Doing More With Less in Technical Services

In these days of vanishing dollars, technical services need to become nimble and responsive to changes in the fiscal realities facing libraries today, increase efficiencies, and streamline workflows in terms of selection of resources, acquisition processes, cataloging, and processing print material for the shelf. The deteriorating budget situation in the state of California certainly served as a major impetus for us to streamline processes! The Oviatt Library at California State University–Northridge has not had an increase to its materials budget since 2001, nor is it likely the materials budget will get better any time soon. As we write this article in 2009, we expect to face further cuts in next year’s budget. Although pricing increases for print books have remained low, our serials subscriptions have been rising sharply for the last decade.

Our first step was to identify where we could improve our efficiencies. During the ALA Annual conference in Chicago in 2005, Doris Helfer attended a preconference workshop on reorganizing technical services that was given by consultants who work with academic and research libraries to increase efficiencies in the “selection to shelf” workflow. Frequently, libraries use such consultants to provide an independent analysis of how best to redesign workflows to guarantee library directors a reorganization that helps the library improve productivity, ensures continuing quality control, cuts unnecessary costs, and has materials flowing through the department as quickly as possible. Although the consultants noted that any library or organization can do its own workflow analysis, they emphasized the necessity of having everyone who is involved in the reorganization committed to making sure that the changes improve the process. While we would like to believe this is always the case, experience would indicate this may not always be true.

Hiring consultants should bring an independent and outside analysis that is free from internal political or territorial
disputes. Also, based on their experiences at other libraries, consultants are usually aware of what process changes will yield the library the greatest benefits. The consultants teaching at the preconference, both of whom previously worked for vendors, stressed the importance of looking at the services library vendors offer and doing a cost-benefit analysis to compare costs of doing processes internally versus using outside vendors. This helps ensure the best use of the increasingly smaller budgets that libraries across the country have been experiencing, either through direct budget cuts or through the attrition a lack of increases to budgets cause while material costs continue to rise. And that takes us back to those scholarly journals and their publishers again.

Another issue that struck a chord — especially for a unionized academic library — was the strong impetus to use personnel turnover as an opportunity to make changes and reorganize a department. For the most part, our staff was fully capable of making and transitioning to a newer and better way of working, but, in a few cases, the issue of whether they wanted to was at least worth a question mark.

The purchase of a new ILS, Innovative Interface’s Millennium, in 2003 provided another opportunity to look at workflows and procedures developed based on our older GEAC library system. After returning from the conference and receiving permission from the dean to start a departmental reorganization, the staff very actively contributed and enthusiastically participated in changing and streamlining processes. We were fortunate to have hired a new cataloging coordinator, Helen Heinrich, in 2005, as she expressed an interest and desire to look at cataloging processes. With the approval of the dean, she was appointed to chair the task force that would evaluate technical services process and streamline all positions to take fuller advantage of automation and vendor offerings considered to be more cost-effective. It was also a great way for her to get to know all the staff and how the unit currently functioned.

The task force set several objectives for the reorganization process:

- Eliminating duplicate and unnecessary tasks
- Streamlining workflows
- Leveraging technology
- Exploring alternative vendor services

Applying the principle of “low-hanging fruit,” the task force started by tackling easy-to-change processes that yielded big results. For example, streamlining copy cataloging procedures, which cover the biggest share of our books, was easy and produced immediate results by increasing productivity by 50%. Much of the time savings came from discontinuing superfluous verifications between the catalog record and the item in hand.

Implementing a robust ILS offers a lot of opportunity for optimizing processes in the information supply chain. But it’s only a potential. Switching from a familiar legacy system to the new software in 2003 created a lengthy learning curve and a lack of group expertise at utilizing the system to the maximum. The daily grind, in combination with shrinking resources, prevented the staff from moving beyond the initial setup and fine-tuning of the system. In addition, as is the case with many libraries proud to have high retention rates, long-time staff possessed uneven technological acumen. Working closely with our systems administrator, we reviewed the ILS-related tasks and identified processes that could be automated by adjusting the loading tables, deploying dormant system functionalities, and improving data mapping by vendors.

Working with vendors as a team in optimizing internal library processes proved a highly effective and rewarding experience. We viewed these vendors as partners in our reorganization, and with good reason. First, vendors have a stake in a library’s success because success would translate into more purchasing power, loyalty, and special relationships. Second, vendors work with hundreds of libraries and, in essence, become aggregators of ILS-related technical knowledge and an invaluable source of advice. Many times they can offer detailed procedures for working with different ILSs and, ironically, may know the library’s system better than the library’s staff, thus
eliminating instances of reinventing the wheel. Third, vendors can provide contacts with other libraries with similar challenges. Fourth, they can serve as intermediaries between the library and other service providers.

The case in point was our experience in setting up PromptCat (now WorldCat Partners) and shelf-ready services with Blackwell and YBP. Both vendors displayed professionalism, outstanding customer service, and acted as a third-party service provider between us and OCLC. Setting up automated copy cataloging and outsourcing materials processing was undoubtedly a lot of work, but these services produced the qualitative change that transformed the work of acquisitions, cataloging, and materials processing.

Low staff turnover is generally viewed as a positive factor in any organization. However, this also can lead to processes and procedures becoming a sort of time capsule. State institutions such as ours are reined in by state laws. As regulations change, the communications that convey changes do not always trickle down to the departmental level. As the task force discovered when examining technical services procedures, we were wasting a lot of resources by complying with outdated practices that were no longer mandated. Time-consuming paperwork, redundant forms, and signature gathering that dated back to pre-electronic times were devouring our time and money. The fear of auditing often makes paper trail procedures a sacred cow, but overcoming that fear certainly paid big dividends for us.

Collection Issues

Given that our budget for books and subscriptions had not increased since 2001 while subscription costs for journals had risen sharply over that same time period, the funds to purchase books had decreased significantly. With fewer dollars for buying books, it became imperative to move from a model of purchasing titles “just in case” to one of purchasing them “just in time.” The bibliographers wanted to target the needs of the faculty and students as reflected by increased circulation statistics. Collection development has begun a series of projects to use our dwindling book funds more effectively:

2. Review the in-house usage statistics of print journals to evaluate for possible cancellation (fewer journal titles means fewer dollars taken from the book collection).
3. Instigate “patron-driven” plans to add book titles to the collection.
4. Purchase ebooks for titles in high demand.
5. Review in-house usage statistics for books that can circulate but do not (future project).

From our review of the circulation statistics for books, we learned that on average 70% of our newly purchased titles circulated within 4 years of purchase. It was important to give a wide window of time for a book to circulate since not all courses were taught each semester or even annually. The snapshot provided titles for each discipline arranged by call number and subarranged by the number of circulations per volume or copy. This allowed bibliographers to identify areas no longer supporting our curriculum and to target hot areas of the curriculum that may need to grow. Due to retirements, we have a relatively new faculty that has generated changes in the curriculum. The library now receives the new and modified curriculum and program proposals at the beginning of the process so we can start building the collection before new courses start.

We also reviewed our print-only journal subscriptions that now make up a very small percentage of our serial holdings. Our journals do not circulate and are used in-house only. We have very helpful patrons who continued to re-shelve journals despite the signs we posted that we were conducting a study. Unfortunately, the only usage statistics we felt were accurate were those reflecting requests for volumes from storage. In consultation with the faculty, we were able to drop a few subscriptions. However, we are now moving to online-only when possible. Reviewing our statistics for our online subscriptions for single titles provides us with a more accurate picture of the value of a title and its relevancy for the curriculum.

Our Northridge campus had discussions with our sister library at CSU–Fresno about its project to purchase ebooks through Coutt’s MyiLibrary. In this scenario, the library deposits funds with the vendor and creates a profile. Based on the profile, MARC records are sent to the library to add to the catalog. Once the full text of a title is requested a second time, the book is considered purchased. Fortunately, the student body liked this approach, and the library received funds from student quality fees to support a “patron-driven” collection development experiment. The library has deposited the $25,000 with MyiLibrary (Coutts). We decided to include textbooks in the profile, which will help support financially strapped students who increasingly come to the library facing serious difficulty paying for constantly increasing costs and edition changes in textbooks. We hope this may also support the
mission of the Center on Disabilities to provide accessible etexts to students in a timely manner. The results of this experiment will provide evidence of the need for ebooks in general as well as specific collection gaps.

We are also considering a second “patron-driven” model to purchase select titles requested through ILL. In this model, the library would purchase the title requested by a patron rather than borrowing it. The interlibrary loan staff and collection development are developing parameters to determine whether to borrow or to purchase a title; the parameters include the price, publication date, and the publisher. We are still developing the workflow for this model but hope to implement it over the summer.

It has been difficult to measure the value of our print reference material. Students expect reference resources to be available online. If we want students using library reference materials instead of relying on Wikipedia, we must make them available online 24/7. We have identified other categories of books that work well online — computer handbooks being an obvious choice. But we are now considering titles in high demand by the students as candidates for purchasing the electronic versions. Despite having multiple copies and editions, some titles consistently have high holds, and some titles also have a history of disappearing from the shelves. Ebooks would eliminate the pressure to continually add more print copies as well as constantly having to replace missing or damaged titles.

To safeguard our book funds, we need to fine-tune our journal collection when possible. The transition from print to electronic has taken less than a decade. From the patron perspective, there is a greater expectation for e-resources as the increase in class sizes leads to more hybrid or totally online courses. Only a small fraction of the journal titles in our collection are single, print-only subscriptions. Most of our ejournals come to us as part of publisher packages or third-party aggregators either through local contracts or, more likely, through contracts handled by CSU’s Systemwide Electronic Information Resources (SEIR), which coordinates and manages the CSU systemwide procurement and contracting of electronic information resources.

The big packages have provided far more titles for less cost than the previous single-title subscription model. However, these packages also lock the library into fewer options to shape or mold our collection in an environment of vanishing funds. Although the campus has been supportive and has kept current funding intact, inflation seriously eroded the library’s ability to support our current subscriptions, much less add new ones. The subscription model has now migrated to the monograph environment, whether in print, audio, or video. When it comes to wrestling with the problems of publisher “big deals,” it is time to rethink the purchase history as the basis of journal package subscriptions so we can shape the collection to the research and curriculum needs of today — not yesterday.

Conclusion

While the process of examining all of a library’s technical services processes and procedures can be long and often cumbersome, it can yield some incredible benefits for your staff, students, faculty, and university. We have automated many boring and repetitive processes, taken much fuller advantage of automation that vendors now offer with their newer automated systems and services. The overall effect reduced the time from selection to shelf by 75% and realized about $200,000 annually in salary savings. And all the task force members who contributed to the process therefore felt greater ownership and buy-in to the process than if it had been imposed on them by a consultant’s recommendation or top down from the dean or department chair.
