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I, User — Just Say No: Eliminating Low-Value Tasks

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On many days it seems not possible for libraries to absorb more: more new technology; more new products; more new services; more new tasks; budget cuts; staff reductions. Automation, outsourcing, and workflow redesign aimed at increasing efficiency and lowering costs may have already tightened your processes to the breaking point. You may not have capacity to absorb another thing. It might be time to say no.

But as librarians, we don't want to say no. We can't really afford to say no. And it's foolish to say no to the new stuff. It's the new stuff that administrators expect and patrons demand. It's the new stuff that will allow the library to reinvent itself for a vigorous future. In very many libraries, the time has come to say no to some of the old stuff, which is often the hardest thing to do.

In fact, we cling to the old; the familiar. We are drawn to tasks we know how to do well. We justify activity and expense with classic images of pristine catalogs and collections, even as they lose relevance. We value old-fashioned library aesthetics to which patrons are oblivious. We tend toward print materials over digital content because we can see when it backlogs, and we understand how it works.


In order to move far and well into the future, it is important to re-evaluate library services and workflow priorities often. We must think clearly about the value or the service provided, and be bold about removing steps and tasks in favor of newer, more important ones. Those that will be eliminated are not inherently bad. They may once have been critical and even now, may offer some diminished value. But service pressures require that we eliminate low-value and non-critical tasks regardless of their original intent because there are so many newer and more vital tasks to be accomplished.

The following is intended to stimulate thinking about "low-value" tasks that may still be performed in your library. Each one that remains may provide a real opportunity to do something better. Some are big. Some are small.

- Stop using overly complex fund structures (and small itemized endowments)
- Stop multiple, item specific, mid-stream searches
- Stop making system print outs (especially for single items)
- Stop inserting routing slips and colored flags
- Stop using free text fields
- Stop signing purchase orders
- Stop applying book plates

- Stop manual transcription of information from the system
- Stop manual tallies
- Stop writing narrative monthly reports
- Stop item by item book selection
- Stop putting new books out for review
- Stop "checking all" as a standard workflow routine
- Stop keeping paper files that replicate information stored in the system
- Stop storing publisher catalogs
- Stop photocopying
- Stop periodical check-in, at least for some categories of material
- Stop binding journals
- Stop upgrading third-party catalog records
- Stop trying to eliminate duplicate call numbers
- Stop accepting gifts
- Stop maintaining physical shelf-lists
- Stop building files of items not held
- Stop cataloging unsolicited serials

Many of these tasks are obviously inefficient and may only exist as a result of inattention. Some exist because of organizational momentum; some are legacy tasks from a previous era; some are closely associated with the library culture; and some still exist because certain staff members are ill-equipped for change. Others on the list may seem inconsequential, not worthy of reconsideration, requiring just a couple of seconds per item. Still others may seem absolutely primary to your organization, and/or outside the bounds of immediate control. In the end, none of these reasons fully justifies continuance of low-value tasks. We must challenge all these assumptions to move forward.

More generally, we should seek to recognize and question outdated remnants of pre-automation routines, manual transcription, item by item decisions or tasks, redundant systems, repetition, procedures that introduce error, and seeking the perfect in favor of the good. In all these ways we will better serve the patron when we just say no. 



Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Acquisitions In an ISBN-13 World: Was Y2K Just a Dry Run?

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Let's face it. You always suspected that all the hoopla over Y2K was a little over the top. And when the lights stayed on and your bank account remained in the black (or the red, as the case may be) you were even more sure of it.

The truth can finally be told: Y2K was really just a dry run for Y2007K.

The entire book industry—from publisher to patron—needs to get ready for ISBN-13. On

January 1, 2007, the ISBN will grow to 13 digits. This may appear to be a rather simple thing at first blush, but its ramifications are very real and far-reaching.

As a quick refresher, the ISBN is comprised of a group identifier, a publisher's prefix, an item number—and most importantly for this article—a check digit. The check digit is calculated through an arithmetic formula and is used

by computer systems to validate the preceding 9-digit "core." With ISBN-13, all current 10-digit ISBNs will be getting a prefix of '978.' This will cause the check digit to be recalculated so the last digit of the ISBN will change also. Some good news is that the check digit will be calculated using a different arithmetic formula, and the 'X' found in the last position

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