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Rhonda Glazier
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, rglazier@uccs.edu

Sommer Browning
University of Colorado, Denver, sommer.browning@ucdenver.edu

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ATG Special Report — Acquisition to Cataloging: Examining the Handoff in Electronic Resources Workflow

by **Rhonda Glazier** (Director of Collections Management, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs) <rglazier@uccs.edu>

and **Sommer Browning** (Head of Resource Management, University of Colorado, Denver) <sommer.browning@ucdenver.edu>

Abstract

Libraries are well aware of the complexities of electronic resources processing workflows and though most have adapted to them by now, there are elements of the handoff from acquisitions to cataloging that could be streamlined. Many times cataloging needs to go back to acquisitions for answers to questions such as title lists, vendor contacts, or license restrictions. Finally, when the eResource is cataloged, aspects of troubleshooting and maintaining access arise and the department responsible for handling these problems can rest on either, both or an entirely different department. This paper examines situations in which the eResources workflow responsibility crosses departments making the handoff murky and confusing, and offers strategies to help streamline this handoff to increase efficiency.

Introduction & State the Problem

eResources workflows are complex things: acquisitions and cataloging/discovery staff often encounter inaccurate title lists or no title lists at all; front files of to-be-published eResources; unavailable or poor quality MARC records; pre-published chapters; varying rules that can occur on the same platform, such as checkout periods and number of simultaneous users; and complicated licensing problems. In addition, the handoff from acquisitions to cataloging is not always clear or even necessary. Consider eResources that are purchased but not published yet — who tracks these titles and makes sure that staff in cataloging know when the title is ready to be cataloged and access is available? More often than not, cataloging must go back to acquisitions for answers concerning title lists, vendor contacts, or license restrictions. Answers to issues such as: was the bill paid; did the platform change; was a license renegotiated; did IPs change, do not clearly fall within cataloging/discovery or acquisition's responsibility. As soon as a library establishes a workflow, for instance that all IP changes should be handled by acquisitions, a new situation arises that needs to be handled by a different department. More communication and collaboration is necessary between entities that may have never communicated in the past, such as catalogers and vendors. But even more perplexing is that there may be no end point. The work of acquisitions and cataloging is never complete, but is often revisited until that resource is out of the catalog.

This paper examines the eResources workflow handoff in the Acquisitions Department of the **University of Colorado, Colorado Springs** and the Resource Management unit of Auraria Library, **University of Colorado Denver**. It seeks to understand when and why the handoff happens and provide strategies to eliminate problematic handoffs to increase workflow efficiency and help prevent resources from slipping through the cracks.

Literature Review

The management of acquisitions and discovery workflows for electronic resources is a popular topic in the library literature and the complexity of electronic resources workflows is never argued. In an article about implementing an eResources acquisition and cataloging workflow for the first time, the author highlights the complexity of processing eResources when asking the following questions, "Who will be the first handle of the eResource records? Acquisitions at the point of purchase? Cataloging? Systems in tandem with the eResource sells and the ILS vendor? What steps should be outsourced? What steps are better performed in-house due to customized data considerations?" (Mays 59) These questions particularly pertain to the cross departmental nature of processing eResources, and even more specifically, to the murkiness of the handoff. The article ends with questions about which department performs which function merely suggesting that these types of questions will need to be addressed to create an efficient workflow. However, **Mays** gives us insight into how to address these issues when she states the importance of communication in this passage near the end of the article, "Ongoing formal and informal conversations among Acquisitions, Cataloging, Systems, and other interested parties including external constituencies will propel the library into a bright future where managing electronic resources will feel as natural as print-only once did." (Mays 59) Communication is certainly one important piece in streamlining the handoff.

In many of the articles on how both cataloging and acquisitions workflows have changed to better reflect the lifecycle of the electronic resource, discussion of the handoff between the purchasing and cataloging units seems out of scope. In *Management of E-Resources Cataloging Workflows at the University of Maryland*, the literature review mentions articles and case studies highlighting tools that assist the cataloging unit in batch loading MARC records for electronic resources. The tools discussed such as ERCM and ERM systems and other homegrown tools, focus on assisting cataloging in organizing data pertaining to MARC record loads such as cataloging procedures, but the paper's focus is not the organization of data that the handoff communicates, such as purchasing data, licensing data, or simultaneous users.

Elsa Andersons's *Electronic Resource Management Systems: A Workflow Approach* is an incredible resource when examining and analyzing an electronic resources workflow. She focuses on ERMS and their ability to manage the data of the eResources workflow, the data created in the purchasing, cataloging, access, and maintenance of electronic resources. She does this with a bird's eye view of the process that can be applied to many technical services departments. She writes, "When selecting an ERMS, it is important to keep the results of the workflow analysis in mind. Whatever software is selected either should fit into the existing workflow, to make it easier, or should solve a problem in workflow management, such as communication and centralization of information." (25) Her work is an excellent resource for libraries who are looking to streamline their processes and choose ERMS that work for them. She also specifically mentions some of the issues surrounding the handoff: "The common thread in all of these articles is the suggestion of a few basic steps to a workflow analysis: clarity about the process, clear communication with all library staff, an iterative workflow conversation, and a list of all possible steps within the workflow to make sure that all are accounted for and transitions are clear. Ideally, workflow analysis will note problematic situations, such as transition of responsibility for an item between people or departments. Other trouble spots are situations where multiple tasks need to be completed simultaneously, such as license negotiation and running a faculty trial for feedback, or points where the process or documentation breaks down. Many of the problems that workflow analysis can identify are communication issues." (24) However, the focus of her work is not to analyze the nuances and everyday obstacles one finds in the handoff. This paper seeks to zero in on those obstacles, unpacking and examining them. Readers may recognize similar handoff issues in their library, begin to understand the importance of these transitions, identify what exactly is being transferred in the transition, and learn tactics on how to recognize and ameliorate issues in order to streamline their libraries' workflow.

Looking at the Handoff

When processing eResources, acquisitions interacts with cataloging/discovery and discovery interacts with acquisitions. There is a "handoff" of materials. How complicated or easy that handoff is depends on how the materials are purchased. The handoff for print materials was very straightforward. eResources have a more complicated process. Examining the way eResources are purchased will help identify the type of handoff needed.

There are three main types of electronic resources purchasing that will be examined in this paper: single title purchases, consortia

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purchases, and individual library package purchases. These purchase options have many similarities in the acquisitions process, but each method has unique challenges. For example, the single title eResource purchase is very similar to purchasing a print book on the surface. But unlike print books, there are pieces of information that have to be communicated to cataloging to make the transition from acquisitions to cataloging seamless. Many eResources have conditions under which they can be "borrowed" or have a limited number of simultaneous users. This information should be captured in the cataloging record and made available to patrons trying to access a title. Since these decisions are made at the time of purchase, how will this information be forwarded to cataloging?

When looking at consortia purchases, the "handoff" becomes more complicated for two reasons. First, in most cases consortia purchases are for a package of titles. Secondly, in many cases the libraries are not purchasing perpetual access, but are leasing the titles. For many of these purchases, but unfortunately not all, the publisher/vendor will send a title list to the library. This list may or may not be accurate. Depending on the reliability of the publisher/vendor a library may choose to check the list. How this is done, and by whom, is the first question that needs to be answered before a "handoff" between acquisitions and cataloging can occur. Along with this initial list, acquisitions will need to forward any information on the terms of use in the license as well as any additional information that will help cataloging create access to the eResource titles. To further complicate the workflow, title changes, access issues and licensing terms need to be connected to that package of titles to help with access issues as they occur. Since access issues happen once the title is in the catalog, many libraries have a separate department to handle electronic resources. This may bring a third group into the "handoff" with electronic resources staff handling the review of the license, access issues, and the like. In this case it is important that any workflow that is developed takes into account this additional department. And if acquisitions is not handling the licensing terms, the electronic resources department may need to negotiate terms for the license before purchase, putting that department at the beginning and end of the process and causing confusion about who should initiate a purchase. If the workflow starts with electronic resources, does that include individual title purchases or packages or both? If only packages, how is the licensing information for single titles being handled? And to further confuse matters, when looking at consortia purchases, the library may be asked to do this for all libraries involved in the purchase, not just their library. This will complicate the handoff because the information on the package must now be shared with the other libraries in the consortia that may have completely different workflows. It will also make it more complicated for those outside of the process to understand who is responsible for what part of the process. Defining who will be responsible for the ongoing contact with the vendor, handle any licensing, access or title list issues will help clarify internal workflow and answer questions such as: Can each individual library solve their own issues? Must the library who initiated the purchase do it instead?

For packages purchased by an individual library, the same issues that are integral to consortia purchases are now handled by staff at each library. One complicating factor may be assigning responsibility for the steps of the process and determining whether the same staff involved in consortia purchases will be involved in the same way for individual purchases. If the roles differ, how will staff in your library know who to go to for answers to similar problems? How will the library communicate these differing roles?

Categories of Handoffs

After analyzing the interactions outlined above, there are five major categories and purposes of handoffs: to transfer information; to transfer work; for traditional reasons; for internal workflow problems; vendor created issues. They are examined below.

One purpose of the handoff is to transfer information concerning a purchase. This information must be transferred between acquisitions and cataloging in order for the purchase to be processed efficiently and accurately. This information can be invoice payment information, the title list outlining exactly which resources can be accessed because of the purchase, and information in the license such as how many simultaneous users are allowed to use the eResource. This information assists catalogers in correctly describing and providing access to the resource. Payment information is especially important in that it starts the entire discovery process and indicates the starting point for access. It is important to remember that this transfer of information often occurs bi-directionally from acquisitions to cataloging, but also from cataloging to acquisitions. There are many times when acquisitions hands off as much information to cataloging as possible, kicking off the discovery process, but cataloging runs into an obstacle, such as the names on the title list do not match the names of the resources in the MARC files or the knowledge base in which cataloging is maintaining access. Another common situation is a problem with access when the titles have not been activated on the vendor platform. In cases like these, it is helpful if the mechanism for informational transfer is clear and easy to use so that staff in both acquisitions and cataloging know what to do to prevent duplicative work. If the vendor must be contacted to clarify the contents of the purchase even further, which staff members and department are best equipped to handle this?

A second reason for the handoff is the skill level of the work. After the procurement process is finished, the resource is handed off to a staff member who has discovery expertise such as specialized cataloging knowledge to verify the quality of the MARC records or to adjust the ILS loaders in order to ensure batchloaded MARC records come in with the correct metadata. This kind of transfer is perhaps the most understandable and traditional reason for a handoff. However, it can get complicated when procurement processes simultaneously result in cataloging, for example when importing invoices also imports bibliographic records. At this point, it is important to consider training acquisitions staff in cataloging procedures so that perhaps a handoff can be avoided entirely.

The third reason a handoff might occur is because the library has "always done it like this." For the purposes of this paper, this is called the traditional handoff. In this handoff, neither skill level of work or information is transferred, the handoff occurs because of narrow job roles or outmoded definitions of work. For example, if packages are typically tracked in a knowledgebase resulting in MARC records automatically delivered to the catalog this tracking might end up in cataloging's purview only because of the fact that MARC records are involved. This kind of transfer of work relies on traditional definitions of cataloging, rather than the more nuanced ideas of discovery and in many cases do not reflect the reality of today's eResources; where they are not cataloged but merely harvested for indexing purposes. This handoff could be eliminated with a wider knowledge of how eResources work in the library system or a new look at what cataloging and acquisitions work means.

Handoffs can also be the result of internal workflow problems. For example, the ILS loader is not set up correctly so that eResources that are simultaneously paid for and cataloged do not come in correctly and need cataloging updates. Another reason for a workflow handoff is that the informational handoff went wrong. Perhaps the workflow does not define where title list information should go and it ends up in various places making it difficult for the discovery staff to find. The information was passed on to discovery, it just was not stored in the location discovery expected it to be stored. These kinds of handoffs can be avoided through workflow analysis.

Finally, there are handoffs that occur because of vendor issues that are outside the library's control. For instance, issues of discovery that hinder access to the resource or questions about access restrictions that are discovered after the resources have been purchased.

Workflows

With the variety of methods for purchasing eResources, and the ongoing communication that needs to occur because of the complexity of these orders, the work dynamic between acquisitions and cataloging is changing. Communication has become more complex and multi-faceted. In addition, work responsibilities between the two departments are beginning to blur and so work duties are being redefined. These changes can cause confusion and tension between staff in separate departments. Who is responsible for eResources after purchase? The answer to this question cannot be found in the traditional responsibilities and workflows in technical services.

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The never-ending cycle of eResources is an additional workflow. As alluded to earlier, traditionally a book is purchased, received, and sent to cataloging. Once the title has been received and cataloged technical services has traditionally been able to move on to the next title with little thought about the one that just went out the door. Unfortunately, eResources has changed that dynamic in a very significant way. Because of intermittent access issues, leasing instead of perpetual access to a title and book packages being fluid, technical services can no longer forget about a title. Continual verification is not possible, but some method of assuring that the library has access to what it should is essential.

Because of these added responsibilities it is important to analyze the workflow at your library and make decisions. One of the simplest — yet in some way hardest — things to do is to just stop doing something. If a particular process is not effective, does not increase access to a title, it may be time to just stop doing that particular process. On the other hand, if there are still pieces of the process that need to be done, but it is disrupting the flow for the department, perhaps the wrong department is in charge of that process. It may be time to analyze work in each department and determine if the correct department is handling each element of the workflow. This type of analysis should be done fairly often because as eResources evolve, the work of those acquiring and creating access to these materials will also need to evolve. Staff should also be encouraged to analyze what the scope of their work entails and to look for areas to streamline as well as take the time to identify issues and problems that no one seems to be catching.

There are also times when a library should give the work over to the vendor. While most academic libraries are doing this to some extent, it is important to review what services a vendor can offer a library and the cost. In many cases it may be more time and cost effective to have a vendor handling those processes. For example, if your library is batch loading discovery records into the catalog with little editing or review, would it make more sense to negotiate with the vendor to have them automatically add discovery records as they become available? If the vendor does not offer this type of service, at a minimum it may be worth beginning to advocate for this service and to articulate to the library's vendors the need for this service. This would allow library staff to focus on updating records on purchased materials and catalog maintenance.

Solutions

So how do libraries handle all of the issues that eResources are causing? First, by analyzing workflow and how materials flow from acquisitions to cataloging. What elements are part of that process? If the handoff of print materials from acquisition to cataloging is working, what elements of that process need to be kept when dealing with eResources and what elements are redundant? Is there information that is needed when transferring titles from acquisitions to cataloging that is not needed in a print transaction but are critical in the eResource environment? Once the library has identified these elements, it can begin to categorize the handoffs by type. Focus on these three factors as you analyze the workflow at your library: better communication (constant improvement and checking in, effective tools for better communication); proactive environment (cross training, blending departments, and recognizing work) and eliminating and changing workflows.

For example, if the focus on the handoff is to share information — examine what communication tools are available to make this process more effective. Handoffs that are intended to transfer an item from one department to another so that additional work can be done (the traditional handoff) is intended to only move materials between departments. Examine who is doing what processes and cross train so that more flexibility in the workflow can be established. If the library is using the same traditional handoff for eResources as it is using for print, there may be steps that can be eliminated or moved. Below is an example of identifying different types of handoffs and creating a solution for that handoff:

Type of Handoff	Purpose	Solution
Informational	Communication	Create specialized forms to track information. Use project management software to help capture information
Transfer of Work	Move items through the department because of different expertise	Cross training; evaluate and change workflow
Traditional	Move materials between departments	Verify that no backlogs are being created; change workflow to capture information on all titles purchased; create standards for records that are reasonable for amount of titles
Internal Workflow	Workflow handles a specific problem or task	Clarify roles; create communication tools that are more effective; analyze workflow and cross train where possible
Vendor Problems Handoff	Communication with vendors	Find method to track vendor interactions to document issues; set up clear lines of communication between the library and vendors; track problem vendors and advocate for not using problem vendors if possible

Communication

The best way to resolve complications and workflow issues is to set up clear communication patterns and expectations. Many groups have a stake in the information and need to know what eResources the library owns or has access to and whether that access is perpetual or temporary. It is important to clearly delineate responsibilities for communication and decision making. For example, when is perpetual access needed — when is it not necessary and who decides? How will staff indicate titles that have perpetual access versus those that do not in order records, item records or the bibliographic record so that selection librarians, acquisition staff, or cataloging staff (just to name a few) will be able to know how long the library will have access to a particular title? This information is also valuable in troubleshooting since lack of access may mean that the title has been removed from a package.

Communication should lead to collaboration and documentation on who will be responsible for which part of the process. Some of the processes that should be documented are: who is responsible for tracking eBook packages; how are changes communicated and to whom; how are eResource problems being communicated to staff and what mechanisms are in place that allow others to inform whoever is monitoring eResources that there is a problem; who verifies access when a title is purchased; does the person doing the work change depending on type of purchase or access problem; and who is responsible for maintaining access to an eResource for its entire lifecycle.

Finally, how is your library ensuring that all library staff are engaged in the eResource process? The library should establish a mechanism to track the progress of a title from selection to acquisition to cataloging to the patron. It is important that staff members who are not part of the process can look up and verify a particular title or package. Some of the questions that might be part of this process include: are decisions about functionality documented; who verifies and documents functionality after purchase; how does the selector know when the title they wanted has been added to the collection; and how will the patron know?

Remember, there are tools that can help your library establish positive communication patterns around eResources. Project manage-

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ment software or forms created by the library can help library staff stay informed. It is also important to find tools that allow multiple staff members to access the same information. For example, setting up folders on a shared drive for title lists, licenses, and vendor contact information is a simple way to give staff one place to go. It also allows for easier updating. Once these files have been created, or a tool implemented, it is important to continue to monitor the effectiveness of that process. Check in with staff to see if they are using the tools and if the tools are helpful. If they are not meeting their purpose it is important to change the tool or the way that information is being stored. It is also possible that some processes will work for a year or two, but because of other changes will lose their effectiveness. Emphasizing open communication with staff who are using these tools so they can communicate problems when the tools are not working will help the library be more nimble.

Proactive Environment

Once you have the processes in place, it is important to provide training for all staff involved in handling eResources, as well as to make an effort to provide ongoing training opportunities after the initial training. This allows your staff to continue to grow professionally and to stay involved in the procedures as they evolve.

Another suggestion is to rethink the division between cataloging and acquisitions. Since these materials are fluid and flow back and forth between acquisitions and cataloging, bringing these two groups together and having staff who follow a resource through the life cycle may be more effective. For example, the staff member who negotiates the license, gathers the information on access, and determines how to receive the MARC records could be assigned all of the tasks around that resource, including discovery. Assigning resources as you would assign clients would give one person the responsibility of a resource and if communicated effectively could clarify and streamline access.

Recognize Work

Finally, it is important to recognize the work done by staff and to celebrate their successes. Working with eResources can be a very frustrating process. The fluidity of eResources and the fact that all of the processes can change daily makes them a frustrating format to handle. It is important to recognize the work being done by acquisitions and cataloging staff so that they feel appreciated and heard.

It is also important to recognize that eResources are central to a library's collection. It is not a marginal format. In fact, most libraries are depending on electronic resources to meet the informational and curricular needs of their faculty and students. Libraries are taking out shelving and making the spaces in the library available for group and collaborative work. With these "invisible shelves" of materials, it is important that everyone who works on these materials recognize the central role they play in making them available and accessible. One way to do this is to highlight the use of these titles in your annual reports and other official documents. Recognizing that these collections are central to the mission of the library elevates the importance of work acquisitions and cataloging staff do.

It is also important to find ways to market these materials. These materials are more difficult to find because the library cannot put them on display in the way that their print counterpart could. How do you let faculty and students know that titles have been added? How do you keep the "gems" in the collection from getting lost in the noise of a thousand titles? Finding answers to these questions will help you market your collection in such a way that the format becomes irrelevant.

Conclusion

The differing methods used to purchase eResources, along with the other issues outlined in this article, make them one of the most challenging formats handled by libraries today. Many of the challenges arise because of the handoff between departments. Examination of the issues around the handoff and developing strategies to address them such as improved communication, cross training, and creating a proactive environment can ease some of the frustrations and redundancy in the eResources lifecycle workflow.

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subscription. The challenges, of course, are in managing the financial portion, and reflecting the access clearly in discovery tools.

Enabling patron discovery of articles owned by the library would be an interesting challenge. I presume it would require some kind of Knowledge Base so that particular article level content would appear as owned in our databases, for instance.

It's a good idea for rarely used journals.

I am concerned about how to integrate purchased articles into the library's collection in a meaningful way. I am also concerned about costs and predictability of those costs in an environment where money is severely limited.

Just what is meant by "purchase for the library collection"? Perpetual access? Multi- or single user access? Ability to share via ILL? And how do we provide metadata that will enable future potential users to know that we have access to this article?

I'm concerned, even skeptical, about the value of adding these articles to the collection. Our ILL usage reflects how seldom the same article is requested by more than one person.

It's a slippery slope, with so many different DRM models. We would purchase an article to add to the reserve collection for a semester, but we would not add it to the permanent collection.

It's an interesting model. We do a lot of article level purchasing but it's all for individuals rather than adding articles to the collection. Management of articles could be difficult as well as methods for discovery and access. I could see it being helpful for course reserves or specific article assignments.

Marginal interest at this point.

It's great in theory but not practical in the long-term.

Seems messy, although I could see it as potentially viable for titles with very specialized content.

No staff time to manage the acquisition. And, how would you make it visible? Catalog individual articles? No thanks!

Not sure how we would handle the storage of and linking to those articles.

Makes identifying what we do and don't have available very difficult.

Maintaining bibliographic records and access at the article level boggles my mind. Will we be signing licenses and maintaining access records at the article level going forward? Do we weed article collections. Or do we expect vendors to provide a subscribed/unlocked icon at the article level for every library using this feature?

I'd like to learn more about options that allow a library to retain access to article content as opposed to **CCC's** service which only allows distribution to the end-user.