THE EVOLUTION OF SERVICE: A TECHNICAL SERVICES PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The behind-the-scenes work of Technical Services (TS) often goes unnoticed by the library patrons. However, they stand to benefit the most from innovative approaches in TS that curtail the challenges of shrinking budgetary and personnel resources. Leveraging existing technology, departmental reorganization, outsourcing and cross-training can help a library weather hard times and improve service at the same time. Qualities that create a good customer service workforce in Public Services can help coordinators for acquisitions, cataloging and processing to function more effectively. Relationships between library technicians, campus staff and faculty, and external contacts evolve as the tools we use to perform our work change. This paper will explore what Technical Services departments can do to improve service, using an academic library as a model.

Background

The campus of California State University, Northridge (CSUN) sits nestled in a valley at the north end of Los Angeles. CSUN’s Oviatt library is the centerpiece of the campus, serving a population of 36,000 undergraduate and graduate students and 4,000 faculty and staff. The library’s collections currently consist of 1.4 million volumes, 150,000 electronic books, 35,000 electronic journals, and 120 abstract and index or full-text databases. The Technical Services staff is divided into three main units: seven full-time staff in Acquisitions; nine full-time staff, one full-time and one half-time librarian in Cataloging; and one full-time staff and one full-time librarian in E-Resources.

Services

Within the Technical Services department, our mission is to select, acquire, organize, and process resources for users to the best of our abilities. Traditional materials processed in TS for the collections are passed on to Public Services, who are often thought of as custodians of customer service. However, it should not be assumed that TS does not play a significant role in access and the delivery of customer service:

While a reference librarian interfaces directly with patrons in person, in classrooms, and by telephone, email, and live chat, a technical services librarian interfaces with patrons through the online catalog, the online journal portal, and through many links provided on the library website. The main concern for customer service is the same — helping patrons find the materials they need. (Skekel, 2008, p. 22)
Typically, contacts between TS and patrons are limited to the occasional access problem, such as locating a periodical issue that is within the office, awaiting binding. However, as we purchase more electronic resources, TS staff plays a greater part in access to those resources, affording us closer contact with the user:

How the library delivers the content of its collection... may have consequences for patrons. Some of these consequences can be a direct result of Technical Services decisions about purchases, cataloging, or even technology used in the provision of resources. (Skekel, 2008, p. 20)

As the library’s focus shifts from providing physical materials and spaces to information access across formats (Diaz & Pintozzi, 1999), Technical Services must be diligent in maintaining access as expected and promised to the user. Whether that entails establishing new services (such as a link resolver or metasearching) or maintaining and improving existing routes of access (such as the library’s catalog), these responsibilities fall to TS staff, thus placing us at the forefront of customer service. Our relationships and communication with others (staff, institutional departments, and users) must be persistent and open to effectively meet their needs.

The model of the traditional vendor and library relationship has also evolved from one of merchant and client to a collaborative, symbiotic relationship. The increased volume of data exchange between our vendors and the library puts us in contact with them much more frequently, emphasizing our role not only as receiver of service but a provider as well.

Here is another side of our multi-pronged customer service provision. Amongst our users, our faculty is especially concerned with electronic resources. In a 2008 Library Satisfaction Survey, faculty listed e-resources as the most important issue to them. This includes the ease and availability of e-Reserves to their students. And it is TS who is providing ready access to e-Reserve materials, usually in the form of e-books or full-text articles, which gives our faculty flexibility in choosing materials to place on Reserve.

Furthermore, our faculty members request a large percentage of the materials through Inter-library loan (ILL). As an experiment, the Acquisitions unit in TS is investigating purchasing items that are initially requested through ILL. If Technical Services can fulfill these ILL requests through acquisition, in some cases faster than ILL could have borrowed the materials, we help create a user-generated collection management policy and provide better service as well. The expectation is that our faculty will be pleased that the library is reactive to their requests, that they will not be restricted by ILL loan limits, and that they may get their materials even sooner. Here again, we are directly offering service to our patrons, with faster-paced purchasing procedures.

**Value**

This year, we expect to spend $1.3 million in electronic resources alone. Are we receiving that much bang for our buck? In an effort to determine how much the services and resources we provide are actually worth, the library’s Assessment Coordinator, Katherine Dabbour, conducted a valuation study in July, 2008. Although we subscribe to 120 databases, just one of them was examined. K. Dabbour (personal communication, December 8, 2008) determined that just one database (Academic Search Elite) provided over $20 million in downloaded articles over the course of one fiscal year.
At the same time, we have to balance the expense of the services offered by TS with the constraints on our budget. For electronic resources, the percentage of our materials budget expended on electronic resources has risen from 25% in the 2004-05 fiscal year to 65% in the 2008-09 fiscal year. The difficulties we face are the result of shrinking or stagnating personnel and materials budgets, coupled with rising costs for resources. Consortial agreements generally increase the number of resources we can offer; however, the fixed and hidden costs of these electronic packages limit our flexibility to expend our budget on electronic resources. “As many department heads know, daily duties can change dramatically from year to year as we are asked to do more with less while embracing new technology and standards” (Deeken, Webb, & Taffurelli, 2008, p. 211). The hidden cost of the workload associated with extra resources has been exacerbated by a 25% reduction in TS personnel since 2004.

Although we do need to save money, we have to take into consideration the provision of service in how we cut back. For example, earlier this year we purchased a certain platform for an e-book because it was less expensive than other options. But the result was a product that was not user-friendly, rendering the e-book unreadable by many users. In economizing, we must ensure that we do not undermine the integrity of the access to materials we provide. Access includes terms of use as well. If a user is turned away because we do not purchase enough simultaneous user licenses, have we adequately provided the service? Where is that balance?

Our users expect a high level of service with our electronic resources as well as our traditional materials. In fact, whatever we currently offer by way of e-journals, e-books, and databases, they want more. We cannot choose between delivering electronic resources and offering customary (old school) library collections. We need both. But how do we balance the provision of traditional materials and services with the explosion of popular electronic resources we now make available to our users? It is not simply a matter of answering, “What can we afford?” but, rather, “How do we get the most out of what we can afford?”

Since hiring more people to meet the demands of a greater workload was not an option for the Oviatt library, we looked to adjusting the current workflows in TS. This included reorganizing, consolidating, and paring down our procedures to make them leaner and to accommodate new workflows for electronic resources and electronic procedures. An ongoing reorganization of the department would impact our ability to meet budgetary constraints to not only bring service to our patrons but in many ways, to improve upon that customer service. In 2005, an opportunity for the reorganization of TS presented itself when newly hired Helen Heinrich brought a fresh perspective and diverse experience as the Cataloging Coordinator of the department.

**Change**

When Helen Heinrich started at Oviatt Library at CSUN as Cataloging Coordinator in 2005, she had over 13 years of experience working in Technical Services at the Getty Research Library. Both libraries fall under the classification of “academic and/or research”, but the similarities end there. The Getty is a private library focusing on the research needs of Ph.D.’s, art history scholars and curators. It prides itself in a unique collection with 65% of materials being in foreign languages. Things could not be more different at the Oviatt Library. CSUN is a public institution serving more than 30,000, mainly undergraduate, students with diverse backgrounds. The primary mission of the library is to support undergraduate curriculum; therefore, to acquire mostly mainstream materials. The contrast between the Getty and
CSUN ensured that Heinrich had a different perspective of the work of Cataloging unit when she started her new job. Therefore, Heinrich's first order of business was to survey and assess the workflow in the department. She sat down with every staff member to learn what they do every day and how he or she does it. Being new gave her the advantage of asking "stupid" questions with impunity and encourages catalogers to think and rationalize why they do what they do the way they do. There were two prevailing answers to those questions: "I don't know" and "We've always done it this way". On the other hand, some people had ideas for how to do things more efficiently and they were eager to try it. Encouraged by those opinions and having a fresh perspective on the workflow, prompted Helen to approach Chair of TS, Doris Helfer, with a proposal for the reorganization. Doris Helfer welcomed the initiative and thus Oviatt library's TS department embarked on the road for change. The Reorganization Committee (the Committee) was formed, consisting of key personnel from all functional areas of Technical Services and chaired by the Cataloging Coordinator.

The process of reorganization at the Oviatt Library could be characterized by three R's: Review, Revise and Reorganize. Perhaps sharing some of the lessons we learned along the way will help others create an effective roadmap for implementing change in their organization.

Obtaining the support of library administration prior to launching the change process was vital. Doing so gave the Committee the authority and mandate to talk to people across various departments and request their cooperation and assistance in implementing the changes.

As mentioned earlier, a few members of the Cataloging unit were open to re-assessing their workflow and introducing improvements. However, the majority of staff members felt threatened by and wary of anything that would disrupt the status quo. There was, naturally, uncertainty in knowing what to expect from the new Cataloging Coordinator. The impending budget crisis in California and, consequently, at CSUN did not facilitate the establishment of trust in a reorganization. Employees were essentially concerned about job security and therefore resisted change within the department. It was crucial to open the lines of communication and explain the goal of the reorganization process to the staff by painting a big picture and underscoring the importance of staff's role in carrying out the library mission. Obtaining staff buy-in and their cooperative and candid participation required that they first feel safe.

Having staff on board, we performed a detailed workflow study. To create a complete picture and identify potential areas for improvement, we conducted internal and external reviews of our operations. The Committee identified the priority processes (e.g., the monograph workflow) and interviewed every staff member involved in the cycle. Typical interview questions included:

Describe in detail what you do on a daily basis?

Is there anything in your workflow that does not make sense to you?

Have you ever wondered why can't we do this differently?

Do we need to keep every step in a multi step process, or can a shortcut be created?

The survey of the external landscape was particularly important because many of the internal processes are determined by outside circumstances. As a state institution, CSUN is held accountable to auditing requirements and state regulations which define many financial procedures. However, the state requirements and the work of TS have not been synchronized for many years. For example, it was discovered that we no longer needed to keep records on the

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ethnicity of business-owners for the book vendors we use, or send out and file forms certifying a “drug-free workplace.”

Numerous hours were dedicated to comply with these outdated procedures; these were numerous hours not used elsewhere and translated into wasted dollars.

The other major factor affecting daily workflow is technology. In addition to software upgrades, how do we keep up with other technological advances? This question raises the issue of staff vs. librarians. At CSUN, librarian positions are tenure-track, so librarians are required to attend professional conferences and satisfy the tenure requirements. However, daily work in TS is performed by staff, who do not routinely have the exposure to the latest developments in the industry. There had been a disconnect, especially in the Acquisitions section, between professional-level knowledge and standard workflow.

In order to explore all options, including outsourcing, in optimizing TS operations, we performed a cost analysis of cataloging and materials processing. We considered implementing PromptCat (OCLC) cataloging and shelf-ready services from our approval vendors, Blackwell and Yankee Book Peddler (YBP). Once we had figures on the actual cost of doing business, we were able to determine if outsourcing was an efficient option. After detailed analysis of the cataloging-to-shelf cycle, we compared our in-house cost with the vendors’ cost. In our case the costs were about equal, so there was no savings in outsourcing. By the same token, it would introduce substantial savings in turnaround time, thus improving service to our users at no additional cost to us.

Revise

When we began the process of reorganization, the Cataloging unit had about three month backlog of books received on approval, with most titles having a Library of Congress record available from OCLC. In order to expedite cataloging of these items, the Cataloging Coordinator re-examined and streamlined the procedures for copy cataloging. Old procedures had a lot of excessive verification built into them, and a number of steps could be eliminated; for example, we discontinued verifying the size of a book, editing punctuation in the record, and shelf listing. It was determined to be more efficient to correct an occasional duplicate call number when it is detected by Circulation. The old procedures were in place for many years and staff were used to them. Many times Heinrich heard the comment “it only takes a second”; however, those seconds add up into minutes, and minutes into hours. We changed our load tables in order to automate the remaining record editing. The load tables were adjusted to strip out “foreign fields,” like non-LC subject headings. As a result, within a month we achieved a 50% increase in productivity by simply revising copy-cataloging procedures. Automating cataloging by implementing PromptCat was still to come!

We looked into eliminating duplication, such as the repeated searching of the same title along the materials movement cycle. Despite of years of changing technology and modernization, there still existed unnecessary, tasks held over from many years ago. At the library, we continued to stripe the edges of periodicals with red ink for easy identification during the bag checks. Exit detectors replaced the bag checks long ago, but the procedures were not adjusted accordingly. Another, more high-tech example was the creation of a local authority record for every heading that did not have a record in National Authority File, even for the headings that did not have cross-references. This rule was a vestige of an old integrated library system (ILS) requirement but, as with the periodical striping, those practices were never questioned by staff.
and came up to light only during the reorganization. Examples like that prompted a tongue-in-cheek motto from Cataloging Coordinator: Less work, not more people!

In addition to the specific changes in the workflow, we needed to adjust the quality standards to correspond to reality. This method is especially important for cataloging. Now that so much of imperfect publishers' and vendors' metadata flows into the catalog, it's not worth editing and massaging to perfection every record that comes from OCLC and bringing it to the standards of olden times. "There is no reason why the data model currently in operation in academic libraries to continually fix, update, and localize bibliographic records should be maintained" notes Eden (2008). In most cases, we will provide better service by having more records that are "good enough," rather than fewer records of perfect quality.

To make changes that would have the biggest impact, we adhered to the principle of "low hanging fruit." First and foremost, we focused on changes that were easy to make but yielded big results. For example, we started by making changes to copy cataloging, which constitutes about 80% of the Cataloging unit's workflow.

Maximizing the use of staff expertise was the cornerstone of the reorganization. As was revealed during the workflow study, experienced and highly skilled staff spent a lot of time on tasks that could be delegated to personnel in more appropriate categories. Therefore, we shifted tasks for which we could use templates, constant and automatically populated data to less skilled staff and began fully utilizing expert staff for challenging tasks.

Providing cross training enabled us to put effort where it was most needed and distribute the workload more efficiently; there is no time wasted when someone else can do the job. This approach helped us promote "one-touch handling," where we aimed to reduce passing of an item through the least number of hands, ideally one.

Oviatt Library TS consists of people with various backgrounds and levels of technological acumen. Not surprisingly, trust in technology emerged as an issue. For example, it has been a long-standing practice to claim periodicals we receive from EBSCO by corresponding via email with an EBSCO representative, as personal contact was considered more reliable than system-generated claiming. Personal contact provided a "paper" trail and confirmation. Our latest ILS performs electronic claiming directly into the EBSCO portal, with no need for correspondence. We invited an EBSCO representative to demonstrate the function and illustrate the claims reporting feature. Despite initial reservations, the new auto claiming feature worked flawlessly, saving TS employee labor and cutting down on turnaround time. As a bonus, we convinced some technological skeptics along the way.

Reorganize

The consolidation of related functions reduced fragmentation and provided tighter control over the affected workflows. For example, cataloging of government documents was split between two people, according to the publication format: print versions were handled by the Government Document Specialist and electronic format items were cataloged by the Serials Cataloger. We eliminated this division by assigning all government documents cataloging to the Government Document Specialist. It cleared the confusion of where to place a request for cataloging and improved management of government documents collection.

Communication is important in creating an efficient workflow. During the workflow study, it became apparent that there was a breakdown in communication between the Acquisi-
tions and Cataloging units. This led to unnecessary steps in the workflow that drained resources, but did not yield results. For example, Acquisitions staff intended to help Cataloging find a title in the catalog by writing a 10-digit bibliographic record number on every purchasing slip that came with a book. But Cataloging never used that number! They were searching the items by title and ISBN and never relied on the record number that Acquisitions painstakingly took time to write down. (Now, after the implemented shelf-ready options, Cataloging searches by just scanning the barcode.)

The division of the department into numerous sub-units, such as Continuations, Firm Orders, Approval Orders, etc., led to the lack of communication, fragmentation and duplication of functions. With lines blurring between the TS functions, we were able to merge small sub-units into the bigger ones which also allowed us to absorb a couple of supervisory positions vacated through attrition.

Trusting the expertise of colleagues emerged as an important issue. Confidence in a colleague’s work helps distribute the workflow evenly and eliminates double-checking because there is no expectation that somebody will make a mistake. A flagrant example in CSUN’s case: the claiming of periodicals included verification that issues displayed as “late” or “not-yet-received” in the check-in card were indeed not received and instead mistakenly shelved without checking-in. A student assistant with a list of not-received issues made weekly runs to check the shelves and verify that the issues were not actually there. This has been done in order to avoid claiming the received issues by mistake. We adopted the new default thought that information displayed in the check-in record is indeed accurate; i.e. an issue that was not checked-in was, in fact, not received. Stopping the control runs saved the unit an hour of employee time per week, which translates into 52 hours a year saved.

We abandoned perfectionism! TS personnel everywhere are well known for their meticulousness and drive for perfection. What it may develop into (and in CSUN’s case it did), is a steadfast determination to avert a mistake by building a complex workflow to prevent that mistake from happening. However, it may be more efficient to correct an occasional mistake when it occurs than to build an entire workflow to prevent it. A 5% chance for an error should not define 95% of work. “Our infatuation with order, perfection, and control does not work in today’s information environment” (p. 38).

For the changes to be effective, it was important to ensure continuity of efficiencies throughout the cycle. We worked very hard to expedite cataloging only to discover that the increased volume of books cataloged created a bottleneck in materials processing. This invalidated our efforts to speed the availability of new materials to our users. It also spurred us to implement shelf-ready services from our vendors.

Once we identified the areas for improvement, be it in the workflow or in our mindset, it became clear that we needed a method to continue this type of imperative change that improves our service. The department’s workflow “is a dynamic process that requires [sic] constant re-examination” (Roitberg, 2000). In order for such a technology-rich department as Technical Services to function at an optimal level, it is crucial that the responsibility for knowing about new processes and technologies and introducing efficiencies is part of someone’s job duties. To avoid stagnation and the perpetuation of outdated practices, someone has to attend conferences, subscribe to the online lists, and read the latest articles.
Technology

Technology is the foundation of the workflow in Technical Services. Therefore, leveraging existing technology and knowing and taking advantage of the advances in the field are the key issues for a reorganization. The following are some of the time- and resource-saving changes that we introduced by leveraging available technologies (see Figures 1 and 2):

- Activated OpenURL capabilities in the portals of our two approval vendors, Blackwell and YBP. This enabled us to check for duplication between new selections in the vendor portal and our catalog from one-point entry.
- Added more data (such as list price, fund code, initials, etc.) to the vendor output records to eliminate editing each record in our ILS to add those elements.
- Changed the load tables in Millennium to automatically enrich records with local elements.
- Utilized batch processing to apply constant data, delete or activate holdings in OCLC.

Finally, straightforward things like providing needed equipment made a difference. Some of our staff do not have printers at their workstations, so many labels were hand-written or the labeling process was broken down in two steps between printer-haves and have-nots.

Collaboration with Vendors

Vendors are crucial part of work of TS. First, we buy books and receive invoices from them. Second, they enable many of the changes that can optimize TS functions. Creating partnerships with vendors facilitates the implementation of the latest advances in the electronic information exchange. In the case of CSUN, working closely with Blackwell, YBP, OCLC and EBSCO gave us a tremendously advantaged.

Below are some of the workflow changes that helped propel Oviatt Library Technical Services into the age of optimized processes and improved efficiency:

- Paced spending evenly throughout the year. This spread the workload of TS more evenly throughout the year by setting milestones of spending for bibliographers.
- Began ordering from fewer “firm” vendors. Scouring large numbers of vendors in search of the best discounts may not justify the time spent looking for those discounts.
- Discontinued outdated auditing trail practices.
- Simplified and streamlined procedures.
- Automated copy cataloging by implementing WorldCat Partners program.
- Discontinued unnecessary practices.
- Reassigned staff to leverage expertise in needed areas.
- Reduced claiming by implementing a time limit. If we do not receive an issue after the window for claiming expired, chances are we are not going to get it, so instead we order the issue from a loose-issue vendor. Time is saved and the user receives the issue much sooner.

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• Reduced filing by reviewed filing procedures. For example, we were processing and filing government documents shipping lists before discovering that they are available online.

• Simplified physical processing. Many of our practices date back to the times when they were affordable. For example, we added a tip-in sheet to every paperback in order to paste on a date-due slip, even if the half-title page could be used.

• Outsourced some materials processing.

These are other changes that were implemented during the workflow study and reorganization produced some tangible results:

• Manual transactions saved: 28,000
• Bibliographic searches saved: 14,000
• Time savings in Acquisitions: 11 weeks
• Time savings in Cataloging with PromptCat: 11 weeks
• Overall savings: 5 months of FTE time
• Eliminated backlog of newly purchased materials
• Merger of two positions into one (through attrition)
• Reduction in student employee budget in processing: 50%
• Reduction in turnaround time in receipt-to-shelf cycle: 75%

Conclusion

The value of library services is greater than the sum of its individual service areas. This is especially true for Technical Services. TS is not only an integral part of the library’s mission to serve but is key to the provision of many of the library’s high-demand, electronic resources. “Library technology provides the power to maximize the use of library resources... [enabling] patrons to search every virtual nook and cranny of the library and increase the likelihood of satisfying a user’s needs” (Heinrich, 2007, p. 218).

More than most departments in the library, TS feels the pressure of bridging the two realities, print and virtual one, without losing the speed or diminishing customer satisfaction. With shrinking resources and growing costs, how do we maintain the equilibrium?

At CSUN we made a successful attempt to look within for the answer.

References


Figure 1: The Approval Ordering Workflow before the implementation of recommendations from the TS reorganization.

Figure 2: The Approval Ordering Workflow after the implementation of recommendations from the TS reorganization.