

Going Paperless:

by JoAnn Hounshell

The Trend in Acquisitions

Trends in Technical Services

The 21st century promises dizzying changes for library technical services, concerned as it is with acquiring, describing, organizing and disseminating materials. From deciphering new technologies to acquiring information in new formats and media, technical services librarians will encounter innovative challenges that will revolutionize their field. There are many aspects of technical services that will be affected by these changes, but two areas that deserve special attention are acquisitions and cataloging.

The role of the library acquisitions department is changing.

Traditionally the department has managed the flow of new materials into the library through some fairly fundamental processes. Tasks have included obtaining information about materials, overseeing the purchasing process, maintaining records and reports for materials ordered, processing materials received, and invoices for materials and services, following up on orders through claims and cancellations, analyzing vendor performance statistics, maintaining vendor and publisher contacts, and managing vendor approval plans. Every acquisitions department also houses reams of paper files, which confirm that these are still the functions of the acquisitions department.

However, acquisitions activities are changing as new processes and new materials emerge in the library marketplace. Even the resource tools that were once the mainstays of the acquisitions department have been replaced by newer, more comprehensive, up-to-date electronic resources. When was the last time someone in the library used *Books In Print* in hard copy? Why would anyone when so many other alternatives are available to the acquisitions librarian, often for free.

Today the definition of library materials and services is changing drastically. The acquisitions department now tracks down information in all material formats. Purchasing traditional print indexes, monographs and periodicals is standard for any library. But soon Internet databases, electronic books and journals, CD-ROMs and DVDs will likely be part of the daily purchasing and processing routine for an acquisitions department.

Acquisitions departments do not spend a lot of time these days reviewing such things as what vendor to use when purchasing a monograph or subscribing to a new serial. In fact, libraries are actually seeing the number of new monograph and serials orders

decrease. The decline in print purchases has a rippling effect throughout the library: Fewer new monographs and serials mean less items to catalog and process, fewer volumes to shelve and maintain, and an increase in interlibrary loan and document delivery requests.

Acquisitions departments are actively looking for new formats for requested materials. For every print index request, the department investigates to find out if an electronic version is available. License agreements are now as much a part of the acquisitions vocabulary

and daily activities as approval plans. The acquisitions librarian is often required to be the chief negotiator when contracting for new services. In the past, negotiating meant obtaining the highest discount possible for approval plans. But now it means contracting for the widest access at the lowest price, with archival options for electronic databases. The acquisitions librarian not only haggles with the service provider but may also negotiate sharing access with other libraries.

Libraries are shifting away from relying heavily on a physical collection to meet the needs of users. A physical

collection consumes vast amounts of library floor space and is quite costly at a time when that floor space is often needed by the parent institution. Libraries not only incur initial purchase and processing expenses but also ongoing costs for maintenance. Books must be reshelfed and often rebound. Looseleaf titles must be filed. Periodicals must be routed, bound and reshelfed.

On the other hand, electronic services don't take up additional floor space, usually incur only an annual cost along with a one-time library processing expense, and have no ongoing maintenance expenditures since nothing is routed, shelved or bound.

Just as the library as a whole is looking for electronic alternatives to the traditional library collection, acquisitions departments are seeking electronic means for traditional acquisitions activities. Probably the most



important issue for acquisitions departments today is finding new ways to communicate quickly and accurately with vendors to get detailed, current information for purchase-order activities.

Preferred vendors are now selected not so much for the discounts they can provide but for their Electronic Data Interchange capabilities and compatibilities with the library's integrated management system. EDI is nothing new. The previous standard, BISAC X12, allowed acquisitions departments to exchange limited information with vendors. The emergence of UN/EDIFACT format as the industry standard for EDI has raised the breadth and depth of capabilities of electronic data exchange. EDI provides the means for more timely action on purchase orders, claims and invoices, and speeds communication between acquisitions departments and vendors. At the same time, EDI reduces staff time and material costs.

The trend in acquisitions is toward a totally paperless process, from the patron request, to the order and receipt, to the processing of the invoice, to notifying the patron of the status of the request. Although many may be loath to totally embrace the idea, it is easy to visualize. The patron or the collection development librarian could have at least two electronic options to request the purchase of a title.

The first option requires the requestor to complete a purchase request form on the library's Web page with as much bibliographic information as possible. The purchase request is sent to the designated acquisitions department electronic mailbox.

For the second option, the requestor has access to the preferred vendor's database. The request option is available at the title level and is stored in the vendor's database until the authorized acquisition staff member logs into the vendor's database and reviews the request list.

Both options allow the requestor to place a purchase request electronically, while the acquisitions department places the order electronically with little or no re-keying of information.

Most integrated library management systems on the market have worked in conjunction with major approval plan and firm order vendors to develop embedded order data processing. Embedded order data processing allows the acquisitions department to create purchase orders automatically based on order details, such as price, fund code and location code, embedded in vendor-supplied MARC records. This workflow process has the added advantage of checking for duplicate MARC records in the library's database, loading MARC records as appropriate, and creating the associated purchase order in a single automated step.

Embedded order data processing streamlines the order process by eliminating a large portion of the manual typing and re-keying of the same information when updating the library's system and entering the same information in the vendor's database. The purchase request has been sent to the vendor, the purchase order has been created, and the patron can see that the title has been ordered by searching the Online Public

Access Catalog. The best part is that there are no paper files or forms to maintain.

One of the most time-consuming processes within the acquisitions department is invoicing. Loading invoices via EDI eliminates the need for the acquisitions staff to manually create and type invoice information into the ILS. Institutions are also using EDI internally to allow the exchange of electronic data between the acquisitions department and their accounts payable offices. Again, the accounts-payable staff won't have to manually input invoice information. The invoice can be processed and approved, then an authorization processed for transfer of funds to the vendor electronically. The acquisitions department can track the payment process through the interface with accounts payable. With this tool, detailed financial data can be provided to the library administration down to the day and the hour. There are no papers or forms to handle or file.

The trend is toward acquisitions departments accepting a purchase request; managing the purchasing process; processing the invoice; and maintaining vendor and publisher contact, without being concerned about format type — all through a totally electronic workflow process.

There are library trendsetters out there. Princeton University libraries began moving toward a paperless acquisitions workflow process in 1995. At a April 2001 meeting of the university's integrated library management system user's group, Katharine Farrell, assistant university librarian for technical services and head of the Order Division at Princeton University,

and Janet Lute, integrated library system coordinator for systems at Princeton, described the acquisition departments EDI workflow process. They said that they no longer maintain paper files of purchase orders and invoices. The relief of not handling such tedious and time-consuming tasks has replaced any initial nervousness

acquisitions staff might have about abandoning the paper files. More important, any order and invoicing problems are resolved effectively by relying on electronically stored files.

An interlibrary loan/document delivery colleague often tells me that her ultimate professional fantasy is to be able to

complete all ILL/DD tasks electronically from her lounge chair on the beach. That is a worthy professional fantasy for an acquisitions librarian as well.

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