

Streamlining Workflows: Combining In-House Cataloging and Outsourcing to Achieve Institutional Success

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Streamlining Workflows: Combining In-House Cataloging and Outsourcing to Achieve Institutional Success

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Introduction

Cecilia Williams joined **Harris County Public Library (HCPL)** in January 2017, bringing seven years of cataloging and project management experience, with a focus on workflow improvement between acquisitions and cataloging. As the new Technical Services Manager, overseeing Acquisitions, Cataloging, and Processing, **Cecilia** was tasked with improving the flow of cataloged and processed materials from the Administrative building to 26-branch locations while reining in ballooning processing costs from our primary book vendor.

Nikita Mohammed is the Cataloging and Processing Manager at **Harris County Public Library**, promoted in 2018. She began working at **HCPL** in August 2012 as a Catalog Librarian, soon after graduation from Library School, with cataloging and processing experience from a special library and a small public library system.

Amber Seely joined **Harris County Public Library** as Division Director of Collections & Technical Services in August 2016 after over a decade of progressive experience in Technical Services in both public and academic libraries. She was immediately handed a mandate for change — bestsellers were not hitting **HCPL's** shelves fast enough and all reasonable efforts should be made to correct the situation.

Background

For more than 15 years, much of the work of cataloging and processing print material for **Harris County Public Library (HCPL)** was outsourced to vendors. The Technical Services Manager determined how much material was outsourced each month and Cataloging staff had very little idea about the amount and type of work to expect from week to week.

While on the surface this kept the workload light for a shrinking Cataloging and Processing staff, it limited our ability to provide a more flexible, customized collection to our customers. Staff throughout the system complained of slow turnaround times for on-order items to be cataloged and processed. Our turnaround time to deliver material to the branches was gauged in weeks, not days, and the uncertainty of work to be completed in-house created a feeling of vulnerability about job security. Changes were necessary for turnaround times to improve in-house, but we found that as we strengthened staff skills and leaned on their expertise, we could change our outsourcing model. In only two years, we transitioned from a system that outsourced 75% of our print cataloging and processing to completing 75% of our print cataloging and processing in-house, faster and more customized.

Based on early staff feedback and assessment, there were many challenges that Cataloging staff regularly worked around. One of the major revelations during early 2017 was how deeply issues with our workflow, ILS technology, and lack of documentation were negatively impacting staff productivity. By tackling the issues below, we found that we could take on larger problems and implement new tools with much more staff support and buy in, and ultimately, success.

Challenges & Solutions

Like many libraries, **HCPL** had developed a cataloging backlog over the years. In our case, there were a few contributing factors including: back-to-back retirements, staff turnover, an ILS migration, multiple administration building moves, lack of documentation, and Cataloger specialization. Our backlog was more than a few shelves of material requiring original cataloging — it was part of the normal workflow for multiple pallets of materials to be ordered simultaneously and then cataloged and processed over the course of months. Since the expectation

was that those materials would take months to complete and there were no incentives to complete items by a specific time, finishing quickly might result in less work to do for the next several weeks. This was a major contributing factor to staff unease regarding job security.

Workflow

In 2012, Cataloging was structured with two Catalog Librarians and three Copy Catalogers, cataloging approximately 5,000 items per month. Catalog Librarians were importing bibliographic records into the ILS for themselves as well as for the Copy Catalogers. This workflow might have worked well at a small institution, but with the workload and schedules of the Catalog Librarians, it was hard to maintain a smooth workflow. Copy Catalogers often had to wait for their bibliographic records to be loaded in order to add the items in the ILS, and this delayed their productivity.

The Catalog Librarians tried different methods over time to ensure that they loaded records efficiently for the Copy Catalogers, but even after setting up a schedule for loading records, the Copy Catalogers had to wait until the next scheduled time or check if they had been loaded. Understandably, Copy Catalogers were reluctant to ask the Catalog Librarians about loading status due to the feeling of not wanting to inconvenience senior staff. As Cataloging adjusted the workflow, we incorporated a new improvement: every cataloger would now import their own records. After training, Copy Catalogers were able to work independently and efficiently. The workflow was so well accepted and has been streamlined so much over time that it is almost impossible to imagine following the previous workflow today.

Another workflow issue that we faced was both Copy Catalogers and Catalog Librarians had become individually responsible for different types of material. While specialization has its benefits, it was a large contributor to the backlog. For example, when a cataloger was out, that format was set aside until that employee came back. Justification for the lack of cross-training was lack of time and problems with timing. This led to another dilemma: when a cataloger left the organization, we were faced with the decision of whether to wait until we had a replacement hired to catalog that format or reassign it to another cataloger. Training catalogers is a time-intensive process, especially without procedures or a manual. Sometimes while working on eliminating a backlog in one format, we created backlog elsewhere in the workflow. In late 2016, the department lost a Copy Cataloger to attrition and the position was reallocated within the library system. This highlighted the need for change and set the wheels in motion as the department attempted to absorb the workload. Starting in 2018, all catalogers were trained on every format and we have developed a sense of shared responsibility for all formats for everyone by publicly posting shared departmental goals and priorities each week.

Printing Labels

After our ILS migration in 2015, printing labels became a time-consuming challenge. The label print report that Cataloging was given to allow for printing prefixes for spine labels had a coding issue — every prefix (e.g., Mystery, SciFi, YA) that was printed was preceded by a colon; deleting the colons could only be done with a mouse going line by line. Technical Services worked with the vendor to try and resolve the issue for over two years. New management brought the issue to our library director, who asked for a breakdown of the cost to the library for the years the report remained broken.

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We calculated that we were spending about 8 seconds on average per item to delete the colons. Multiplied by 45,000 items a year cataloged in-house, we estimated that a total of 222 hours a year (about 1.4 months of FTE) were spent deleting colons, at a cost to the system of over \$4,400 over the previous two years based on a \$22.00 per hour salary estimate. Our director took this number to the vendor and suggested that they offer us an ongoing discount off the price of our ILS. Within a month, the report was updated and working correctly. Beyond the time required for clean-up, the colon had represented a bigger issue for staff morale — Cataloging staff prioritized working on materials that did not include prefixes or found time-intensive workarounds to printing labels, all to avoid having to delete the colons.

Documentation

The Cataloging department also lacked a manual. Over the years, catalogers relied on precedent and institutional memory to handle items outside the norm. While checking for precedent can be effective, it is inefficient because records get deleted over time, everyone may not remember to check the catalog, and there can be conflicting information in the catalog if different catalogers handled situations differently over the years.

As a result, we decided to create a Cataloging manual. The entire Cataloging team began meeting regularly and brainstorming ideas. Everyone took on a role — writing, editing, reviewing, and testing procedures. It took us less than a year from start to finish to go-live and has been very beneficial. We decided on an electronic format which allows it to be easily shared and updated to accommodate new formats and ideas. We have seen greater consistency in our records, easier onboarding for new employees, and increased employee knowledge. When receiving questions from other departments or vendors, it is easier to provide policies and procedures with uniformity and certainty.

Partial Processing

Early in the spring of 2017, over 6,000 unprocessed picture books were ordered in just one month — a hugely dispiriting mistake, as almost every item would require a dustjacket as well as specialized processing. As is often the case of mistakes, this set us off on a journey of figuring out how to stop thinking of outsourcing as an all-or-nothing option.

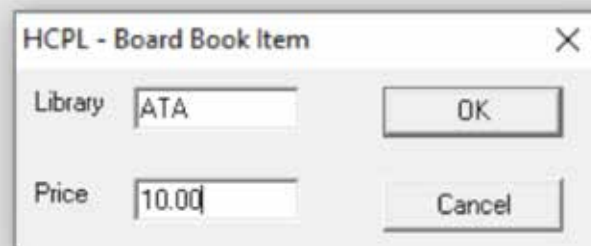
HCPL had several existing accounts with our primary book vendor set up with partially processed specifications, which in our case is defined as 2 barcodes with tape, property stamp, branch code label with tape, and a dustjacket if necessary. These accounts had been inactive since 2015, but in June 2017 we started using them again, slowly at first, ramping up over time. This gave the department another way to receive material to catalog and process in-house — a way that required significantly less staff time.

Macro

At HCPL, all catalogers are responsible for adding item records in addition to bibliographic records to the catalog. Catalogers would catalog in OCLC Connexion, import the records into the local ILS, and then create item records one-by-one in a very click-intensive process. We leveraged Cecilia's previous experience with writing OCLC Connexion macros to automate batch creation of detailed item records vis 949 fields based on criteria selected in a dialogue box. The HCPL Add Items macro creates an initial item based on selected criteria and the user has the option of adding additional items to the record, only changing the branch location information and the barcode. These item record details, many of which could only be coded manually before, save between three to eight minutes per title just in adding items to the catalog.

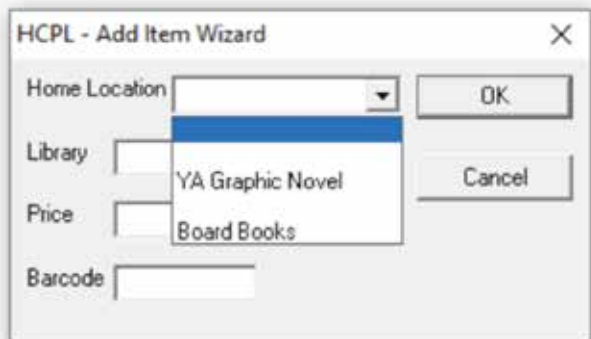
Initially, the macro was created to handle board books and branches and prices had to be keyed in. Since Cecilia and Nikita both had a background and interest in computer coding, they collaborated on the macro to add features and refine the design layout. Creating something practical that directly related to our everyday workflow was very meaningful to both of us and strengthened our individual skill sets. Today, there is very little clicking involved once the macro is executed. Every field is tab accessible, and checkboxes can be checked via the spacebar. The only field that needs to be keyed in is the price. Below you can see the progress of the Macro over time.

March 2017 — Board Books



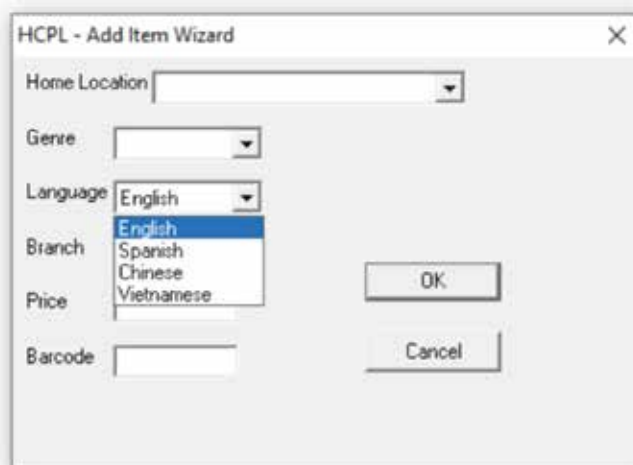
The screenshot shows a dialog box titled "HCPL - Board Book Item". It contains two input fields: "Library" with the value "ATA" and "Price" with the value "10.00". There are two buttons: "OK" and "Cancel".

April 2017 — Added home location drop down capability



The screenshot shows a dialog box titled "HCPL - Add Item Wizard". It has fields for "Home Location", "Library", "Price", and "Barcode". A dropdown menu is open for "Home Location", showing "YA Graphic Novel" and "Board Books". There are "OK" and "Cancel" buttons.

October 2017 — Added language and genre capability



The screenshot shows a dialog box titled "HCPL - Add Item Wizard". It has fields for "Home Location", "Genre", "Language", "Branch", "Price", and "Barcode". A dropdown menu is open for "Language", showing "English", "Spanish", "Chinese", and "Vietnamese". There are "OK" and "Cancel" buttons.

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July 2019 — Reorganized layout and added additional options

Sample OCLC field:

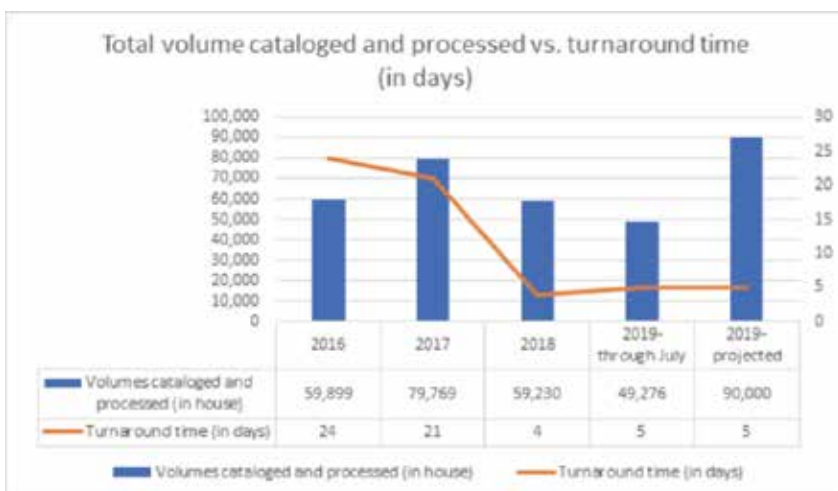
```
349 $w ASIS #1:34028100302225 #m LAP ## AVAIL_SOON #1 DVDSPA #o PREFIX1 Spanish #p $10.00 #r T #s T #1 DVD #x DVD #z ADULT #1 SPANISH
```

Every subfield can be manually edited, if desired.

Results

The change to working with partially processed books as well as using the macro resulted in an average time savings of 3.75 minutes per item. Over the course of just the first year, we saved over 1,651 Full Time Employee (FTE) hours, or about 9.5 months FTE. During the second year we saved over 3,357 FTE hours, or the equivalent of an entire year's worth of work from 1.6 staff members. We project that by the end of the year we will have cataloged 90,000 items in-house, saving over 5,625 FTE hours, which is the equivalent of an entire year's worth of work from 2.5 staff members.

As we have increased efficiency, we have been able to reduce our turnaround time significantly: in 2016 it took us on average 24 days with five staff members from receiving an item in our building to sending it out to the branches fully cataloged and processed. We hit an all-time low of four days in 2018 with only four staff members; so far in 2019 the average has been five days to send out items fully cataloged and processed, but we were short staffed for a quarter of the year.



It is important for us to note that the time savings of our switch to ordering partially processed materials was not about eliminating full-time positions; it was done in recognition that the workload was more

than our current staffing levels could accommodate in a reasonable amount of time. Our improvements created a more consistent workflow, keeping everyone busy for a full eight hours of each day cataloging and processing material, and reducing the number of days with little new material to work on. From a processing costs perspective, the difference of \$2.55 an item between fully and partially processed materials resulted in a savings of \$51,000 in the first year, \$95,000 in the second year, and \$88,000 as of July 2019, for a total savings of \$234,000. Each year we have been able to use that money to refresh Cataloging and Processing technology or reallocate it to the Materials budget. Our customers benefit by receiving more materials, faster.

Extra Services

After reducing our turnaround time for delivering new books to the branches, we were able to take on other projects based on staff feedback and rebuild trust that had eroded over the previous few years. One extremely popular customer and staff request involved cataloging juvenile series with multiple authors under a series title instead of under each author. Cataloging worked with Collection Development to create a list of juvenile series written by multiple authors that could be culled by a series title in order to collocate the items. We have pulled items in these series in for updating over the last year to make the shelf list consistent. This was a huge customer service win that saved branch staff time and energy spent identifying and shelving these items contrary to the information in the catalog and the spine label. Our younger readers find it easier to discover titles from large, popular series.

Cataloging also outsourced world language cataloging for many years. This practice led to very slow turnaround times for world language materials with only marginally useful MARC records. As the macro and partial processing changes decreased the time spent on individual items, catalogers were able to take on additional training and responsibility in finding and creating high quality records for our world language material without increasing staffing. This has significantly improved our service to our non-English speaking communities by providing more accurate cataloging of materials delivered within weeks of ordering instead of months. Cataloging staff have also indicated that they appreciate expanding their skill set while being more engaged in diversity initiatives.

The ability to make customer service-oriented changes helped change the system perception of Cataloging and Processing. We are no longer remote and off-limits; we actively participate with others throughout the system and invite new ideas to help us better serve our customers.

Recommendations

Flexibility — One of the goals we hope to achieve through this paper is to replace the idea of “change” with “improvement.” The word “change” alone can be a scary concept but, presented in the right manner, staff can begin to see that change is necessary in order to make improvements. While we may not always agree with every change that is made, it is important to have a positive attitude and be flexible. Be transparent about the process improvement. Some ideas do not work out as expected and there will be mistakes along the way. Leaders should be clear and honest about their own mistakes while implementing new workflows. Acknowledging our mistakes along the way encouraged staff to be forthright about their own mistakes and built trust among the team during times of high change.

We have been transparent about the backlog we had and how we changed our workflow to improve. We actively market the customizations we made to our cataloging policy that respond to customer and staff needs. Our policy is not just to respond positively to requests, but to actively solicit feedback and build relationships outside of Cataloging and Processing in order to build trust.

Communication — Managers: Your employees are the ones actively doing the work that you have implemented, so they will be able to provide the best feedback about whether something is or is not working, enabling you to adjust workflows

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