SPECIAL SECTION: LIBRARY REORGANIZATION FOR THE FUTURE

OUTSOURCING, QUALITY CONTROL, AND THE ACQUISITIONS PROFESSIONAL

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Abstract—Outsourcing, long a presence in the library world, is increasingly seen as a way to cut technical service costs. This development has caused great insecurity among technical service librarians and frequent discussions about whether cataloging and acquisitions are threatened specializations. We argue, based on outsourcing experiences at Stanford University Libraries, that the need for experienced technical services librarians increases rather than decreases in a library that outsources some of its technical service operations. Quality control, once built into routines carried out at the clerical level, becomes a major factor for the success of the outsourced operation. This quality control component logically devolves to librarians who know how the finished product should look. We describe the quality control programs developed for monitoring a no-return approval plan and vendor-supplied cataloging.

Keywords—Quality control, Outsourcing, Shelf-ready, Copy cataloging, Approval plans

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INTRODUCTION

Outsourcing has become one of the buzz words of library management. Whether we regard it as the solution to financial and staffing problems or an abdication of our responsibilities as librarians, few within the library community fail to find the idea of outsourcing discomforting. Experience within Stanford University Libraries with new outsourcing initiatives indicates that technical services librarians need not become a threatened species as a result of outsourcing. On the contrary, a whole new role, resting firmly on previous technical service skills and knowledge, is emerging as the need for new types of quality control becomes evident.

In 1994, technical services at Stanford University Libraries began reengineering the processes by which library materials are acquired and cataloged. This reengineering had multiple goals, one of which was “to produce a design for the research library technical service operation of the twenty-first century” [1]. The planning and implementation process behind this reengineering has been extensively documented in articles by Stanford technical services managers [2]. One of the main features that emerged from the planning process was increased use of outsourcing in the areas of collection development, copy cataloging, and physical processing of materials.

The first step in preparing for outsourcing was to establish a new management model for technical services. Stanford had three departments in technical services: binding and preservation, serials and acquisitions, and cataloging. Though outsourcing would affect all of these departments, most of the responsibility for the outsourced product would fall on acquisitions. The current technical services organization has taken the department head position out of serials and acquisitions. Four unit heads, with both line management and planning responsibilities, work as a team to manage the department. All four coordinator positions report directly to the AUL for technical services [3]. This organization has provided the mix of hands-on production responsibility and larger program management needed to implement and control the outsourced acquisition and processing of library materials. The following paper considers the areas in which new quality-control programs have been created and the way in which acquisitions librarians have taken on the responsibility for these areas.

QUALITY CONTROL IN THE AREA OF COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT AND SELECTION

Initial plans for outsourcing acquisitions focused on current imprint, domestic titles. Working with our chosen vendor, we created a plan that would allow us to receive books, catalog records, and physical processing as part of our approval plan. To embed physical processing instructions for 12 branches and one main library in the approval profile, we had to create a separate profile for each shelving location. These new profiles replaced two profiles, one for university presses and one for trade presses. The old approval plan profiles had been refined over the years and well matched the needs and goals of collection development. The new profiling was necessary, therefore, entirely for the purpose of making shelf-ready processing work.

In the past, the profiling of approval plans at Stanford University Libraries was largely a function of collection development, monitored but not controlled by acquisitions. For the first time, acquisitions was more than a monitor and observer of the profiling process. Acquisitions staff, in partnership with the vendor and in consultation with collection development, laid down the basic rules for the new profile. Our fundamental rule was that there was no book duplication within the plans. If one profile requested that a book be sent in a particular area, all other profiles needed to receive a slip or nothing for that area. In this way, we were able to turn the function of monitoring
for duplications over to the vendor. The vendor blocked all second copies, across approvals, firm orders, and standing orders. Additional copies were supplied only if the order specified “additional copy wanted.” Secondly, we asked that numbered series not be sent as books. Since we were unable to supply a full list of our standing orders (and in the past we had used multiple vendors for domestic orders), we felt that there was too much risk of duplication if numbered series came in on approval. Selectors were responsible for keeping track of their slips and monitoring titles coming out in numbered series.

Third, returns would be made for shelf-ready material only if received through vendor error, and rejected books would be paid out of collection development funds. This rule placed a much higher premium on a low return rate, and it discouraged slip orders made simply to examine a title. Acquisitions staff was the first judge of what constituted vendor error and served as liaison between selectors and the vendor when disputes arose. Finally, a selector had to take responsibility for each area of the profile. Fund codes were embedded in the profiles, and these funds were applied unless, after receipt, a selector decided to change the fund to be used in payment. Items that fell into general areas (such as the A’s and Z’s), could no longer be assigned to a selector after arrival; all materials needed a default fund code and location.

At the time of the new profiling, selectors, who had not done a major profiling project in six years, needed assistance with the profiling hierarchy and in translating collection development knowledge into the terms of the profiling tool supplied by the vendor. They also need to be educated about outsourcing and how it would affect the way in which the profiles worked for Stanford. Collection development was strongly affected by the way in which responsibility for specific titles was assigned in this outsourced environment. The old profiles had included all subjects within one profile, with no indication of which selector was responsible for an area. Selectors had been accustomed to assuming that titles in a profiled area were wanted somewhere within the system. When the books arrived, a kind of local sub-profiling would take place, as staff sorted the books by known selector interests. The new profiles moved this post-receipt sorting function into the profiles themselves. The profiles for each of the branches included the operating fund for that branch. The profile for the central library had fund codes embedded in the profile. Books were not only paid according to these fund codes; they were also sorted by their codes. Selectors saw the books that were assigned to the funds they managed, rather than the books that library staff thought would interest them. This practice of assigning titles to a selector through profiling resulted in unanticipated changes to the types of materials a selector saw. Continuous interpretation and control from acquisitions staff was required throughout the profiling process.

Once the profiling was completed and materials started to arrive under the new profiling parameters, it was recognized that several new quality control functions were needed immediately. We had previously depended upon our vendors for information about returned titles, and we used this information to modify profiles. In a no-returns environment, the vendor no longer supplied this information. We needed another method for gathering information about areas of selector dissatisfaction and conveying this information to the vendor. The order services coordinator had monitored returns in the old environment, mostly as a means of tracking ordering problems and vendor performance. These monitoring functions needed to be expanded and increased. All rejections, whether by the selector for collection development reasons or by acquisitions because of duplication or vendor error, now went to the order services coordinator for resolution. Depending on the reason for rejection, one of several actions occurred.

The most frequent reason for rejection was duplication, which could happen for one of several reasons. If it occurred because of vendor error (usually a failure to catch duplication between a firm order or approval item, and a standing order), we sought permission from the vendor to return the item, even though it had been physically processed. Other vendor errors could also result in a
request to return: the wrong title supplied on a firm order; the material arrived damaged; or, infrequently, error in following the profile. The order services coordinator became the final authority on what Stanford considered an error and was responsible for requesting permission to return. Duplication that resulted from staff error was noted and arrangements were made to pay for the material, remove the title from the catalog, and dispose of the material through the exchange program or book sale. This aspect of the quality control process proved to be a valuable source of information for staff training.

The final class of rejected materials examined by the order services coordinator was the most complex, requiring analysis and communication with both selectors and the vendor. Material that fell legitimately within the profile and yet was rejected by a selector (though this comprised a relatively small percentage of the rejected items) took the greatest amount of time, required the most detailed record keeping, and took the greatest knowledge of the profile and collection development standards. Previously, only selector, call number, and rejection reason were tracked. Title information had come from the vendor. In the new process, the selector, a short title, the ISBN, the root call number, and the reason for rejection were recorded. This information was conveyed regularly to the vendor. It was also monitored for patterns indicating problem areas that might need to be modified within the profile. This allowed the order services coordinator to notify selectors when a problem area became apparent and to keep the head of collection development aware of trends in the acquisition of current imprints.

At the end of the first full year in which the new profiles had been in effect, our monitoring revealed an unanticipated result of our outsourcing arrangements. Items returned because of material content prior to the reprofiling usually ran between three and four percent of all approval receipts. During the first year of the new plan, these rejections ran at about half a percent. However, this reduction in the rejection rate was not the good news that it might at first seem. Discussions with selectors indicated that they were keeping materials that they would have previously returned.Selectors felt that since they were paying for the material regardless, they would keep rather than reject borderline titles.

This behavior presented issues for the consideration of both collection development and acquisitions. The head of collection development was informed of this change in selection patterns. A decision needed to be made about whether considerations such as shelving space and collection quality might outweigh the monetary considerations driving selectors. Acquisitions staff was faced with the problem that information that was needed to modify and refine the profiles was being concealed by selector practice. Currently under discussion is a way for selectors to inform acquisitions that they have received a borderline title and have chosen to keep it. This information will be included in the information conveyed to the vendor and will be monitored for future use in profile changes.

The monitoring of rejections provides only one part of the approval picture. Acquisitions has always depended on selectors for information about what is not being received. The need for this information was increased by the fact that we were dealing with a new, unrefined profile and wanted to make outsourcing work well for collection development as well as technical services staff. In addition, situations that had always existed but had been invisible to selectors came to the forefront for the first time. The full effect of some instructions within the profile became apparent when local sorting of incoming approval items was no longer performed. The order services coordinator was required to take a more active role in gathering information about vendor failure to supply expected materials. This need offered a valuable opportunity to forge stronger ties with collection development staff and to educate collection development about the workings of the new profile plan. Selectors were encouraged to question profile selections and the reasons we received
certain material but not others. Acquisitions staff moved into a more active role as liaisons between selectors and vendor and the interpreter of collection development needs to the vendor.

The increased need for quality control in the area of acquisitions most closely connected with collection development called upon professional skills already present in Stanford University Libraries’ staff. Outsourcing arrangements drew upon past experience with approval plans and the profiling process. An in-depth knowledge of local acquisitions policies was necessary, with special emphasis on the way in which we had coordinated standing, firm, blanket and approval orders. In addition, knowledge of collection development at Stanford University became very important. The coordinator for order services began to fulfill these new quality control needs. New roles as the liaison between selector and vendor, as well as between selectors with conflicting needs from the approval plan, devolved to acquisitions staff. An increased emphasis on a knowledge of the way profile plans served collection development as a whole also was necessary for outsourcing to work for the entire library.

QUALITY CONTROL OF BIBLIOGRAPHIC RECORDS AND PHYSICAL PROCESSING

Even before the decision was made to begin outsourcing some cataloging and physical processing functions at Stanford Libraries, the knowledge, skills, and experience of the professional staff were applied to making critical judgments and decisions concerning this initiative. We first had to determine if outsourcing some segment of these processes that we had been performing in-house could meet our functional and quality requirements while lowering costs. Assessment of vendor products and services required the expertise of our library professionals, who examined and analyzed the products and services in order to understand how they would work in our environment. Once the feasibility of outsourcing had been determined, we needed to apply our professional abilities once again to decide if changes should be made to our current receiving, cataloging, and physical processing model that could better accommodate the integration of outsourcing with our current processes. We decided to merge the functions of monograph receiving with those of copy cataloging. This change was perhaps the most significant process change in the technical services redesign of 1994, and it created an environment which was more suitable for simultaneously acquiring shelf-ready materials and receiving invoices and bibliographic records electronically from the vendor [4]. In order to establish and monitor these vendor-supplied processes at point of delivery, it seemed logical that it should be a single unit’s responsibility rather than the shared responsibility of two distinct units. This change in organizational model also provided the opportunity to reclassify jobs within the unit to include the lower level of activities that are associated with the handling of shelf-ready materials.

Now we needed the professional staff to apply their experience and expertise to begin implementation. After the system compatibility issues for the electronic transmission of invoice and bibliographic records had been resolved, the first step toward receiving records electronically was to determine the bibliographic specifications and standards that we would require. We agreed that we would accept full LC-distributed MARC cataloging records directly from the vendor. In addition, we would accept LC CIP records that the vendor had upgraded to our specifications. For materials for which no LC-distributed MARC records were available, the vendor would create a brief descriptive record prepared with the item in hand. These records would be created in full compliance with the USMARC formats and would meet our specified requirements. These requirements were driven by another component of our technical services redesign in which we used automated batch search services (also known as copy cycling) to repeat bibliographic searches for full cataloging records. Catalog and database managers compiled the specifications with a view
toward maximizing the matching potential of these brief records against batch searching products. We had an additional requirement that a complete LC call number be supplied by the vendor and that the call number be included in the spine label. Even those books for which no LC cataloging record was found would still arrive shelf-ready and be sent to their permanent shelving location while awaiting full cataloging records. Extensive communication with the vendor was needed at this time to ensure that all required data elements of the bibliographic record would transmit electronically in the desired format. Once agreements concerning bibliographic specifications had been reached, the vendor transmitted files of test records that included full LC, CIP upgrades, and vendor-created records. These records were carefully inspected and any necessary corrections or modifications were communicated immediately to the vendor. During this phase of the implementation, any potential quality control issues were discussed and resolved to our satisfaction.

In order for the vendor to meet our physical processing requirements, which had always been accommodated locally, we first needed to review our current standards and procedures. This evaluation required the knowledge and judgment of our professional preservation and circulation staff who worked closely with the vendor to develop detailed technical specifications for physical processing. These specifications are used to guide the physical processing on a particular account; the specifications also exclude physical processing on certain categories of materials. After each of these physical processing accounts had been established, we were ready to begin receiving shelf-ready materials.

Actual delivery of shelf-ready materials and electronic transmission of bibliographic records began as a small-scale pilot project. Each bibliographic record transmitted was carefully checked for accuracy and thoroughness and immediate feedback was given to the vendor. The physical processing of each piece was also carefully inspected and any errors or discrepancies were reported. During the pilot project, the knowledge and resources of our professional staff were called upon to resolve problems and to provide interpretation and clarification. The pilot project continued until catalog and database managers were in complete agreement that the vendor-supplied records would provide the bibliographic integrity that we require, and the circulation and preservation managers were satisfied that the physical processing met our specifications and standards.

The next step was to begin full implementation. Now that the delivery of the books and records was fully activated, monitoring of bibliographic records and physical processing would now be performed by staff. Staff needed to be able to quickly detect any discrepancies in delivery of the book or the bibliographic record. We developed and implemented a staff training program to ensure that staff are capable of identifying problems in bibliographic records or physical processing. Especially in the early stages of implementation, processing specifications often needed to be updated to reflect interpretation and changes that arose in day to day operations. Delivery of bibliographic records has been extremely successful, but even after a full year of implementation, we still need to devote professional expertise to resolve any discrepancies between orders and receipts and to decipher bibliographic intricacies that invariably accompany some records. The vendor also may seek advice on occasion before processing particular items if they are uncertain about handling. This kind of communication saves both the library and the vendor time in the long run.

Any bibliographic or processing errors or concerns must be communicated to the vendor immediately in order to avoid future discrepancies. In an environment in which all work is done locally without outsourcing, standard quality control checks are in place as books and records move from unit to unit. However, in the outsourced environment, these checks can be lacking. Professional librarians must implement their own checks to ensure that quality products are being provided by the vendor. Technical services librarians must also continue staff training and
development with our own staff so that we can assist the vendor in providing quality service and cost-savings.

All of the steps that we have taken—from the initial decision to evaluate the feasibility of outsourcing some segment of our processes to testing, evaluating, and modifying the vendor products, as well as adapting our current environment to accommodate these changes—have relied strongly on the capabilities and experience of our professional staff. Professional librarians must continue to be the liaison between the vendor and the library. This is a crucial component for the ongoing success of our current outsourcing operations, and librarian expertise will be required in the consideration and planning of further outsourcing projects. There is no doubt that outsourcing bibliographic and physical processing operations moves responsibility for these processes from the local environment to the vendor, but it is the professional librarians who must continue to maintain the intellectual understanding of what constitutes bibliographic integrity and quality.

REFERENCES