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Squirreling Away: Managing Information Resources & Libraries — Snow Plows or No Plows - What's a City to Do?

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Squirreling Away: Managing Information Resources & Libraries — Snow Plows or No Plows - What's a City to Do?

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As I started to write this, it was snowing in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The forecast was grim, with estimates of between six and nine inches in Southeast Michigan over the course of the day — with more snow expected on Saturday and Sunday. Schools across the region were closed and flights in and out of Detroit's DTW Airport were cancelled as well, causing many librarians on their way to Denver for **ALA's Midwinter Meeting** anxious or rethinking their trip. If you could stay at home, we were being told by weather professionals, that might be a good idea.

But in Ann Arbor, we are chugging along. It is not that we are amazingly dedicated (though we are) or tremendously talented (though we are), it is because we have the equipment and the means to take care of the snow for our mostly residential campus. In fact, this morning, Michigan President **Dr. Mark Schlissel** tweeted "Up before dawn getting our campus ready, our outstanding Facilities & Operations staff Make Blue Go and help keep us safe, no matter the weather. Thank you, team!!!!" And it is definitely true that we are grateful for the Facilities & Operations staff who clean up every time it snows. We are also grateful for the road crews who are out everytime it snows, even if it falls on a holiday or a weekend. As my former boss once told me, it is truly a gift that we live in a world where the snow that falls is plowed off the streets, allowing us to get out of our houses and where we need to go, even on the worst days.

In the winter, especially in Michigan, we are very focused on the weather. Your ability to travel, get to work, get to school, walk the dog, etc. all hinge on your ability to get out of your front door. It also is, as the old joke goes, a great time to make French toast, as the grocery stores always run out of milk, eggs, and bread in the day before a big storm. Since you have a good deal of time to think about things when you are clearing your driveway and sidewalks in front of your house, it got me thinking about what might be connection between the way that we manage for snow events and the way that we build collections in our libraries. Maybe it was the cold air running through my brain, but there were more connections than I knew!

So I wanted to learn more about the snow removal industry in the United States. In doing some research (in our databases...PLEASE!), I learned that IBISWorld estimates that snow plowing services in the United States represents an \$18.8 billion industry with over 151,000 individual businesses involved. This does not include municipalities and government.² From that very same report, we learn this about expenses:

Purchases

Purchases are expected to account for 31.0% of revenue in 2017. Industry operators commonly purchase replacement plow and spreader components, including mounting systems and frames, hydraulics, joystick controls, enhanced headlamps and blade markers. Industry operators also purchase snow removal equipment, such as shovels. However, fuel expenditures and the procurement of rock salt are the Snowplowing Services industry's largest purchase costs.

Rock salt prices, according to *Snow Magazine Online*, can cost industry operators upwards of \$110 per ton. These costs can be especially prohibitive as larger snowplowing companies commonly purchase more than 350 tons of salt per year. Rising rock salt prices have led to an increase in purchase costs from 2012 through 2014. However, in recent years, industry operators have implemented new materials and technologies to mitigate these costs. For example, liquid ice-melting products are more commonly used. These solutions act as a preventive anti-icer and can also be combined with traditional rock salt for more efficient ice melting.

Other expenses

Depreciation costs are expected to comprise 2.6% of industry revenue. Many industry operators work seasonally and are employed in other occupations, including landscaping, building contracting and various other skilled trades. Consequently, these individuals already own large pick-up trucks or other vehicles, which are this industry's largest capital expense. Other capital expenses include snowplows and salt spreaders. Snowplows, for example, vary in shape, size and design. However, standard straight-blade plows can cost as little as \$4,600.³

So from this report, we learn (not surprisingly) that the expenses that are balanced between capital goods, such as plows, shovels and other equipment, and consumable goods, such as fuel and rock salt. I am not sure why they did not count the eggs, milk and bread in the consumables — I will have to write them and ask. So these expenses are simply the cost of doing business. What is also addressed, and more germane to this article, is the Business Locations exploration of this industry sector. IBISWorld estimates that Michigan has 8.4% of the snowplowing establishments in the United States. For those keeping score, New York comes in first with 14.1% of these businesses dedicated to keeping the Empire State moving during winter. If you have ever been to Buffalo in the winter — this makes perfect sense. For that matter, if you ever have been to Buffalo in the summer — it also makes sense. In further describing where these firms are not, they make what would be a fairly obvious statement:

All of the other regions have a disproportionately lower concentration of establishments because they typically experience milder winter weather and little to no snow. For example, the Southeast is expected to account for only 4.6% of establishments in 2017, although the region is home to over a quarter of the US population. Likewise, the West accounts for only 6.8% of all establishments, although the region is home to 17.2% of the population.⁴

In looking at the other side of the market, from the service to the equipment, we see that there are great constraints also in regards to snowplow manufacturing. A similar IBISWorld report states: "Snowplows, salt spreaders and other snow control equipment are simple mechanisms that are used for a single purpose, so keeping products fresh and innovative may challenge some industry operators."⁵ So right now, if you're still here, you might be wondering where I am going with this. If this were a crime drama, the judge would ask if the counselor has a question. And I do. What does this have to do with libraries? Everything.

But before I continue, I want to bring up an event that took place in our beloved Charleston in early January this year. On January 3rd, an uncharacteristically bad winter storm dumped five inches of snow in Charleston and shut down the airport for four days. While five inches of snow might not have been a problem if the temperatures moved into its normal ranges for a Charleston January, it did not bounce back above the freezing mark. This led to icy conditions and an airport and a layer of snow and ice that did not melt. This left the airport operations frozen out. This amount of snow would not have slowed down any airport in the "Frost Belt" because they are prepared for the inclement weather. In Charleston, that is simply not the case. So we should ask ourselves an important question, why aren't they prepared?

Long after the airport resumed operations, the *Post and Courier* asked **Paul Campbell**, CEO of **Charleston County Aviation Authority**, why they were not better prepared for the storm? Among many things **Campbell** said, one resonated with me: "It doesn't make any economic sense for us to buy any equipment [to clear snow]. It was a once-in-30 year event."⁶

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According to the *Post and Courier*, the previous snow was a number of years earlier: "The last real snow in the area was eight years ago, and that was only a couple of quickly melting inches. For a lot of people along the South Carolina coast, this was as deep a snow as they had ever seen."⁷ The snowfall's novelty wore off when people realized that the snow was not melting quickly. With the airport being shut down and roads very difficult to travel on, the novelty shifted to anger. Besides countless passengers who were stranded in their travels to and from Charleston, **Boeing** was particularly concerned. The construction of their 787 Dreamliner commercial aircraft, that is partially constructed in the giant facility adjacent to the airport, was interrupted by this storm.

The question being asked over and over again across the region is why didn't the airport or the county have the snowplows to handle this weather occurrence to get the city moving again. The answer is likely found in the IBISWorld reports — snowplow services have very little market in South Carolina and the cost would be high for the community to purchase this equipment just in case. If you made a huge investment in snow plows, which really serve no other purpose, could you justify having them sit at the end of an airport taxiway collecting rust year after year? It is not a matter of marketing to get people to use it — they are only needed when it snows. Had they the equipment and the staff who could operate it, they might not have had to close down at all. The airport CEO would likely have been quoted in the papers saying something along the lines of "they thought I was crazy buying these snow plows, but I knew that eventually we'd need 'em." But it would have been the first time it was used in eight years and that might beg another question — was the money used to buy that equipment well spent?

So why did I take us on this story? Well, to talk about print volumes and library collection development of course. In thinking about the problems that the Charleston Airport (and the community) suffered through because they did not have the snow plows, despite needing them every 30 years or so (if we believe the Airport CEO). I would think that it would be difficult to justify the cost of equipment (and staff time) for something that may be used once every ten or twenty years. And while Charleston travelers on January 3rd would have been thrilled if they did make the investment, what might they have given up to pay for the equipment so rarely used? To need something once every eight years is a hard sell for an administrator.

In looking at our library collections, are we making the same decisions? We often use ten year windows in looking at circulation of newly purchased print items as a measure of success. We claim that book reviews are not as timely, and do not drive patrons to these volumes. We continually invest in discovery platforms to expose these resources to our patrons. We think about marketing as a way to get people to check out these items. Can we routinely purchase items that are not used for significant amounts of time and be good stewards of our campus dollars?

There is no right or wrong answer here for sure. Librarians are using their professional expertise to help build the collections that support

the work being done at their campus. That all being said, do library administrators and collection development librarians need to be thinking more logically about our purchases as how the resources will be used. We should be driven by what is needed on our campus more than what others are doing. And if you invested in something that might be used once in ten, twenty or thirty years, what have we given up to make that possible? If collection development librarians were not constrained by space, by staffing issues or by budget, the work would be easy. But that is not the case anywhere. The libraries with the larger budgets, bigger facilities and more staff also typically support a campus population with a greater appetite for library resources.

In libraries, we tend not to look at other aspects of our communities in finding parallels to how we should build our collections and our services. In seeing the relatively rare need for plow equipment in Southern cities, we see an interesting exploration of the very issue that is at the core of collection development. Are we buying what our campus really needs or are some works as useful as a snowplow in South Carolina? The cost associated with having every tool in our toolbox is simply not something that any library can afford. Here is hoping that your travels are weather-incident free and that you have all the resources your campus needs. A guy can dream, right? 🐿️

Corey Seeman is the Director, Kresge Library Services at the **Ross School of Business** at the **University of Michigan, Ann Arbor**. He is also the new editor for this column that intends to provide an eclectic exploration of business and management topics relative to the intersection of publishing, librarianship and the information industry. No business degree required! He may be reached at <cseeman@umich.edu> or via twitter at @cseeman.

Endnotes

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Laying Down the Whack-a-Mole Mallet: One Inexperienced ERM Team's story about adopting the Agile Philosophy to Manage Electronic Resources, The Epic Saga – Part One —
Presented by **Gerri Rinna** (Western Michigan University)

Reported by **Susannah Benedetti** (University of North Carolina Wilmington) <benedettis@uncw.edu>

Rinna described her experiences using an agile management tool at **Western Michigan University** to handle the increasing and expanding number of eresources, with new subscription models, platform changes, browser updates, and apps that seem to constantly change, all on top of changing library and campus administration, initiatives, and strategic plan. In 2015 the library migrated from a locally hosted system to a cloud hosted ILS with Knowledge Base, Link Resolver, Discovery Layer, Statistical module, etc. With workflows, processes, and even file management unsustainable in the new system that placed more responsibility on the ERM team, she implemented the Kanban board, a project management process that originated with Japanese production and manufacturing industries

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