"May I help you?"… how an integrated online service can meet user expectations

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Introduction

Digital technology offers new opportunities to end-users of virtual libraries, which can increasingly rely on innovative tools to facilitate access to services. In 2006 the Library and the Documentation Service of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) - the Italian National Institute of Health - decided to digitalize the procedures for the application and management of the Document Delivery Service (DDS) for internal users, which still used a traditional model. A new integrated system, developed as a web-based application, was set up by the ISS Data Management Service and launched in July 2007 as *RecDoc – Recupero dei documenti online.* The purpose of this paper is to describe this new system, focusing on its features and the opportunities it offers.

DD service at ISS

The Document Delivery Service at ISS is traditionally performed by both the Library and the Documentation Service, two separate sectors of the same Department (*Data Management, Documentation, Library and Publishing Activities*). *RecDoc* is currently limited to internal users, but it will soon be extended to external users through an identification procedure.

Through *RecDoc* the Library is able to satisfy requests for journals held by other Italian libraries with which the ISS has agreements for the mutual exchange of documents. Currently, these number about 100, including the most important libraries of scientific and health-related areas. Although most of these libraries are located in Rome, many are based in other parts of Italy. *Figure 1* shows the total number (both internal and external users) of DD transactions performed by the Library on an exchange basis[1] in the period 2002-2006: an average of about 30% of the requests per year are from internal users.

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[1] The ISS Library offers the DDS on a mixed basis (for a fee, free or exchange) according to the Library Rules. For the purposes of this paper only exchange-based transactions are considered
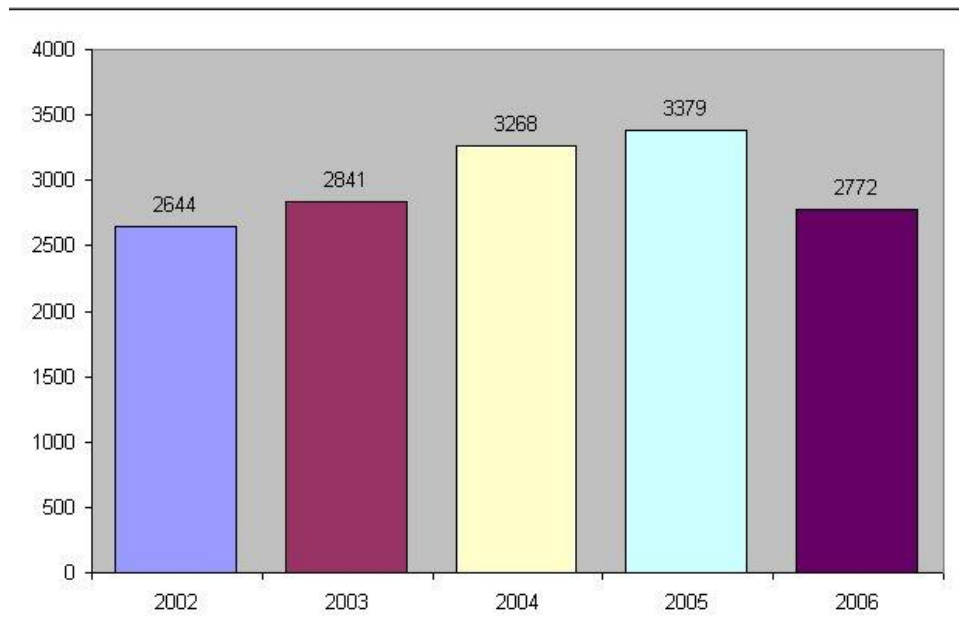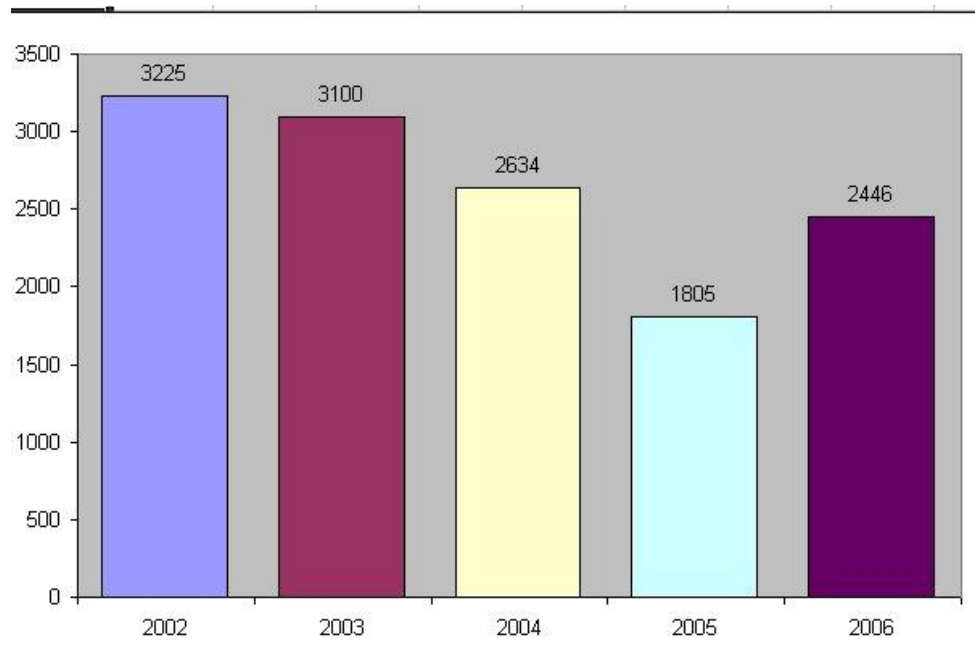
Fig 1 - DD transactions performed by the ISS Library
Years: 2002-2006

In the case of documents not held by the ISS Library or by any other national partner library, it is also possible, through *RecDoc,* to access the electronic Document Delivery Service for articles not available in Italy. This service is performed by the Documentation Service through international suppliers such as the National Library of Medicine (NLM) for DOCLINE and the British Library for INSIDE. DOCLINE is the National Library of Medicine's automated inter-library loan request and referral system, which provides document delivery services to health professionals. In Italy, access to DOCLINE has been granted by the NLM only to the ISS which, through its Documentation Service, provides articles not available in Italian libraries. The British Library, with its comprehensive collection, grants access to almost all kinds of document through the INSIDE collection of over 20,000 key journals. An average of about 2500 articles per year have been ordered in the last five years by the Documentation Service: *Figure 2* shows the total number (both internal and external users) of DD transactions performed in the period 2002-2006.

Fig. 2 - DD transactions performed by the ISS Documentation Service
Years: 2002-2006

RecDoc: the new online DD system

RecDoc, the new document supply system, is a web-based service. It was designed, in response to the needs of both end-users and the personnel of the ISS Library and Documentation Service, to simplify requests for journal articles and the related procedures. The result is a more efficient service that better meets both end-users' expectations – by minimizing the steps needed to make a request – and personnel needs, by standardizing the information required to process requests.

The *RecDoc* system uses two *tools*, which provide both end-users and the personnel running the system with an advanced tool for online management of the DDS:

–   The *Request Tool*, designed for users who wish to submit requests to the Library or to the Documentation Service (*Figures 3, 4, 5*)
–   The *Management Tool*, tailored to the working procedures of the DDS personnel who process the requests received from end-users (*Figures 6, 7*).

The key objective in designing *RecDoc* was to evolve from a paper-based to a web-based system that would allow end-users:

–   to access the document delivery systems managed by the ISS Library and by the Documentation Service from the same platform (*Fig.3*)
–   to make requests using an online form (*Fig.4*) without having to provide personal data: the system automatically recognizes ISS end-users by their personal account
–   to handle requests according to their needs (*send*, *cancel*, *rewrite*, *add items*): users may fill in as many forms as they wish and forward them at their convenience, within the limit of three requests per week (*Fig.5*)
–   to follow the progress of each request online (*request in progress*; *request processed*) (*Fig.5*).

Fig. 3 – RecDoc *Request Tool*: the homepage

Fig. 4 - RecDoc *Request Tool:* the online form

Fig. 5 - RecDoc *Request Tool*: the list of requests, inclusive of working process phases

RecDoc was also designed to help the Library and Documentation Service staff to manage the service through a completely
automated system able to offer personnel the following facilities (*Fig.6*):
   − a link to partner libraries and other selected document providers
   − to route requests using pro forma e-mails to partner libraries and document providers
   − to reply to end-users using pro forma e-mails
   − to generate statistical reports and graphs on request.

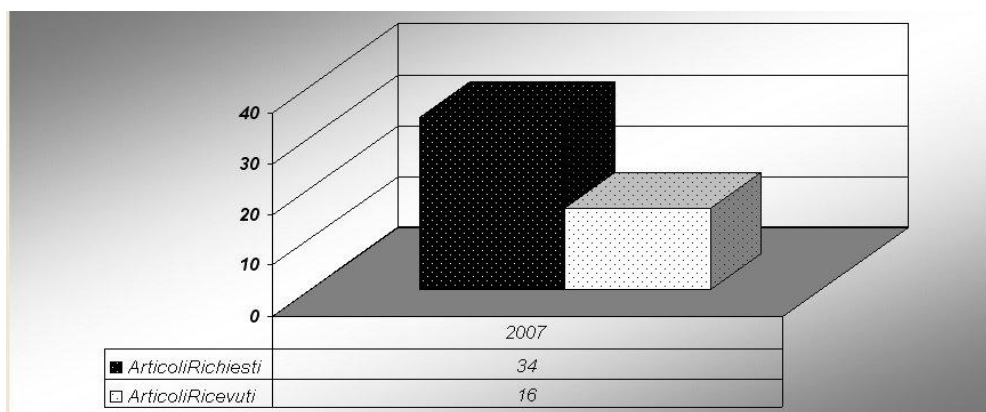**Fig. 6** – RecDoc *Management Tool*: the request management form

Fig. 7 – RecDoc *Management Tool*: a statistical report with graph

Briefly, the new system offers both DDS end-users and staff the following benefits:
   − simpler procedures
   − fewer human and data-entry errors
   − easier communications with both internal ISS colleagues and external partners
   − time-saving.

For ISS staff, another benefit of the new system is the "Reports and statistics" function, which enables them to analyze trends in the day-to-day operation of the Library and Documentation Service and to retrieve/download results (*Fig.7*).

From a technical point of view *RecDoc* is an integrated web application developed by the ISS Data Management Service with the aim of being user-friendly and completely transparent to DDS staff. The ISS Data Management Service is also responsible for updating and maintaining the software.

Conclusions
In conclusion, it can be said that *RecDoc* is an integrated online system able to harmonize the procedures involved in the complementary activities performed by different sectors of the same organization. As noted, the goal of *RecDoc* was to reconcile the expectations of both end-users and personnel of the Document Delivery Service: it is still too early to say whether it has succeeded, as it was launched only recently, but the initial response from both end-users and staff seems to be positive. As for the future, further steps towards full implementation of the *RecDoc* system are envisaged, such as:
a) the development of an *ad hoc tool* able to manage DD requests from external users
b) an English edition of the *Request Tool*.