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Biz of Acq — The Evolving Work and Workflow in the 21st-Century Technical Services Department

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Introduction

The environment of 21st-century technical services units can be summed up in one phrase — ever changing. Modifications in our profession are being brought about by the increasing availability of electronic resources in various and evolving formats; reduced budgets; a retiring workforce; and rapid advancements in virtual storage, access and delivery technology. As managers in a technical services department for a large public university in Michigan, it's possible to see how these opportunities and challenges complement each other, requiring reimagining and reorganizing the work we do in order to remain efficient and relevant.

This article examines the changes taking place in the cataloging and processing areas of the Technical Services Department of University Libraries at **Western Michigan University** over the past three years. We have experienced decreasing staff and budget cuts as we faced the challenges of acquiring increasing numbers of electronic resources and fewer print resources. Included are descriptions of the move from processing in-house to shelf-ready, transferring our approval profiles to DDA, and creating a new position that combines automated cataloging and processing.

Background

The Technical Services Department of University Libraries is currently comprised of one department head; three unit heads, one each of cataloging and metadata, serials and electronic resources, and monographic acquisitions; and fifteen para-professional staff. In five years this department has gone from 25 FTE down to 19 FTE, a loss of nearly 25% in personnel hours. This reduction in work force is due to retirements and people moving into other jobs. This trend began in late 2009 when a print materials cataloger moved to another department, creating an opportunity for the coordinator of fast cataloging to move into a better position, leaving his previous position open. This position was quickly swept by administration. Within the 2010 calendar year, three retirements came



from the cataloging and acquisitions units of the department. One was the coordinator of the bindery located in monographic acquisitions, another in cataloging, and the third was the coordinator of the processing area then under the unit head of cataloging and metadata.

Funds are tight in Michigan, especially since the recession of 2008; our institution has been functioning with a reduced operations budget, therefore not all vacated positions are being filled. Budget reductions also meant that we no longer had the numbers of student assistants to help us with the rote and repetitive steps of fast cataloging and processing. This situation called for the technical services department head and unit heads to take a long, hard look at the holes that were left and collaborate with co-workers to fill in the gaps so that materials continue to get into the hands of our users as quickly as possible. Doing this demands reviewing available resources, revising workflows, and repositioning of staff.

It is comforting to know that we are not the only academic library to be affected by staff attrition and lowered operating budgets. Some libraries have had to face condensing their departments due to layoffs; fortunately we haven't been in this position. Many libraries have been reassigning staff tasks as they begin restructuring their organizational structure to address the new realities of 21st-century librarianship.¹

Reviewing Resources

It took a few months for the realization of having two coordinator positions vacant at the same time to sink in. It required a period of adjustment, and we were soon informed that one of the positions would be swept. This phase provided us the opportunity to examine what exactly was needed by the department overall. With many print journal subscriptions being moved to electronic versions, work in the bindery was slowing down as the numbers of items sent out for binding lessened. The unit heads decided that the bindery coordinator position was no longer necessary.

Remaining work in the bindery could be completed by the very capable bindery assistant and two students. By not replacing this position that had been part of monographic acquisitions, the unit head had fewer people to supervise. When reviewing the needs of the processing area which had historically fallen under the direction of the unit head of cataloging and metadata, it became apparent that the workload of the unit heads was somewhat unbalanced. The time was right for adjusting the workload, and processing was moved administratively under the monographic acquisitions area.

The majority of our repetitive work within the department prior to 2010 had been handled by a corps of student workers that have largely been dispossessed by many of these chronicled changes, leaving those few remaining student workers with a higher set of expectations. Consequently we have created the category of and assigned an important role to what we have come to know as "super students" that are counted upon to perform tasks formerly done by para-professional staff and often train new student workers. One of these super students was working in cataloging with quality control for **OCLC's PromptCat**. She became a super student in late 2009 when her supervisor moved into the previously mentioned cataloging position, vacating a permanent position that coordinated fast cataloging. After this student graduated from **Western Michigan University**, she began an online program to earn an MLS and continued working for us as a temporary part-time employee. She was familiar with the workflow, MARC, and was able to train other students, if needed. She proved to be an energetic, competent, and intelligent co-worker. By reviewing the role played by this super student in fast cataloging, it was decided that she could manage all PromptCat records and books.

This was not the only super student in the department. In late 2010 another student in processing was promoted to a super student when the coordinator of this area retired. He was a student who had worked in the library for his four years of college and knew the bulk of the processing jobs. As a super student he oversaw other students of varying experiences, one of which he trained to succeed him so that the area would still be running smoothly when he left the library. With the use of super

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students we were able to keep the processing area running smoothly for two years.

At the same time as our human resources were being reduced, we were improving our methods for bringing in records in batch modes. We were already using EDI for our brief order records and invoicing. PromptCat had been set up in 2006, a few years before the loss of staff started to occur.² In a sense the department was already outsourcing the copy cataloging by using PromptCat. Using this approach worked well for the department. After looking at what else could be outsourced it was decided to use the services offered by our book jobbers **Emery-Pratt** and **YBP Library Services**, and we made the move to shelf-ready books during the summer of 2012. Now that approval, form, and firm orders monographs were coming in with spine labels, bar codes, date due slips, and “Property of **WMU**” stamps already in place, it was possible to examine whether or not the need for a fully staffed processing area still existed. The costs for shelf-ready come out of our acquisitions budget, which is relatively stable as compared to the human resources budget. In the longrun this practice of receiving the majority of our materials shelf-ready proved to be more sustainable than maintaining a full-time staff person in processing to supervise several students in the current economic climate.

The opportunity to further embrace technology became available to us with **YBP Library Services** offering a demand-driven acquisitions (DDA) service for eBooks from **ebrary** that coincided with the above mentioned move to shelf-ready for PromptCat books. By moving the approval profiles to **ebrary** we could reduce the number of print volumes coming into our area, thus reducing the load for materials processing. We began with a pilot project in 2011 directed to particular and appropriate funds (in the physical sciences and business initially) and gradually branched outward. Currently all funds are participating, selectors traditionally known for selecting still do, but many others rely heavily upon the DDA to meet perceived needs. Some funds had already been set up as “e-preferred” dating back to setting up the **YBP** approval profile. The DDA profile was set up to mirror the **YBP** print approval profile which helped assuage any lingering selector apprehensions. **ebrary** was initially selected as the vendor. As an institution we are open to doing business with **EBL** and now are waiting for the result of the recent merger of the two companies. The vast majority (over 80%) of the DDA activity has been seen in the form of short-term loans rather than actual purchases.³ Consequently, we have seen a drop off in expenditures and item counts for print monographs. We plan on continuing with DDA going forward, fully expecting shifting pricing models and increased costs. DDA is now ingrained in the DNA of our operation when it

comes to selection and collection development.

Also taking place on the human resources end of the equation, library administration reduced the number of student worker hours that were allotted to us, leaving us very short-handed in Processing. The shift to DDA has also reduced the need for physical processing of monographs, thus lightening the personnel situation we were experiencing in this area.

The Evolving Workflow

As an institution, we came to implement many automated processes including PromptCat rather late compared to other libraries of our size. Fast cataloging was a large elaborate operation employing multiple student searchers and student cataloging assistants performing pre-order searching, downloading bibliographic records, and fast cataloging with a full-time supervisor running the process. At that time, monographic acquisitions were riding high with annual counts of items received exceeding 20,000 titles. Typically, the pre-ordering process took up to a week or more before a purchase order could be created and sent off to the vendor. Brief order records supplied by vendors were subsequently employed to allow for system-created purchase orders and quicker order submission.

Today the great volume of our work in monographic acquisitions is done principally with the two previously mentioned vendors: 1) **YBP Library Services (Blackwell North**

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America before them) for approval and form books, and 2) **Emery-Pratt** for firm orders. All of the cataloging records for these orders are automatically brought in through PromptCat. We still do business and cataloging in the manual method with the other less trafficked vendors, such as: **Amazon**, **Harrassowitz**, **Latin American Bookstore**, and **Theodore Front** along with a number of out-of-print and antiquarian book dealers.

The current setup using shelf-ready has dictated a far less predictable delivery schedule, and consequently a batch mentality has taken root here in our operation and most likely with the vendors as well. In 2006, when we set up PromptCat, our original target goal was to see 80% of the items coming in quickly and sailing through the receiving and cataloging process then out to the shelf. Now, two years after the move to shelf-ready, the shake-out period, and after many subsequent shipments, we are finally seeing that a rate of 75-80% with a considerably reduced volume of books. Problems are rare, now that procedures have been worked through and refined. Once in a while, a few shelf-ready items require labeling or relabeling (unassigned call numbers and publication year issues).

Handling PromptCat is always our top priority when these books are available to work on and this directive shapes the workflow. The remaining time left goes to the non-PromptCat items that require the full receiving, cataloging, and processing cycle. The workload priorities are set daily, establishing a choppy or ad-hoc workday that has become far less predictable in nature than the earlier days with **Blackwell North America** (our previous approval vendor) when we could count on large shipments of books every Monday morning that routinely occupied a lot of the work week for a good portion of the technical services staff.

It used to take five days to run the full cycle process of receiving, cataloging, and processing of the books prior to 2012. Today, the length of time is reduced to two to three days, with each stage, receiving, cataloging, and processing, typically taking three to four hours. The volume of books now ordered and received is significantly reduced and the nature of the work in cataloging and processing is largely tasked to checking, inspecting, and confirming the items in hand.

Communication with and between vendors is critical to ensure that the correct records arrive with PromptCat. Interaction within the units of Technical Services is equally as important. Breakdowns in that line of communication have occurred between the vendors, **OCLC**, and the University Libraries' Systems Department,⁴ resulting in constant monitoring.

If records are not made available from the vendor or are not loaded at our end the workflow breaks down. Regular reports from **OCLC** forecast the arrival date and size of upcoming shipments. Staff working in acquisitions, cataloging, and processing regularly communicate on a variety of topics including the need to change **OCLC** symbols and the overall workflow. Occasionally an **OCLC** record is missed in the automated PromptCat load and has to be brought into the system manually. This is also the case for invoices not listed on a report that was otherwise complete; missing records for each invoice are brought in by hand. When these events have taken place **YBP** was notified after records were brought in to avoid overlaying those titles with a different record.

This new workflow is currently working very well for our acquisitions, cataloging, and processing end of the operation. However, we realize that there will be another set of changes as we move into a new ILS system in the summer of 2015. We have a good understanding of what this system will do for us, but at the same time it is necessary to acknowledge that the procedures and workflows may change again.

Retasking Personnel

Further cutbacks to student hours in 2013 have reduced staffing in the following areas to truly minimal levels: Acquisitions (5 to 0), Cataloging (5 to 1), and Processing (6 to 1.5). This dependence on fewer, critically-placed student workers occasionally does lead to interruptions in the operation resulting from absences due to illness and scheduled time off for the remaining staff and student workers.

Shelf-ready processing now handles the majority of our trade from our principal jobbers, **YBP** and **Emery-Pratt**, who apply date due slips, property stamps, call number labels, and security slips. The scale of the operation is reduced, but many items such as foreign language, Internet purchases, music scores, videos, audio CDs, out-of-print, archival, and antiquarian material still require full processing. These materials, about 20% of our total monographic spending, receive focused attention from the catalogers and processing areas. With reduced staffing much is expected of those that remain with specialized knowledge and skill. Scheduling can be an issue with gaps of coverage on any given business day. All of the processing had been formerly handled in-house. Thousands of items a year regularly came through requiring a regimented and systematic approach running week in and week out. The shift to shelf-ready was prompted by the retirement of a full-time supervisor in physical processing, who worked on anything that needed to be done at any given point in the processing stream to keep the enterprise running smoothly. This supervisor oversaw six student assistants, each scheduled approximately 15 hours weekly. The position has now

been redrawn combining the responsibilities of PromptCat supervision along with physical processing and was renamed Coordinator of Automated Cataloging and Materials Processing. Since spring 2013 it has been occupied by the former fast cataloging super student who was open to learning the processing operation (and did so quickly and enthusiastically). The number of student assistants has been reduced to two who are scheduled 12 to 15 hours a week. After these implementations, **WMU's** monographic acquisitions and material processing that previously required 130 personnel hours per week is now handled by one FTE and two part-time students totaling 70 personnel hours.

Conclusion

We have found that despite the technological changes and subsequent adaptations much of the work remains the same, but on a significantly reduced scale. There is good news in all this: the automated cataloging we do for our approval and slip books has enabled us to direct the human resources we have to cataloging our hidden collections and rare materials. An advantage of shifting approvals to DDA is not only that there are fewer books coming through processing and reduced monographic costs, there is also more space on the shelves where print collections are kept as well. Gaining real estate for the library is a bonus. The money we save by using DDA for approval titles helps offset the cost of shelf-ready. We are predicting that the trend toward DDA and outsourcing of services, like the purchasing of catalog records and shelf-ready processing the majority of our collection, will continue for the next few years. 🐾

Endnotes

1. **Roberta Winjum** and **Annie Wu**. "Moving Into the Future: Technical Services in Transformation. A report of the Technical Services Managers in Academic Libraries Interest Group Meeting, **American Library Association Annual Conference**, Washington, DC, June 2010. *Technical Services Quarterly*, 28: 3, P. 353
2. University Libraries was late in adopting PromptCat due to the previous cataloging unit head's preference for fast cataloging over an automated method.
3. A short term loan is prompted by a patron using an eBook for up to ten minutes, and the book remains available for twenty-four hours to a week with the library being charged a small percentage of the book's price. Once the book has been opened three times a purchase at full price is triggered.
4. University Libraries Systems Department automatically retrieves PromptCat files and loads them into our integrated library system.