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BLURRING THE LINES IN TECHNICAL SERVICES

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To begin, I must emphasize that at The Ohio State University Libraries we have not formally or informally reorganized our technical services. Our lines are visibly blurring, however! For this presentation, I want to focus my remarks on our efforts in the area of serials processing. We have redesigned some of our serials acquisition and cataloging workflows toward the most efficient processes that our current automation scenario will allow. Our goal has been to reduce organizational barriers and to integrate work flowing through diverse automated systems. I would like to share with you the two approaches we used to analyze and diagnose problems, streamline processing, and improve services.

OSUL Situation

At the OSU Libraries (OSUL), we are hopefully in a unique situation regarding our acquisition and cataloging workflows. I say "hopefully unique" because I would not expect our current situation to exist in today's automated systems environment. As part of the OhioLINK project, OSU Libraries will migrate to an integrated Innovative Interfaces INNOPAC/INNOVACQ system by 1994. We currently operate two independent systems for acquisition and cataloging functions: the older, proprietary version of INNOVACQ for acquisitions and serials control (to be replaced in summer 1992 with the INNOPAC version of these subsystems); and OSU's locally developed LCS system for cataloging, OPAC, and circulation functions. In essence, we maintain two parallel databases. Both LCS and INNOVACQ system constraints and system interface limitations have created unusual workflows that I will not detail for you at this time. In general, the acquisition workflow is generated from the INNOVACQ system and uploaded to LCS; the cataloging workflow is generated from OCLC records, which are subsequently loaded to LCS and overlie the bibliographic records created by acquisition.

Organizational Flows

Regardless of the automation scenario and type or size of library, when acquisition and cataloging processes are automated, certain workflow issues inevitably must be addressed. Two years ago, Sally Rogers (head of the section within the Cataloging Department that handles serials cataloging) and I (head of the division within the Acquisition Department that acquires serials) began to analyze the wide variety of ordering, cataloging, and processing flows for serials and other titles on continuation.

We quickly discovered that the underlying basis for the serials workflow evolved around two totally separate control issues: the type of acquisition and the method of cataloging and processing the item. We assumed that the method in which the item is acquired and the type of bibliographic control should at least intersect properly within the workflows, if not integrate completely. In situations when this did not occur, we at first suspected that it was due to our complex automation scenario. I am now convinced that this mismatch is a natural characteristic of the serial acquisition process and that we can use our automated systems to create methods to reduce or resolve the problem.

Defining the Problems

Let me describe what I see as the ideal workflow:

1. The bibliographic characteristics of the item are completely understood by the selector at the time of order request.
2. The bibliographic utility includes a current and complete cataloging record in the format desired.
3. The library's vendor of choice has the item in stock and or available for purchase or current subscription under the identical bibliographic entry and format.

When these three elements match, the acquisition department can easily presearch and select the correct bibliographic record at time of order, use that entry to complete the acquisition cycle, and move the item effortlessly through the cataloging flow.

When one or more of these elements fails to match, one of the workflows reels from the effect. The selector may not receive the correct item or have it processed in the chosen manner; the acquisition department records, which are maintained in a format to match the order type, may not match the chosen bibliographic entry; the cataloging format may have to be revised from the original order records. All of these scenarios are familiar to any acquisition librarian.

Two Approaches to Solving the Problems

We first attempted to analyze our flows based on the two control issues I mentioned earlier: the method of receipt in Acquisitions and whether or not the title was fully cataloged. We defined four categories of acquisitions processing, ranging from full to minimal control. These levels were based on the type of order, the source (paid or gift), where the item is received (centrally or in-location), if the item is checked in and/or claimed, and how it is cataloged.

The chart we developed gave us both a better understanding of the complexity of our flows and a basis to simplify operations. As each criterion was added to the workflow, we could identify how that specification affected the system coding and at what point the exceptions to "normal" flows had to be made.

What did we learn from this exercise? First, our processing issues are complex due to the wide variety of options we handle. Second, at certain points in the process our automated systems do create additional problems in communicating handling and status information. Most important was the realization that the only way to resolve these problems was to reduce services, an unacceptable response, or move to an improved system, an impossible option for several years. With the onset of the OhioLINK Project, we felt that any major workflow changes should be postponed until the full INNOPAC/INNOVACQ system was installed.

Our second approach was to create a working group to analyze particularly problematic areas of serials processing. Seven staff members from the two departments met on a regular basis for six months to develop a list of the major issues. Each member took responsibility for a particular issue and developed a background paper defining the problem, outlining affected procedures and workflows, listing any policy issues to be considered, and suggesting any possible resolution to come with the OhioLINK project. The result was a summary of issues, problems, and ideas for resolution, listed in priority order. This summary document included possible steps toward resolution and a general timeframe for consideration.

From the work of this group, we came to some additional conclusions. We confirmed that our problems were due to both current policies as well as automated system restraints. We discovered that bibliographic control decisions made in cataloging did not always reflect acquisitions decisions made at the point of order. Finally, we realized that for both departments, a compromise in current policy could result in problems for the other department, if not carefully planned.

As a result of these two projects, we have made two major changes to workflows. First, we eliminated the distinction of how the item was acquired in terms of the source-paid or gift. Previously, this distinction had limited the cataloging options available to the collection manager. The collection manager may request a specific level of processing based on the value of the item and importance to the collection. In the past, in the Acquisition Department all subscriptions had been treated as equals. That practice was continued under the new agreements. For example, free titles may receive full cataloging, check-in, and claims services; a paid title may receive only brief cataloging. Second, we have created a new category of processing for gifts, in particular those titles received informally, that is, not "on-order" through the Acquisition Department. Any serial or continuation gift item may be processed through an abbreviated workflow where it receives only a brief bibliographic record on both systems and the patron is referred to the location for holdings information.

Conclusion

If the concept of reorganization is unworkable due to system or personnel restraints, consider blurring your lines. Begin with the simplest task and identify your common elements of workflow. Then determine how your current organizational structure and automated systems have impacted your workflows, for better and for worse. Do not be afraid to focus on problem areas; everyone wants them resolved. I am convinced that with sufficient analysis done by those directly involved, an efficient and effective organizational structure will fall into place.