

Direct Ordering by Subject Librarians in a Vendor System: A Case Study

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Abstract

Acquiring monographs – print and electronic – is a core function of an academic library. Adopting innovative methods to select and order monographs is a valuable means of demonstrating efficiency and organizational performance while focusing on timely delivery of materials to the patron community. The University of Ottawa has opted to transform the ordering process for firm orders with its principal vendor, YBP, in order to take advantage of new workflow capabilities offered by the vendor. This involved a reassessment of the division of roles between the Acquisitions service and the collection development librarians. It also involved change management practices and a refocusing on key tactical goals such as redefining workflows with a user-centered approach, exploiting technology to make our processes as streamlined and effective as possible, and working with the vendor for mutual advantage. Selectors were asked to place their orders in an Export Cart rather than a Select Cart, with no verification being undertaken by the Acquisitions staff before the orders were transmitted to the vendor. The direct ordering method allowed us to order monographs more quickly and ensure that no backlogs accumulate for orders placed with this vendor. Significant efficiencies were gained in the Acquisitions unit, allowing staff to focus on orders of greater complexity, namely electronic resources. Selectors needed to learn the new process and adjust their work routines accordingly. This paper is a case study of the rationale, implementation, and outcomes of our initiative.

Keywords

acquisitions; workflow; ordering; selection; collection development; vendor

Introduction

In an era of intense technological change and a growing emphasis on performance accountability, managing the selection and acquisitions process more efficiently is a constant challenge as well as an opportunity for academic libraries. Doing more with less, or streamlining the workflow in ways that creates added value, is daunting for any library. Selectors and those engaged in acquisitions activities, in academic or other libraries, are being challenged to reinvent their workflows so that these become more effective, timelier, and more aligned with the library's strategic goals. A recent report from the ALA Technical Services Managers group reminds us that, "Technical services staff will need to respond to the swift changes today and tomorrow; developing the essential competencies and skills is imperative." (Winjum and Wu 350). Vera Fessler

speaks of the need "to take risks for making improvements" (Fessler 139) in the face of major challenges to librarianship today. In today's economic and organizational context, there are pressures in academic libraries to ensure that selection of material, especially books, is done in the most streamlined manner possible.

Libraries offer a variety of inter-related services and need to optimize their overall value and impact. A holistic approach is important since it can be problematic to treat individual services, or groups of services, in isolation. This needs to be understood in a fiscal climate where return on investment is being closely scrutinized – library budgets are increasingly constrained, and the roles of all services are being reassessed for relevance and value to the institution. In this context it is important to heed Rick Anderson's words on patron-centered philosophy: "The patron-centered librarian will design workflows that make library materials (in all formats) available as quickly as possible to patrons. This doesn't mean handling processes with reckless speed, of course, but the patron-centered library will avoid assuming that perfect accuracy is always worth what it costs in promptness." (Anderson 193) On a related note, R2 Consulting has written that "libraries must find new capacity from within their existing resources" (R2 2011) in order to remain effective and relevant.

The University of Ottawa Library decided to address this challenge in the context of redesigning selection and ordering workflows to focus on patron benefits and reassessment of traditional roles. The University of Ottawa is a doctoral institution comprised of slightly over 40,000 students in Fall 2011 (of which 6,004 are graduate students and 34,708 are undergraduates) and about 4,000 professors in ten faculties – Arts, Social Sciences, Management, Education, Science, Engineering, Common Law, Civil Law, Health Sciences, and Medicine. The university is an ARL member and the premier bilingual (English-French) institution in North America – it offers virtually all programs in both of Canada's official languages. The library's collection budget was 13.6M in 2011-12 (7.7M for serials and 5.9M for monographs). About 60% of the budget is now spent on acquiring electronic resources; this reflects a major trend in acquiring and delivering materials in digital format for our community to meet evolving needs and expectations of users in a wired world, for learning and research.

The staff complement of about 147 FTE includes 45 librarians, 30 of whom have collection development responsibilities to one degree or another. About half of these have full-time responsibilities. Selectors partner with faculty to develop collections and provide research assistance as well as to offer instructional programs to classes and individual students as appropriate, to address scholarly communication issues, and provide reference service. The ILS system that has been in place since 2001 is Innovative Interfaces (Millenium). There are 14 staff members in the Acquisitions team, which is an integrated unit that handles all ordering, receiving and payment of materials. This unit also manages our electronic resources. The Head is a librarian; the rest of the team is comprised of a Coordinator, two Supervisors (one for the Ordering unit and one for the Receiving unit) and clerks under each of these work units. Approval plans have been greatly expanded over the past decade – in 2011 we received 15,017 books on

approval, from several vendors. Books arrive shelf-ready, and the OCLC WorldCat Cataloguing Partners service provides the MARC records that we import into the Innovative Millennium system. Selection is largely done using vendor systems (e.g., YBP, Coutts, and Harrassowitz) whereby titles are forwarded to the Acquisitions department for processing. However, French European books are not yet handled through this method. Scholarly works are bought from many overseas presses; this is a reflection of the research-intensive nature of the university.

Case histories from other institutions

A review of the LIS literature (key databases such as LISA and Library Literature) on this workflow issue didn't yield any relevant results. The information below was obtained from personal knowledge of different initiatives, as gleaned from the Web, from individual contacts or information provided by our principal vendor, YBP.

At Cornell University Library, the ordering workflow was addressed a number of years ago. Transitioning from a print-based process to an automated, streamlined workflow resulted in the ITSO CUL (Integrated Tool for Selection and Ordering at Cornell University Library) system. It provides brief bibliographic records for new titles in a web-based interface, automatically capturing MARC cataloguing and order data to create bibliographic, holdings and purchase records. As a result, "a large percentage of monographic firm orders can be placed with minimal intervention, freeing up staff to focus on those orders that do require the human touch." (Cornell 2004)

At the University of Alberta Library, a major shift in ordering and workflow processing of monographs has occurred. Since 2005, they have stopped using their ILS and "started ordering directly in our major vendors' systems." (Ziegler and Marshall 2009) This means that the Acquisitions department doesn't play much of a role, and selectors place orders in YBP and Coutts' systems. Cataloguing is outsourced and the books are processed shelf-ready from OCLC in Winnipeg. There are no order records in the catalogue, but this hasn't been a problem since selectors would verify the vendor system for the status of a requested item.

In both of the above libraries, there was an identified need to migrate from an inefficient paper-based selection and ordering system to a more effective, consolidated approach using the vendor's capabilities and in-house systems expertise. This was an opportunity to gain efficiencies in the selection and ordering chain. There are a number of US academic libraries that have also enabled a direct ordering process, such as Harvard's Widener Library, Brown University, and University of Iowa.

Acquisitions and collection development issues

The University of Ottawa Library identified a strategic need to make the acquisitions process more efficient in its operations. We have been fortunate enough to receive strong support from the university administration in the past decade. The Collections

budget expenditures rose dramatically from \$6,391,238 in 2002-03 to \$13,962,484 in 2010-11 (an increase of 118%), resulting in a meteoric increase in the number of books and other items ordered – from 19,278 in 2002-03 to 46,728 in 2010-11. (In comparison, the average budget increase across the five major Canadian research university libraries during this period was about 14%). During this decade, a number of major changes were instituted, such as the restructuring of the department into two teams – an ordering and a receiving team, each with responsibilities for handling all formats of materials. Some of the notable strategies adopted during this period include: electronic ordering in vendor systems by Acquisitions staff, electronic invoicing workflow (for YBP, our principal vendor for US and UK coverage), the consolidation of vendors (the vast majority of our orders are placed with five vendors by geographic region and coverage strength), a major scaling up of approval plans across all subject areas (in 2010-11, 45% of our books were received on approval), and shelf-ready processing associated with the YBP and Coutts approval plans. As a result, our workflows and day-to-day operations have been radically transformed and streamlined during these years. The staff has been retrained in order to maximize their focus on tasks which require their knowledge and analysis rather than bulk processing activity.

However, given that the number of selectors in the library and the size of the Acquisitions team remained relatively stable, these measures weren't sufficient to meet the growth in the university and in the Collections budget. We learned from YBP about an ordering workflow that would empower the selector to place orders directly in the vendor system (GOBI). The selectors would be asked to place their orders in an Export Cart rather than a Select Cart, and the Acquisitions staff would not verify the order for duplicates before importing them into Millennium and confirming them with the vendor.

As this represented a paradigm shift in how we divided tasks and responsibilities, we decided that we would begin with a pilot project in order to introduce the process to a very limited number of selectors. Our Health Sciences Library was keen to try this new strategy for enhancing the ordering process. There was communication between the Acquisitions service, YBP, and the Health Sciences Library in order to understand the process and set up the necessary templates for ordering. Over a period of several months, orders were placed using the new method. A report on the experience was prepared, describing the issues, challenges, and benefits. The Library administration approved a system-wide implementation. The report was distributed to all selectors to provide them with the context for the decision.

There are several major benefits that were put forward as justification: 1) Orders would be processed more quickly, resulting in a saving of about one week in the arrival of books; 2) Fund balances would be more up-to-date and accurate, seeing that there was no backlog of orders to be processed; 3) Titles ordered would appear in the catalogue twenty four hours after selection; 4) Selectors could place the orders anytime it was convenient for them; and 5) Significant time savings for the Acquisitions staff, thus freeing them up to deal with more complex orders. These benefits aligned with strategic goals that the library espoused, e.g., adopting a user-centered philosophy in delivering

materials in as timely a manner as possible. However, there were challenges as well: in particular, the additional time required by selectors in the ordering process. This will be discussed further on.

Before the new system could be implemented, however, it was important for everyone involved to meet with the vendor and understand the purpose and the parameters of the project as well as the modifications needed to implement the procedure. This process was appreciated by selectors and acquisitions staff alike. Exploiting vendor technology to achieve efficiency in the selection and ordering process was another goal implicit in this approach. It was also deemed important to maintain order records in the catalogue so that our patrons would know which titles had been ordered and the status of the title.

The direct ordering strategy was applied only to individual books, whether print or electronic. It was not feasible to apply this to electronic resource orders, considering the complexity of ordering and payment information, licensing requirements, and the significant budgetary implications, e.g., for ejournal subscriptions, aggregated journal databases, ebook collections, e-reference works, etc. Although we have streamlined this process using a standard order form that can apply to all types of electronic resources, it remains a human process requiring significant analysis and interaction between various staff.

Implementation

The vendor was closely involved in the planning discussions. Once we had agreed upon the project goals, the ordering workflow was modified. We needed to create a special loader in Millenium so that orders could be attached to the GOBI brief MARC records upon loading. (Note that cataloguing copy of purchased books is obtained via the OCLC WorldCat Cataloguing Partners service which matches records of titles sent by YBP. The brief MARC records are replaced by full records.) This required a few customizations so that the location and funds information could import and export as appropriate. The export cart in GOBI was activated, and the selector ability to create templates was also activated. Templates were crucial in ensuring that direct orders could be associated with the appropriate fund codes, accounts, selectors, and location codes. The templates also needed to specify the sub-accounts created by YBP that indicate the treatment needed, i.e., whether shelf-ready processing was to be applied, and whether the order was for a US or UK publication. This was significant because US books arrive much faster and cheaper than UK books. Moreover, there is an additional surcharge for ordering UK books from the US location, or vice versa, of which the selectors needed to be aware. Therefore, a review of the various status codes in YBP (e.g., In Stock, Out of Stock, Orders Accepted, Import Only) was important for the training process. For libraries that are not using YBP, it is quite feasible that in principle a similar process could be implemented with other vendor platforms since various vendors either offer this service or are in the process of developing it.

It was important for the selectors and the Acquisitions staff to know which type of orders were appropriate for the direct ordering method. Approval books would continue to be shipped according to the plan parameters; this did not change. Firm orders for print monographs across all subject areas could be placed using this method, with exceptions for several categories of orders such as continuations and replacements (since we already had a bibliographic record for these items). Ordering eBooks was limited to several aggregators available via YBP, namely ebrary, EBL, and NetLibrary (now Ebsco). Moreover, it was important to be aware of alternate formats. The licensing level needed to be selected, e.g., single user or multi user in the case of ebrary. Selectors needed to decide whether duplication of print and online books was appropriate or whether a default eBook strategy was appropriate. Since the eBook marketplace is very volatile and experimental, and because patron comfort with eBooks varies greatly by field and by researcher, it was felt that selectors should make their own decisions regarding this complex matter. A high-level blanket approach would not have been appropriate. Discipline-specific decisions were important in this regard – what works well for some disciplines would not be suitable for others. Selectors could provide further instructions or clarifications via the ‘internal notes’ for cataloguing or processing information, or the ‘vendor notes’ for rush orders.

Selectors were invited to an information session with the vendor and the Acquisitions coordinator. The latter created a reference guide that specified the types of material for which the process could be used as well as the types of book orders for which it could not be used. Afterward there were group meetings followed by individual meetings with the selectors in order to create the templates and clarify the process. Templates are managed within GOBI as illustrated by the example below. Back and forth communication with selectors to answer their questions was very important in order to build understanding and engagement with the process. Selectors could create templates that would apply to all of their disciplines and fund codes or create separate ones for different disciplines. One of the challenges was in understanding the particularities of ordering eBooks, i.e., the available aggregators, the licensing levels, and their timeliness of availability versus print.

Template Creation – example in GOBI

The screenshot displays the GobiExpress web interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with tabs for Search, Notifications, Folders, Reports, Options, Library, and Quick Links. A dropdown menu is open under the 'Options' tab, listing: Address Book, Edit Peer Group, Manage Templates, My Gobi account, and My Preferences. Below this, a message states: "Complete. For more information, contact your YBP representative, or [click here](#)." The main content area is titled "Add Order Details Template" and contains the following form fields:

- Template Name***: Health Science Order (US) (up to 25 chars)
- Make this the GobiExpress default template
- Subaccount**: 2377-10 FIRM
- PO Number**: [Empty field]
- Fund Code**: rg901 (Choose or Type)
- Note to YBP**: [Empty field]
- Location**: rgen
- Internal Note**: [Empty field]
- Vendor Code**: ybphs
- Library Note**: [Empty field]
- Initials**: HB
- Quantity**: 1

A sidebar on the left includes navigation options: Order Cart, Select Cart, Export Cart, Approval Bookshelf, Go Back, Clear Form, Save, and the Baker & Taylor YBP Library Services logo.

Direct ordering (or direct exporting) meant that selectors were responsible for ensuring that an order did not duplicate an item in the collection or already on order. As this verification was previously carried out by Acquisitions staff, the selectors needed to incorporate this step in their selection workflow. Developing new routines and communicating the rationale for the new strategy were important elements of the new process. There is extra work in verification of selected titles, as well as the choice of fund code, in the context of using multiple templates to order books. This is particularly true for ordering books in disciplines where there was a high annual output or where there is librarian responsibility for several disciplines. Each librarian has his or her own working style and needed to make adjustments in work routines in order to accommodate the new process. It can be noted that there will be several risks in implementing the new process: the degree of buy-in from the subject librarians, the immaturity of the eBook industry (especially as compared to ejournals), and the complexities inherent in the multiple delivery channels for ordering eBooks.

As this method represented a significant change in the workflow and expectations of the selector, it was important to provide a transition period during which the new process was not mandatory. A six month period (January-June 2011) was deemed appropriate before the process became the default ordering method in July 2011.

Results

The results for 2011 are instructive.

Month	Total Exported Orders in Millennium	Orders in Select Cart	Direct orders in Export Cart	Duplicates/errors from Export Cart
January	2126	211	1915	NA*
February	2131	53	2078	NA*
March	2193	138	2055	165
April	2385	80	2305	285
May	1125	0	1125	28
June	1233	1	1232	29
July	1364	5	1369	35
August	1271	11	1260	162
September	940	25	915	25
October	1377	52	1325	31
November	1757	6	1751	25
December	1065	18	1047	2

* data not collected

For January-June 2011, when the method was not mandatory, there were 10,710 direct orders (using the Export Cart) and 483 traditional firm orders placed (using the Select Cart). This means that 95.6% of YBP orders were placed according to the new method. As can be seen from the numbers above, the Acquisitions staff needed to address a significant number of orders placed by mistake in the Export Cart (which ranged from 28 to 265 during this period). For the July-December 2011 period, there were 7,667 direct orders using the Export Cart and 117 traditional firm orders using the Select Cart. This latter number is a drop of 75% from the first half of the year. This reflects the fact that selectors were increasingly verifying their orders in a comprehensive manner. The number of errors and duplicates for YBP orders in the later months of 2011 was quite

negligible in comparison with the earlier part of the year. The extent of duplication with standing orders is believed to be quite minor.

The new workflow has meant significant time savings for the Acquisitions staff. It is estimated that each 'direct order' saves 2 minutes – this translates into about 2 1/2 hours per day, or 13 hours per week, or 52 hours per month. This has allowed staff to focus their energies on addressing orders for electronic resources (new orders and renewals). These orders are complex and time-consuming compared to print, as mentioned above. Product information, order creation, vendor and payment details, licensing requirements, and access verification are important elements. Detailed procedures have been developed for staff, and they have responded very positively and effectively to their new tasks. Developing the virtual library is a major priority and therefore the re-direction of effort will assist us in this larger goal. Moreover, this redeployment is proving invaluable in reducing the workload of the Head of Acquisitions and the Electronic Resources Technician by assigning standard tasks to clerks. This allows the two above-mentioned staff to focus on a myriad of more complex, higher level e-resource acquisition and management issues.

Challenges

How to deal with duplicates that are identified by the vendor or identified upon arrival? Would we return them, thus undermining the gains in streamlining and efficiency? We decided that we would accept doubles and use this as an opportunity for developing greater understanding of the process and the purpose for implementing it. Individual and group communication proved effective in this regard. While there are still some doubles that are ordered, this number is steadily declining, and we are confident that it will continue to decline over time. The overall cost-benefit equation of the strategy favours the acceptance of doubles as a necessary limitation (which will diminish over time).

The blurring of traditional roles (whereby the selector is involved not only in the intellectual identification and assessment of appropriate items to purchase but also in the order placement) is a major change in the roles of Collection Development and Acquisitions staff and the relations between them. We are in an era where human resources in the library are limited (and unlikely to grow), and the adoption of technology-enhanced workflows is essential for improving organizational performance. In this context it is important to assess the selection and ordering process from a holistic perspective. Work styles are individual and varied. Selector flexibility in adapting to the new workflow is much appreciated. While the majority of selectors accept the new process, there were a few who found it to be time-consuming, inappropriate, and complex. It is hoped that over time they will become more reconciled to it. This does reflect the fact that selectors are a diverse group and have differing approaches to library workflows. Being asked to absorb tasks that were previously done by non-professionals has been a problematic element of the new workflow for a few selectors.

Success factors

Several success factors can be gained from this experience: the vendor partnership, management support, a well-defined and realistic plan, and attention to communication and training. Close planning and collaboration with the vendor was essential to a positive outcome – this was a multi-step process that required both an attention to detail as well as a ‘big picture’ view. Management support was important to provide the stamp of organizational leadership to this paradigm shift. A stepped approach that began with a pilot project before being scaled up to a library-wide strategy was preferable to jumping in on a wide scale. This could be different for libraries in other institutions depending on size, type, and organizational culture. The training of the acquisitions staff was important, e.g., modifications to procedures for receiving and transmitting firm orders to the vendor system using the Export Cart. Ensuring ongoing communication and dialogue with the selectors to ensure that they received adequate training and support was another key success factor. Their buy-in and commitment were crucial for the success of this project.

Conclusion

Our workflow redesign has resulted in a re-engineering of the selection and ordering process as it applies to orders placed with YBP. Working in close collaboration with our principal vendor, we took full advantage of the vendor’s capabilities and expertise. A phased approach to changing the workflow was important for the implementation to be successful. The new process has been successful (e.g., greater efficiency in ordering and delivery of print books and eBooks to the collection, timelier budget balances, and Acquisitions staff being able to focus strategically on electronic resource orders), but this needs to be tempered by the additional work required by selectors. As we shift more towards eBook purchasing, the new workflow will be of increasing benefit. Reassessing our ordering workflow has given us the opportunity to demonstrate innovation and accountability in how our Acquisitions team and collection development librarians work together to serve our patrons better. We intend to explore this ordering strategy for monographs with other vendors, particularly for French material, as this is a priority in our bilingual institution. We maintain an open attitude to exploring other opportunities for workflow innovation as they develop.

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