identified gaps in the service.