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It is that time of year again, to breathe in the fresh air of spring and listen to the birds singing outside your window. Before becoming completely entranced with the temptations of spring, let's take a quick glance at the results of the ATG Annual Survey Report. As many of you know, Against the Grain administers surveys out to hundreds of willing, faithful readers, giving you the opportunity to express your opinions and to share the statistics concerning what is going on in the library world, particularly your own. The number crunching that results allows all of us to reflect upon our own position in what is happening in the mainstream library realm, and what we can be doing to either keep up or sidestep into what is more acceptable.

Out of the respondents who took our survey, 67% were academic librarians, 11% were public, 11% were technical, and a person responded as being a government librarian and another as being an administrative librarian.

Concerns

One of the first questions that we ask our survey takers is “What are the top five things that librarians should be concerned about in the twenty-first century?” This year, the theme that pervaded the results is the series of issues related to e-resources. Some are concerned about the escalating cost of e-resources, others are concerned with its insecurity and lack of standards among the e-vendors. Ownership for many millennia has always been applied to physical objects that can be touched and hidden. Now that the electronic age is reaching new heights, people are recognizing that information is never really “owned.” The music swappers and the RIAA have repeatedly clashed in the past year over what rights they have to own a song simply made up of bits and bytes. All that a song is, really, is a glob of information.

Digital rights management was also a commonly mentioned concern of the respondents. Should information have an “owner” associated with it? Once a library has paid the given amount of money for a subscription to an e-resource, should it not have ownership of the archived subscription to which it was subscribed? If so, what kinds of guarantees does the library have that it will always have access to this information stored remotely on another server? Regardless, over two-thirds of our respondents have cancelled paper subscriptions in favor of electronic subscriptions to journals.

Let’s Outsource!

Another major concern expressed by the respondents is the issue of outsourcing. Out of the respondents, 74% reported outsourcing their cataloging and 47% reported outsourcing their approval plan, approximately the same amount. The acquisitions department is being outsourced by only 11%, whereas last year it was about 8%. This trend towards outsourcing tasks is expected. Another 8% reported outsourcing their physical processing, databases and binding. Some only partially outsource their department. For example, in cataloging, some respondents explained that they only outsource the cataloging of their government documents.

Outsourcing to some people should be done as much as possible in order to open up more time for technical services staff to assist in public services. This way, the job enrichment program is being utilized and fulfilled because the contractors are doing most of the monotonous work, leaving the unexpected or localized tasks to the staff.

Other people feel that it is cheaper to stay away from outsourcing and to do it “in house” since they hire primarily work-study students. After all, contractors are much more expensive than hiring students, and the students take away much more experience than the contractors do. The choice to outsource is dependent on the library’s ability to hire skilled laborers versus the library’s ability to train and keep low overhead should the less-skilled trainees make more mistakes.

Training Library Assistants

Fortunately, 94% of the respondents said that they provide training for their library assistants. The negligent 6% either do not hire library assistants or they answered the question altogether. Two of the respondents who said they provide training said that it is not in-house, that is, the training occurs outside of the library. One of these respondents explained that the training occurs in local workshops through a federal library consortium, whereas the other one said that they depend primarily on WebEx and other online courses to train, or even through satellite transmission. It should be interesting to see in the near future if online courses or satellite transmissions become a preferred medium to provide consistent, secure training to the new librarians’ assistants.

Document Delivery and ILL

Asked whether or not librarians used commercial document delivery or pay-per-view, half said that they do and 47% said that they do not use either one. This is roughly the same as last year, where the percentages were 45% and 55% respectively.