

Help Me Data!

Making Use of Qualitative Survey Data In Public Libraries

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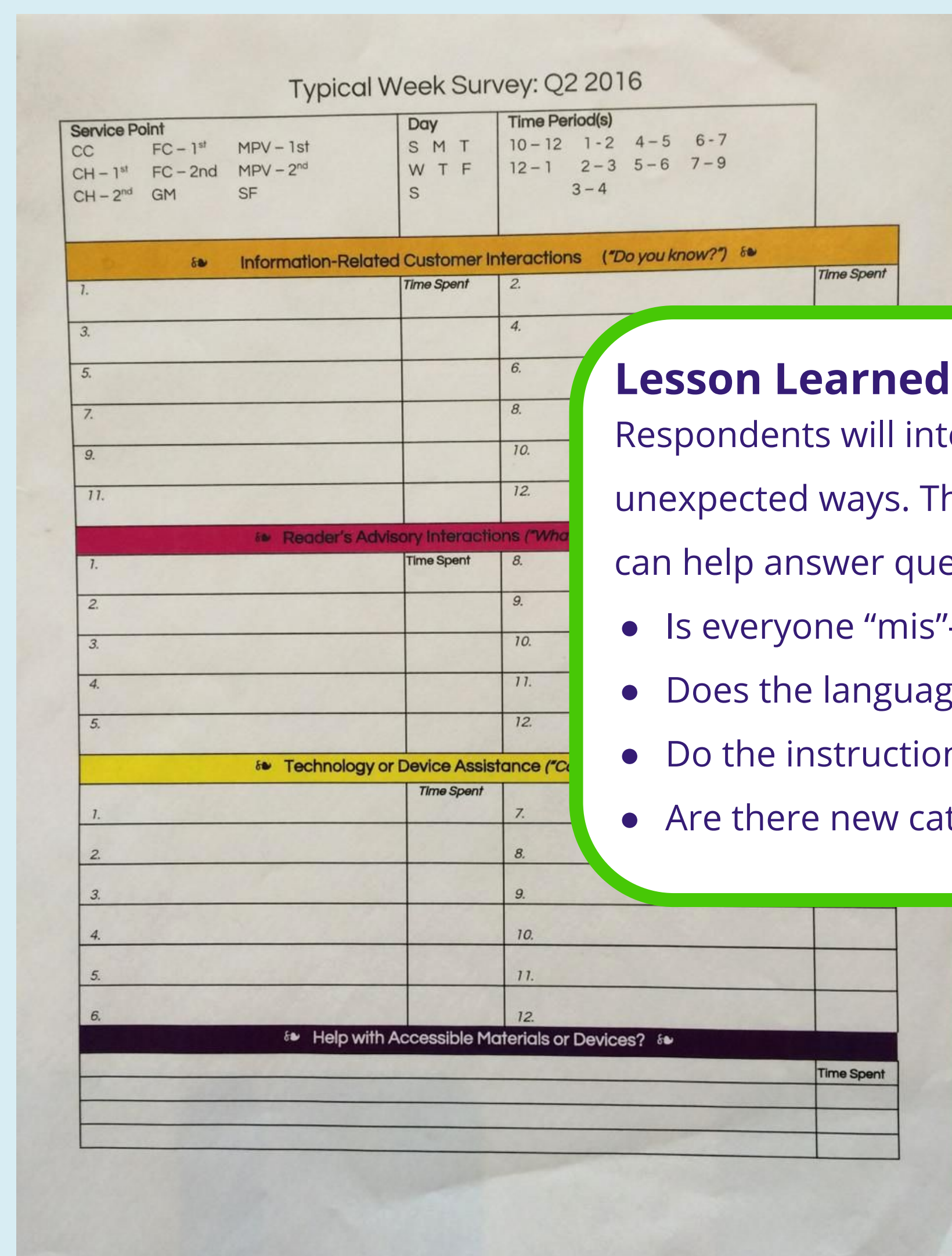
Introduction

Brampton Library was attempting to collect qualitative answers in the quarterly **Typical Week Survey** completed by staff. The goal was to elicit more detail in the responses to better understand what kinds of questions staff were being asked, and how long customers were interacting with staff. A questionnaire had been created asking for responses on three types of questions, and time spent on those questions:

- Information-related customer interactions (“Do you know...?”)
- Reader’s Advisory interactions (“What else is like...?”)
- Technology or Device Assistance (“Can you help...?”)

The Challenge:

The task was to take the data and organize it in such a way as to make it useful. There were over 1800 lines of data from the second quarter survey across seven different branches. Staff had completed the form in many different ways, making a straight count of the original three questions very difficult.



Lesson Learned:

Respondents will interpret a survey in many unexpected ways. This is actually a good thing, and can help answer questions like:

- Is everyone “mis”-interpreting in the same way?
- Does the language need to change?
- Do the instructions need to change?
- Are there new categories to be added?

Methodology

The concept was to code all of the answers in distinct categories that would reflect the library priorities. Research showed that Edmonton Public Library had done something similar with a set of surveys done in 2012, and those codes inspired the top level categories for Brampton Library:

Find: finding books and information on a diverse array of subjects, includes Reader’s Advisory

Tech: includes printing, copying, document assistance, library computers

Member: includes getting library cards and paying fines

Service: includes telling customers about programs and online services like Lynda/Gale/Overdrive

Borrow: showing customers how to use the self checkout, and assisting with putting books on hold/ILL

Space: directional and room requests

The **first iteration** of recording the data was done in an online survey program. However, that proved challenging due to the qualitative nature of the responses and the variability in number of responses per page.

The **second iteration** of recording the data was done directly into Excel, making it easy to move to the analysis stage with pivot tables. It was also then possible to incorporate a second category with a finer level of detail. These finer detail categories had already been used to mark customer comment cards, and it was possible to incorporate the existing codes into the broader framework.

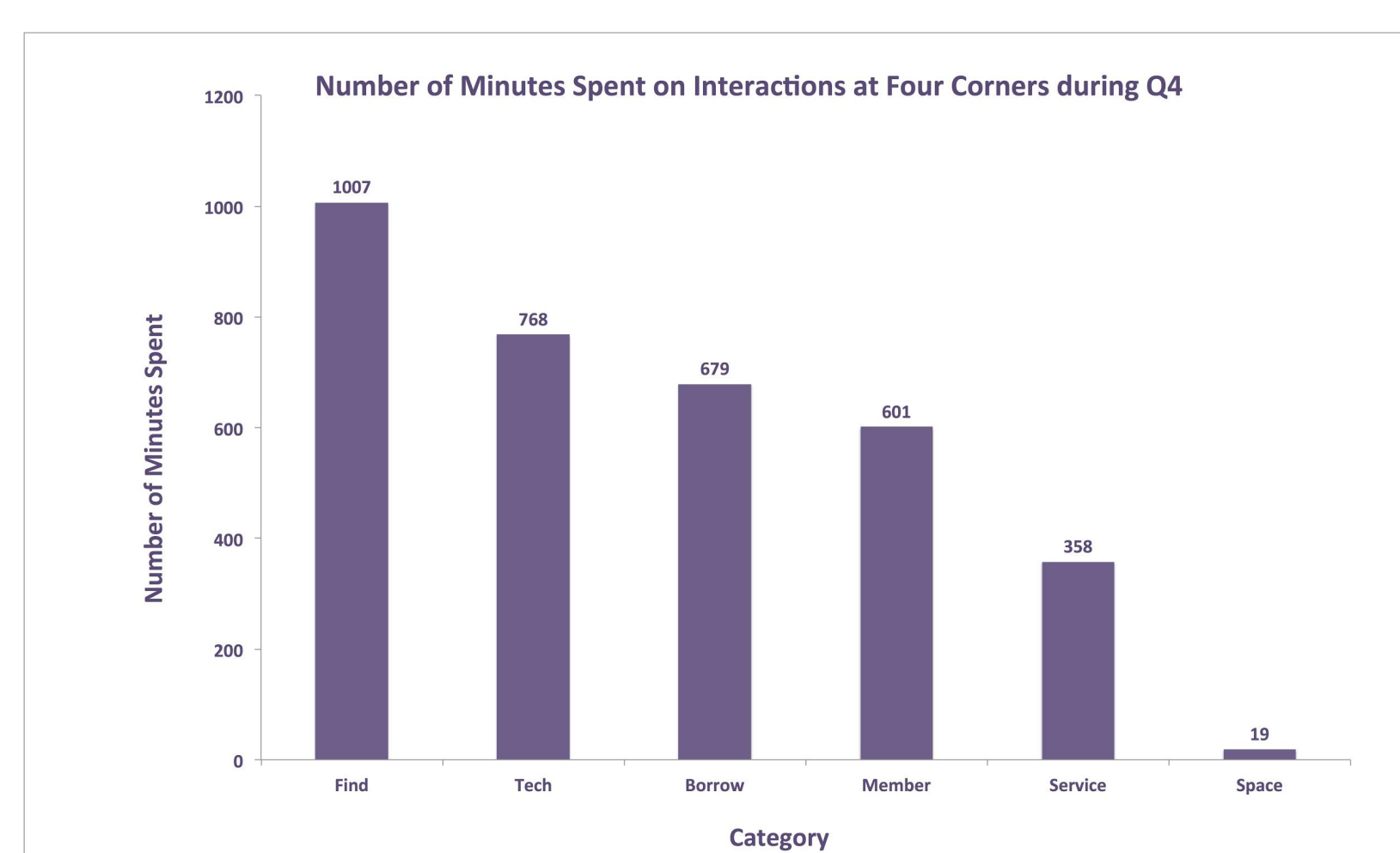
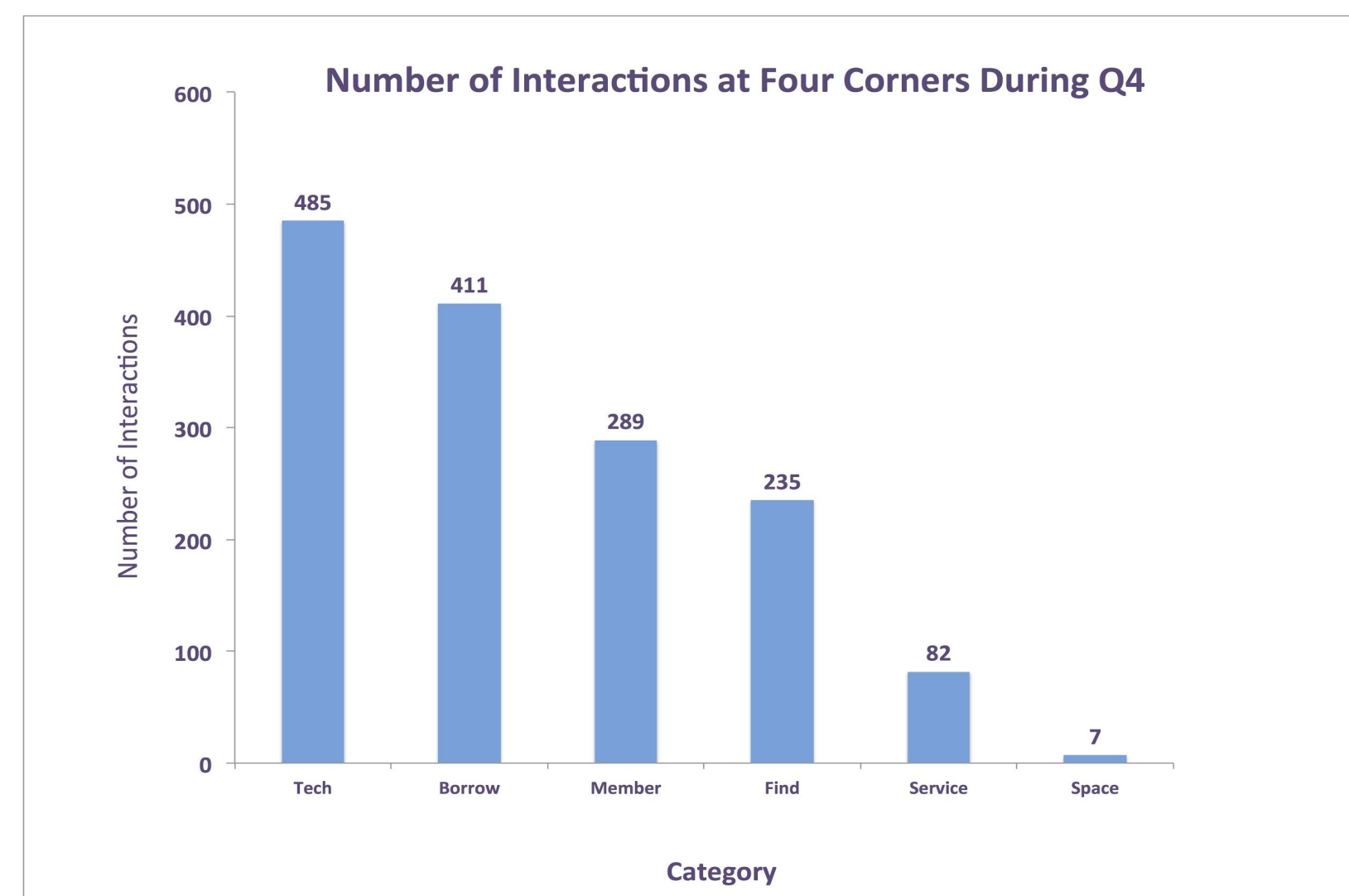
Season	Weekday	Branch	Interaction	Time (Minutes)	Category 1	Category 2
Q4	Friday	FL	Spot- picture books	3	Find	book
Q4	Friday	FL	Gr 4 math book	2	Find	book
Q2	Monday	FC	Local history	10	Find	RA
Q3	Saturday	SF	Pin # at self-check machine	1	Borrow	CKO
Q3	Tuesday	FC	How to renew	2	Borrow	renew
Q3	Saturday	CC	hours	1	Space	hours
Q3	Wednesday	SF	How to print from personal laptop	1	Tech	compner
Q3	Wednesday	SF	How to scan?	1	Tech	scan
Q2	Saturday	FC	Overdrive help	2	Service	Overdrive
Q2	Saturday	FC	Newcomer bus tour	5	Service	program

Lesson Learned:

First, work backwards. What’s the question being asked? What kinds of data are needed to answer the question? How will the data need to be analyzed? How can the data be collected in such a way that it will end up in the format needed to perform the analysis?

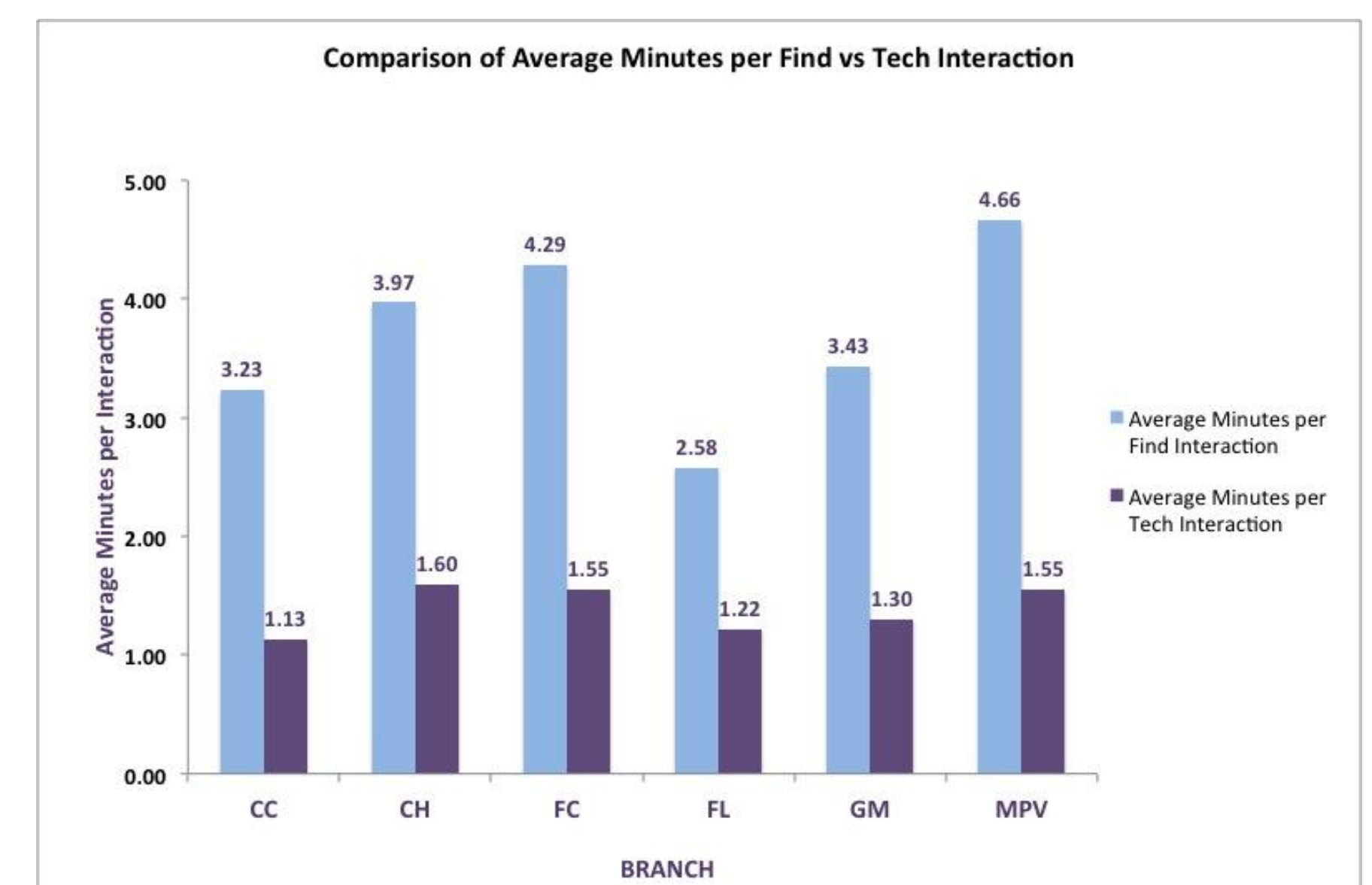
Results

Staff interacted with customers most **often** on “**Tech**” questions. Examples:
“How to print”
“How to copy”
“How to log in to wifi”



However, staff spent **longer** interacting with customers on “**Find**” questions. Examples:
“Books on dinosaurs”
“History of residential schools”
“Biography of Gandhi”
“Separation anxiety books”

The pattern of longer “**Find**” interactions was consistent throughout all of the branches. The average time per interaction was significantly longer for “**Find**” interactions than “**Tech**” interactions.



Staff had been feeling as though they spent most of their time fielding **Tech** questions, but the data showed that they spent more time interacting with customers on more complex information questions.

Discussion

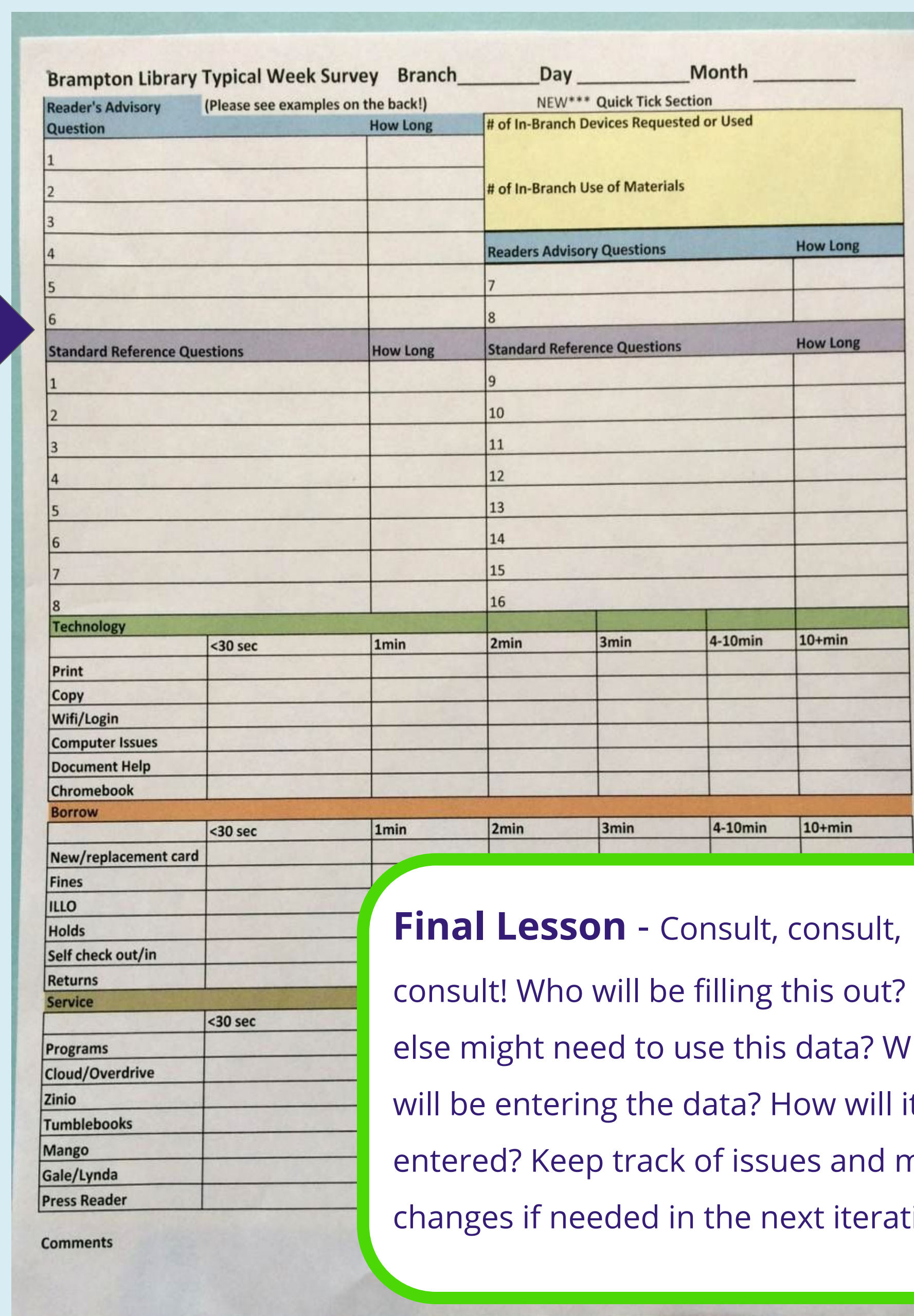
After the Q3 results, a review with staff revealed that two kinds of data needed to be collected during the week - could those be merged in a new form? Yes! A revised form was created to make it easier for staff to enter in repetitive data, and create a more accurate and consistent record.

Can this type of survey data collection be **longitudinal**? Yes! Once the format is set, it’s easy to compare and contrast different time periods and different locations.

Can there be **more detail for a deeper dive**? Yes! Brampton Library was already recording comment cards with a fine level of detail - and it was possible to make all of those codes a subset of the larger categories, and use for both Typical Week and comment cards.

It’s a lot of data - what if it’s too much data? Options for working with a **smaller data set**:

- Focus on just one strategic goal for the year. Maybe it’s digital literacy, and only record questions about requests for online information.
- Do a full data set twice a year instead of four times a year.
- Pick something the organization is changing soon. For instance, Brampton Library instituted a PIN for the self-check machine. That drove up the number of questions to staff in the Borrow category. Will that number come down in the next quarter as customers become adjusted? Or will it remain an ongoing question for staff?



Conclusion

Working with the qualitative data in this way allowed for easy analysis of interactions staff were having with customers. It also enabled comparison across the system, and set up the potential for longitudinal data collection.

An intermediate knowledge of excel (or any spreadsheet program) was required, but no additional or expensive software, making it affordable for any size of organization.

References

Arnason, H., & Reimer, L. (2012). Analyzing Public Library Service Interactions to Improve Public Library Customer Service and Technology Systems. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 7(1), 22-40. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.18438/BSNP6T

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Bonus Lesson: Learn how to Concatenate in your spreadsheet program - it’s almost always the answer, even when it seems like it should be something else.