

## Testing an alternative to QuestionPoint

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Between August 20 and August 31 of 2007, L-net, Oregon's 24/7 chat with a librarian service, tested Jive's FastPath web chat software during live service hours. Librarians were offered the chance to test alternative software instead of covering their normal shift. OCLC and the 24/7 cooperative graciously allowed us to forgo coverage of some cooperative shifts during these two weeks (we'll make them up later).

We set out to measure:

1. The number of technical problems encountered using Jive's FastPath software
2. Librarians' experience of Jive's OpenFire, Spark and FastPath software
3. Patrons' experience with Jive's OpenFire, Spark and FastPath software.

### Technical problems

We had 61 sessions with patrons using Jive's FastPath software and 265 using OCLC QuestionPoint, including cooperative questions answered by Oregon librarians and questions answered by QuestionPoint backup librarians and 24/7 Cooperative librarians.

An unsuccessful session is defined as one where the patron sent no messages to the librarian other than their initial question or other system-generated messages. This might happen because the patron closed the window before the librarian connected or because there was some other technical problem.

For OCLC/QuestionPoint, we are able to track for which of these the patron waited longer than 2 minutes. We were not able to track this for Jive/FastPath. It is assumed that other problems are technical problems.

Software	Total questions	No message	Waited > 2 minutes	Total problems	% Unsuccessful	Apparent technical problems
Jive	61	10	n/a	10	16%	16%
OCLC	265	47	10	57	22%	18%

### *Average wait times and session lengths*

Software	Total	Average wait time	Average session length*
Jive	61	0:12	9:51
OCLC	265	0:59	12:41

\*Only sessions longer than 0 seconds are included.

Sessions were 22% shorter with the Jive/FastPath software than with OCLC/QuestionPoint. Longer sessions in OCLC could be attributed to the delay that

patrons and librarians experience in between messages. Librarian and patron screens reload every six seconds, so after a new message has been sent, there is an added delay before it appears to the other person, three seconds on average. Longer sessions with OCLC/QuestionPoint could also be attributed to the librarians in QuestionPoint working with multiple patrons, and being unable to give undivided attention to each patron.

Wait times were significantly shorter using Jive/FastPath than with OCLC/QuestionPoint. This may be because librarians staffing Jive/FastPath were only answering questions from Oregon patrons, while those staffing OCLC/QuestionPoint may have been taking questions from the entire OCLC-24/7 Cooperative. This would increase the number of sessions at any one time, but more importantly, librarians are instructed to wait at least 60 seconds to pick up a patron whose "local" librarian is online.

#### *Mid-session disconnects*

One issue with QuestionPoint that has been difficult to pin down is that patrons sometimes become disconnected during the middle of a session. The patron may purposefully or inadvertently browse away from the chat window, or she may experience some technical problem. It is a difficult problem to track.

In OCLC/QuestionPoint, a message, "Patron is no longer connected" appears in the transcript when this happens. In Jive/FastPath, there is no message, but there were few enough transcripts that I was able to track this phenomenon manually.

<b>Software</b>	<b>Transcripts</b>	<b>Mid-session disconnects</b>	<b>%</b>
Jive	61	8	13%
OCLC	265	34	13%

## Patron experiences

8 of the 61 patrons using Jive/FastPath replied to a survey. We asked,

If you have used this service before, you may have noticed that we're trying out a different chat program to connect you with a librarian.



*The old chat*



*The new chat*

*Which chat do you prefer?*

- 0 - The old chat
- 2 - The new chat
- 1 - I like them both the same
- 4 - I have only tried one

*Why?*

Patron who liked the new chat:

simpler look, and I like the "agent typing" Would like to try co-browse. overall, I prefer it.

Patron who liked them both the same:

I love the easy co-browse in the new chat service-it's seamless and very fast. The wait for the librarian was a bit long...at least it felt longer because there wasn't a welcome message or anything to let me know someone was there. The chat feels faster than the old service-it doesn't "hang" as long between messages.

## Librarian experiences

18 librarians tried staffing L-net with the Spark client. We asked them to fill out a short survey about their experience and had 12 replies.

*Do you think that one is easier to learn to use than the other?*

0 - Spark is harder to learn than QuestionPoint

0 - They are about the same

12 - Spark is easier to learn than QuestionPoint

*Do you think you can give patrons better service with one or the other?*

5 - Patrons get better service with Spark than with QuestionPoint

5 - Patrons get the same service whichever tool I use

2 - Patrons get worse service with Spark than with QuestionPoint

In QuestionPoint, all librarians are alerted when new patrons arrive and someone must select the patron from a list to begin chatting with her. The software gals call this "**pull**" - the patron waits for someone to pull her from the server.

In Spark, the first available librarian is alerted when a new patron arrives and she is asked to either "accept" or "reject" her. If time runs out or if librarian "rejects" the patron, she is sent to the next available librarian. The software gals call this "**push**" - the server is pushing the patron to the librarian.

*Which do you prefer, push or pull?*

6 - Push

5 - Pull

*Please describe any technical problems you had with Spark:*

Re: "worse service with Spark" - I had difficulty in Accepting chats within the time frame because of an oddity with FastPath's initial Accept/Reject window: if the question is long, it pushes the Accept/Reject buttons below the Windows Taskbar and you must scroll up using a very low contrast scroll bar button (clicking/dragging on bar didn't seem to work.) It took longer to scroll, and I lost one chat due to timing out. Secondly, when using the "co-browse", even if you continue to surf to more sites after launching the co-browse, only the first URL will show up in the transcript. So, to send more than one URL, you will need to type them into the transcript manually, as far as I can tell. I only had three calls, and two from the same (impatient) patron that hung up on the call I managed to Accept, so my data set is limited. However, regarding the push vs. pull question, it makes me wonder what it would be like with a class visit -- how long would it take for a patron to cascade to a third or fourth librarian (30 secs each?) -- during a class visit, the first librarian may not have time to click RejectRejectReject.... Just a thought (I have little real data to back that up.) Also, in reviewing my test messages, Caleb found that "resolution codes" don't work when the other person leaves the room (there's no chat if there's only one? he guessed.) So, resolution codes are still a question, perhaps.

No technical/software difficulties - just me, never having "chatted" before. I was a little nervous and felt awkward, but I can see that this would be easier to use than questionpoint. I wasn't sure about getting a transcript for a follow-up, so I ended up opening word and doing a copy/paste of the transcript before I logged off. Unnecesary, I'm sure -- but it worked in a pinch.

One patron got disconnected, but he came right back. When Caleb sent a patron to me, I did not have all of the buttons/tabs on the right hand of the screen - or the canned response list

My computer seems to run slower with Spark running. Once I am chatting with the patron it is very fast, but switching between applications can be slow.

I "lost" the chat window a couple of times, but found it in the window with the other librarians.

I rejected a question because I already had one, and it came back to me even though my coworker did not have a question.

was I supposed to get an audio alert of a new patron? If so, I don't think I did.

none that i could see, though one patron did leave the room before i answered her question, but she had seemed patient and said she had the time, so not sure if it was an accident or on purpose or what - i made a note of a possible lost call

After ending the chat I found the information the patron needed - how to I do a follow up?

Well, Caleb had to reset the server for some reason, but it didn't cause me a problem.

*What would you change about Spark to make it a better tool?*

- Find ways to make transcripts more complete
- Find a way to make the Accept buttons visible regardless of length of question (decouple it from its fixed height and location onscreen, I guess.)
- Find ways to add to transcripts after other patron leaves room.

If there was a way to recreate the policy pages we have with QP, that would be helpful, but not imperative, as I often just search online for policy info anyway. I'm also curious about how we would handle follow-up and email and would be excited to have an alternative to the current software for that!

It is a little hard to see parts of the window - like the scroll bar. Maybe it is because I use a laptop - or I just have glaring lights over me.

Use the pull instead of push.

I'd like to have an audio or visual alert when the patron I'm working with sends me a new message.

Real cobrowsing would be nice.

so far the only thing i missed was getting to see what library they came in from with a link to the policies for that library. i had a question from a Beaverton Library patron, and could have used their policy page - but found it eventually on their website. maybe the policy pages are there somewhere, but i missed them. also, on all three, when i clicked on "View More Information" i was hoping to see what library they connected through, but never did, it always gave me <http://www.oregonlibraries.net/about> - but i would think at least one of the three would have come through a library?...

make it possible to paste a url into the address bar, rather than having to type it

more options on resizing windows, fonts, and the chat message

repeat the question in the chat, especially when you transfer it to another librarian

*Would more of your co-workers staff L-net if we used software like Spark instead of QuestionPoint?*

All reference staff at my library already staff L-net

3 - Everyone who is ever going to staff L-net already does

1 - Yes, software like Spark would encourage more people to staff L-net

No, software like Spark would actually discourage people from contributing to L-net

7 - I don't know

*Is there anything else you'd like to say about Spark or QuestionPoint or both?*

Thanks for trying new things - this is very interesting :-)

Spark was really easy to use and no in person training was required - I read the 6 page handout and was able to staff the service right away. Having such easy to use software would give us the opportunity to focus training on the actual service we are delivering, rather than the logistics behind the scene.

We have hopes of adding a couple of librarians, to L-net. but, we are still working out the details.

I like being able to choose/pull my patrons - at least for non-Oregon patrons. Many of their questions are about local subjects/policies and I think it is better if a local librarian helps them. Pushing Oregon patrons to me is fine.

Spark seems less complicated and that is always better! Right now I prefer it, but since I have only used it for a few questions there may be features from QP that I have not missed yet.

Spark seems more intuitive and simple than QuestionPoint.

There were a couple of questions above that I didn't answer on purpose...

I'm not sure if I prefer push or pull. I think I would need more practice with spark to say, but pushing seems to work well. I want for us to use whatever will make it easiest to pick up our patrons with the least delay.

I also can't comment on whether coworkers would be more open to staffing L-net with spark. I think the reasons many coworkers are reluctant to staff the service have little to do with software and more to do with time, a lack of understanding of L-net's value, and other issues. That said, for librarians who are willing to take the leap and begin staffing L-net, spark would make the initial process easier.

Also above, my reason for saying that patrons get better service with spark is mainly due to my impression that wait times might be less and the possibility of losing patrons during sessions seems less likely.

I'm so glad that you're considering other software! Whether L-net switches to different software or decides to remain with questionpoint, it's very exciting to consider other possibilities and to keep the focus on using whatever software provides our patrons with the best possible service. Thank you so much for doing this pilot!!!

i really enjoyed this. found it much easier and less cluttered and quicker. big thumbs up!!  
i would hope it would inspire more of my colleagues to do L-net!

Does the phrase "..has left the room" mean the same thing as exiting or hanging up? or should I stay connected in case they "come back in the room"?

Even though everybody who's going to is already doing L-net, this would make it more attractive for them and I'd get fewer complaints about how difficult the software is.

It seems very easy to use and is more intuitive than QuestionPoint. It would be good to include policies pages. Also, it's unclear what you're supposed to do once you're done with a chat.



## Spark Librarian Survey

Tags: [staff](#)

Please think about how the Spark software you used recently to staff L-net compares to the QuestionPoint flash chat we usually use.

**Do you think that one is easier to learn to use than the other?:**

- Spark is **harder** to learn than QuestionPoint
- They are **about the same**
- Spark is **easier** to learn than QuestionPoint

**Do you think you can give patrons better service with one or the other?:**

- Patrons get **better** service with Spark than with QuestionPoint
- Patrons get the **same service** whichever tool I use
- Patrons get **worse** service with Spark than with QuestionPoint

Push and pull

In QuestionPoint, all librarians are alerted when new patrons arrive and someone must select the patron from a list to begin chatting with her. The software gals call this "**pull**" - the patron waits for someone to pull her from the server.

In Spark, the first available librarian is alerted when a new patron arrives and she is asked to either "accept" or "reject" her. If time runs out or if librarian "rejects" the patron, she is sent to the next available librarian. The software gals call this "**push**" - the server is pushing the patron to the librarian.

**Which do you prefer, push or pull?:**

- Push
- Pull

**Please describe any technical problems you had with Spark:**

**What would you change about Spark to make it a better tool?:**

**Would more of your co-workers staff L-net if we used software like Spark instead of QuestionPoint?:**

- All reference staff at my library already staff L-net
- Everyone who is ever going to staff L-net already does
- Yes, software like Spark would encourage more people to staff L-net
- No, software like Spark would actually discourage people from contributing to L-net
- I don't know

**Is there anything else you'd like to say about Spark or QuestionPoint or both?:**

Submit

98 reads

Submitted by [caleb](#) on Sat, 2007-08-18 00:16.