An Assessment of the University of Washington Libraries' Virtual Reference Service

Jason Cabaniss, MLIS

Abstract

This project assesses the chat reference service of the University of Washington Libraries. The service offers students, staff, and faculty 24/7 access to librarians and advanced graduate students from the UW as well as librarians from across the country, in order to have their information needs answered as fast as possible. With access to OCLC's Question Point, I looked at a sample of chats that occurred during weeks one, five, and ten of Winter Quarter 2014. Chats were coded according to the category of questions, READ Level, time of day, and session time, and an analysis of the data showed that the majority of questions were either General Information or Known Item Searches. This could be due to a number of factors, including website design, gaps in information literacy instruction, as well as the recent migration of the UW Library's catalog to Ex Libris' Primo.

Methodology/Data Collection

A total of 619 chats (a 24% sample of the Winter Quarter Virtual Reference total) were analyzed from Weeks 1, 5, and 10 of Winter Quarter 2014, using OCLC's QuestionPoint software. The entirety of Week 1, a total of 419 chats, was coded, while a sample of 100 was selected from Weeks 5 and 10, respectively. Transcripts were read and coded according to the unique transaction ID, session time, time and date, resolution code (Answered, Followup by Patron's Library, Lost Call, etc.) as well as READ Level and Question Category. READ (Reference Effort Assessment Scale) Level, developed by Bella Karr Gerlich of Dominican University, is a 6-point scale categorizing questions based on the effort it takes a librarian to answer a question. Question Category groups questions into four categories: General Information, Technical Help, Known Item Lookup, and Reference.

Findings and Further Considerations

According to the data gathered, the majority of chats were categorized on the READ Scale at either 1 or 2, and under the Question Categories General Information and Known Item Lookup. No questions were rated higher than a 5, and only a small number of questions were categorized as Reference. There are a number of possible reasons for the READ Levels to be on the lower end of the scale and for the question categories to veer towards general information. I would recommend the Reference department perform another assessment in one to two years, conducted either by librarians or by MLIS students as part of another Capstone project. With this work and another assessment the department will be able to notice any trends in the types of questions being asked, and how they can tailor their services to better suit the needs of their patrons.
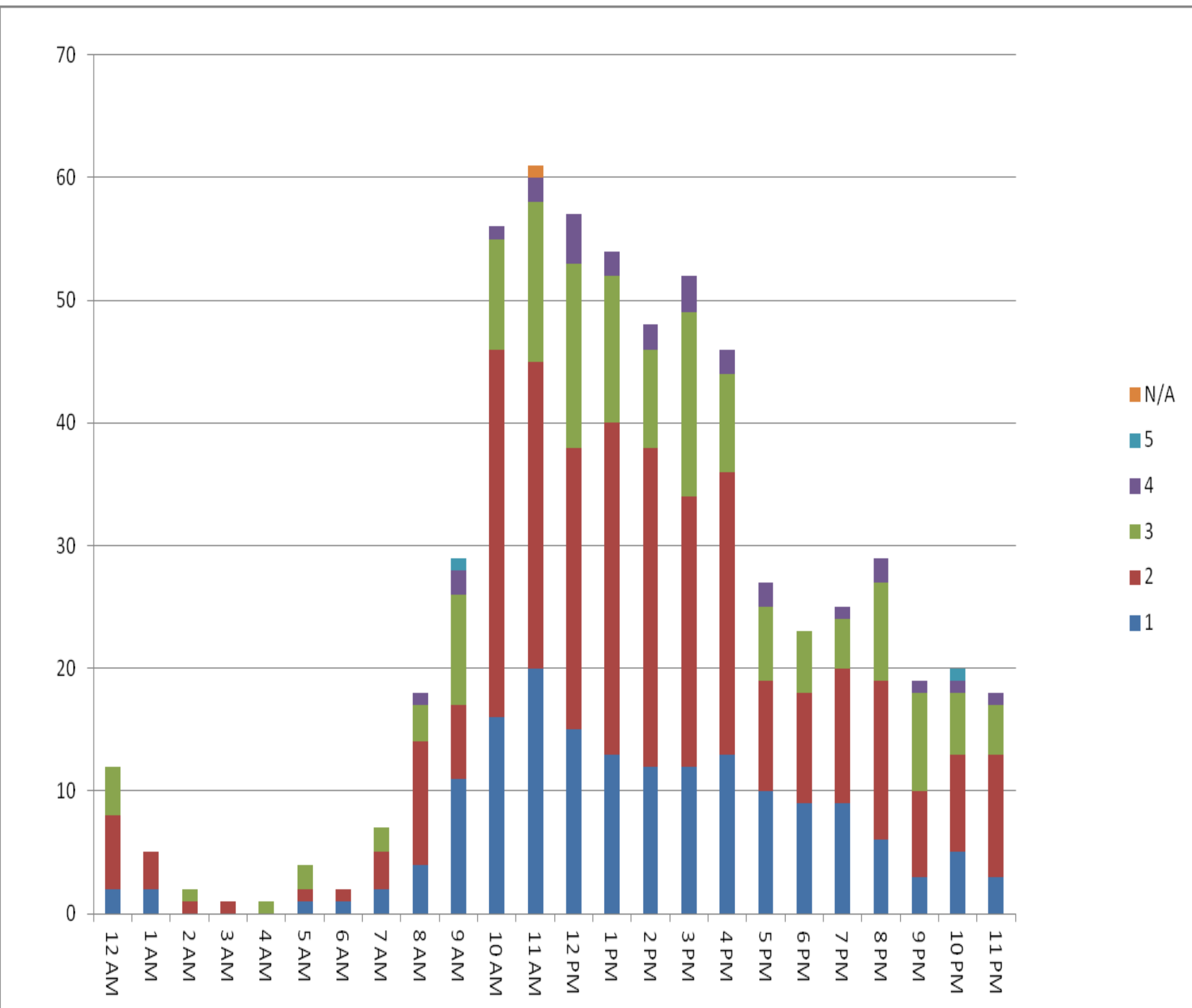
READ Level by Day of the Week
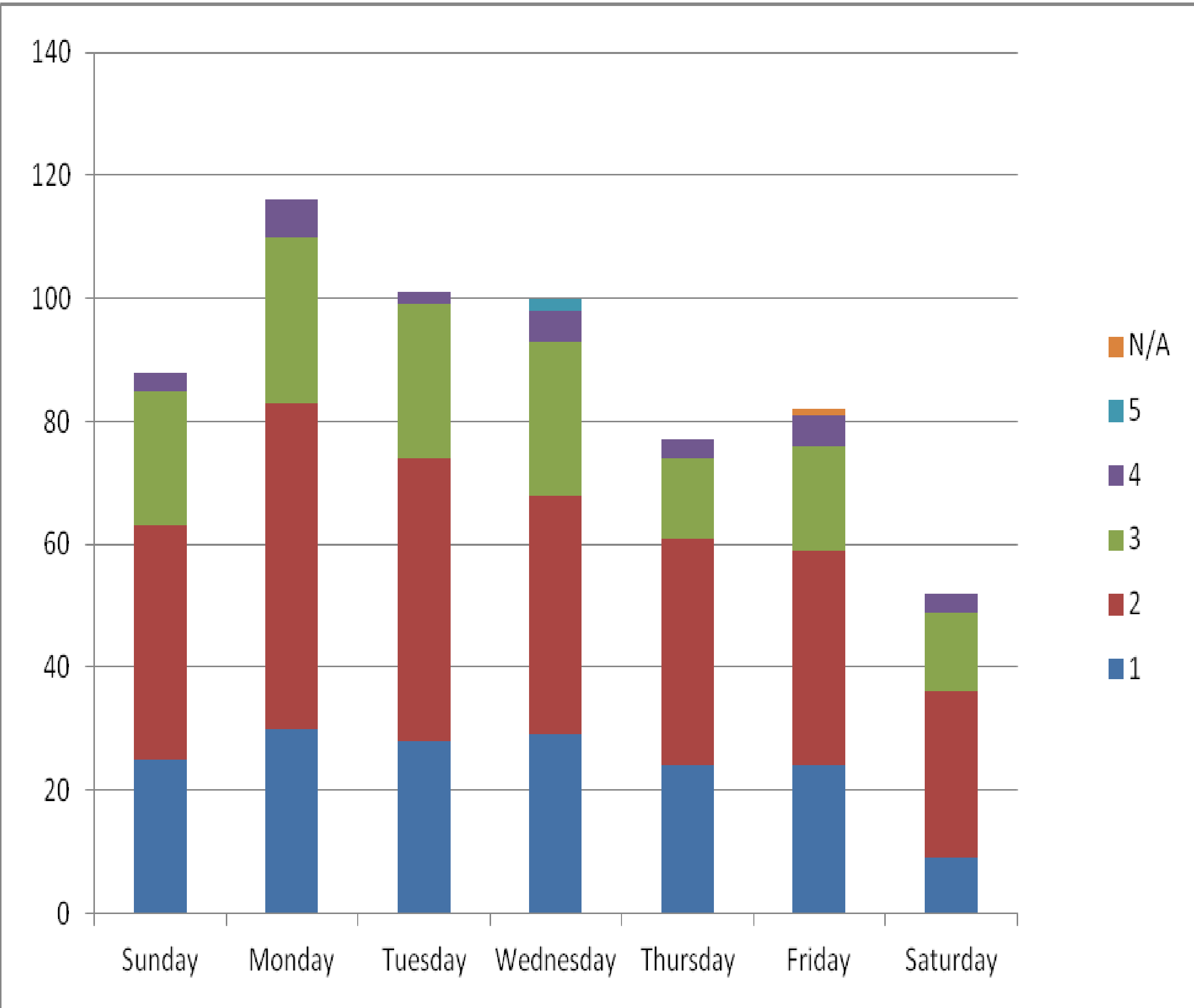
Question Category by Time of Day
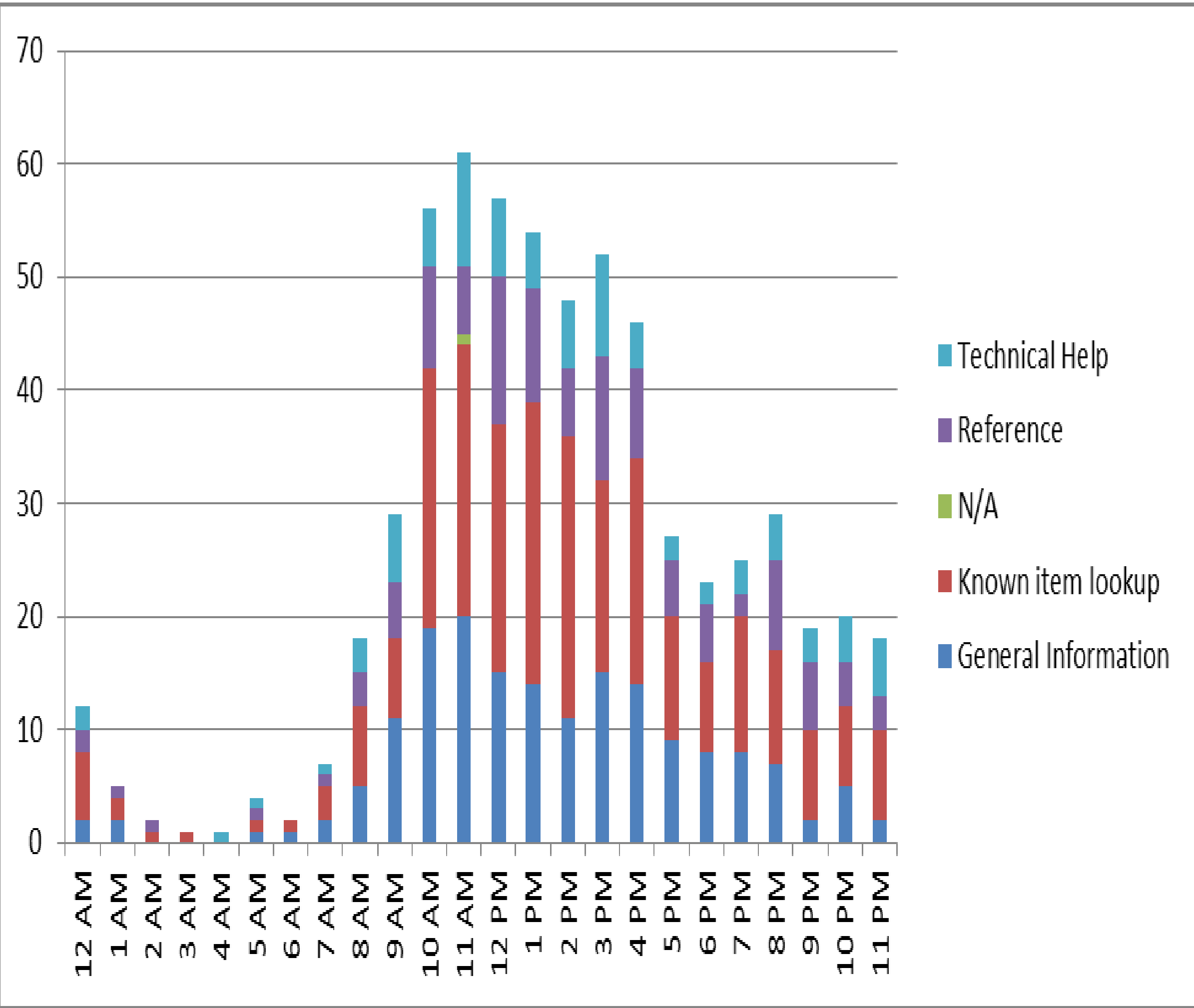
READ Level by Time of Day

Total Question Types