Using Technology to Facilitate Pre-Acquisition Workflows for Electronic Resources

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Abstract

Investigation of new e-resource requests before a purchase decision is made can be very complex, potentially involving gathering information from various parties (publishers/vendors, library stakeholders), setting up a trial, gathering trial feedback, and making sure stakeholders are notified in a timely manner throughout of the investigation process. The University of Nevada, Reno Libraries approached this management challenge by creating a dynamic online form. With its front end originated in InfoPath and its backend database and workflow controlled in SharePoint, this form allows an automated process covering request submission, product evaluation, collection development review, and selection decision. All the information regarding a specific request is gathered into this form, with automated email notifications to stakeholders at each major step of the process. The front end of the form is designed to be very simple and user-friendly, requiring only three pieces of information from liaison librarians: purchase request title, reason for request, and college with interest. Since the form was launched in July 2015, 100 requests have been submitted. This new form has saved a lot of staff time in managing and communicating about e-journal/e-resource requests, which translates to improved services for liaison librarians and library users.

The University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) is a medium-sized, state-funded public university offering over 145 degree programs including master's and doctoral degrees. It is a major research institution in the state of Nevada and has a student body of over 21,000. The University Libraries include the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center, serving as the main library on campus, as well as a number of branch libraries. Approximately 90% of the Libraries's $4.5 million annual collections budget is spent on electronic resources.

The first stage of managing the electronic resources lifecycle is investigation of new electronic resources for purchase or addition. At the UNR Libraries, activities in this pre-acquisition stage start with liaison librarians submitting purchase requests, followed by technical services staff going through a checklist to gather and research key information about the requested resource, and finally the assistant dean (AD) for collections to review and make a selection decision. Depending on the requested resources, the AD may solicit input from a five-member collection council or the group of twenty-three liaison librarians before making a final selection decision.

The Challenge

Back in 2008–2009, the Libraries's acquisitions team provided a one-page paper form for liaison librarians to submit new e-resource requests. However, the paper form was not used widely because liaisons simply preferred submitting requests by email. It was a huge challenge for the acquisitions staff to manage this workflow by email, where all the library stakeholders who had roles or tasks in this workflow expected to be informed at the right steps with needed information. Some specific challenges are listed below:

- Email requests could get buried in email boxes, causing workflow bottlenecks.

- Gathered information about a requested resource could be stored in several staff members' email boxes, making it hard to share widely for review purposes.

- Manual email notifications at "handoff" points may not always include all involved stakeholders who needed to be included, causing missed communication or delays.

After examining the available e-resource management tools, technology, funds, and staffing resources, the Libraries decided to use InfoPath and SharePoint to develop a homegrown solution that would address this challenge.

Solving the Problem

The Libraries decided to approach this challenge by creating a dynamic online form, with the following goals in mind:

- The form must be brief and easy for liaison librarians to use.

- The form must have a backend database.

- The form must have backend, staff-only parts for recording pre-acquisition investigation results, input from the AD for collections, votes from the five-member collection council, and a final decision by the AD.

- The form must have a function to move and control workflows from request submission to staff review, AD review, collection council review, and final decisions.

- The form must be able to generate automated email notices to stakeholders at every major "handoff" point throughout the process.

- The form must serve as a central place for all gathered information, input, and decisions.

The Solution

A new journal and e-resource purchase request form was created, with its front end originated in InfoPath and its backend database and workflows controlled in SharePoint. It consists of six parts representing six groups of activities in the pre-acquisition process.

Figure 1. Part 1—Request form.

The first part (called "view" in InfoPath/SharePoint) is the request form for liaison librarians to fill out. To make it really simple for liaisons, only three of the fields on the form are required: purchase request title, reason for request, and college with interest.

Figure 2. Part 2—KAMS checklist.

Submission of the request form creates an entry in the backend database on SharePoint and triggers the second "view" for technical services staff to review the information in part one and to perform the checklist in part two. The E-Resources & Acquisition Services (ERAS) Head adds comments and makes sure that both part one and part two are completed.

Figure 3: Part 3—AD routing decision.

Once the second "view" is completed, the form triggers the third "view" for the AD to review the information in parts one and two and to mark his or her decision in part three on who the request should be routed to: the AD, the collection council, or the liaisons group.

- If the AD is selected, the form triggers the fifth "view" for the AD to make a final selection decision. (See Figure 5.)

- If the council is selected, the form triggers the fourth "view" for the council to provide input. (See Figure 4.)

- If the liaisons group is selected, the form triggers the fifth "view" for the AD to make a final selection decision after he finishes consulting with the liaisons.

Figure 4. Part 4—Council review.

In part four, the collection council reviews the information in parts one through three, makes comments, and casts their votes (purchase, set up a trial, wish list, or rejected). Once the fourth "view" is completed, the form triggers the fifth "view" for the AD to make a final selection decision.

Figure 5. Part 5—AD final decision.

In part five, the AD reviews the information in parts one through four (and input from liaisons when solicited) and makes a final selection decision: purchase, set up a trial, wish list, or rejected.

Figure 6. Part 6—Admin update.

Once the AD marks his final decision in part five, the form triggers the sixth "view" for administrative use.

The backend database, holding all the data from the request forms, tracks the progress of every purchase request and makes reporting easy.

Every form, with its six parts, serves as a central place to store all gathered information, input, and decisions about a specific requested resource. In addition, completing a current "view" triggers the next "view" and simultaneously creates an automated email to alert the stakeholders to perform their assigned procedures in the next "view." This design takes care of the need to inform library stakeholders who have tasks in this workflow at the right steps with needed information.

Results

Since the form was launched in July 2015, 100 requests have been submitted in a seventeen-month period. Ninety of the 100 requests have been processed completely and received final selection decisions. There were 74 purchases, 11 on the wish list, and 5 rejected. Eleven database trials were conducted before final decisions were made.

The liaisons are pleased with the ease of use of the form and the real-time email notices about the selection decisions on their e-resource requests. Technical services staff members are able to maintain consistency in performing the internal checklist for every requested resource and to

record their findings in a central place in a timely manner. The collection council now has a virtual space to provide input and to vote on e-resource requests, facilitating a smooth workflow and reducing the need to meet as a group. The assistant dean for collections has access to all the gathered information about a specific request in one central place to aid his selection decision making.

The time needed for a request to complete this workflow varied from less than a day to several months. The requests that required trials took longer. The automated email alerts at each "handoff" point have helped eliminate possible workflow bottlenecks. The backend database has made it easy to track the status of a specific request in the workflow and has also enabled easy reporting on new purchase activities.

Although the new purchase request form does not currently integrate the e-resource trials workflow, which is also managed in SharePoint at the UNR Libraries, there is a SharePoint linking feature that enables cross-referencing between the two.

Conclusion

The new journal and e-resource purchase request form meets the goals that were set for the project. It has become an important tool for the Libraries to manage new e-resource requests and wish lists. On the one hand, the successful collaboration between the Library staff and campus IT colleagues on this project lays a foundation for future projects to enhance this dynamic purchase request form. On the other hand, recognizing that this form addresses only the first stage of e-resources lifecycle management, the Libraries will continue to monitor new developments of e-resource management tools, both commercial and open source, and to seek an elegant solution that can manage the complete e-resources lifecycle.

Figure 7. Backend database in SharePoint.