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Acquiring Minds Want To Know: The Future Of Technical Services

By: Joyce Ogburn

No Abstract

Acquiring Minds Want to Know

The Future of Technical Services

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Recently I was asked to speak on the topic of the future of technical services departments. Just being asked to address such a topic seemed to affirm that there was going to be a future, contrary to the fears expressed by many folks in the trenches. So I approached the topic with great hope, and this column will outline a few of the ideas that flowed from my presentation.

Technical services departments may rely on three strategies to survive into the future: 1) forming partnerships; 2) managing smarter; 3) cross-fertilizing across library units.

Forming partnerships: Technical services functions and the service sectors that support them will be challenged to provide leadership in information management and delivery. Libraries and service providers have formed partnerships before, but the need will be even greater to pool resources and talents to reduce costs, enhance services, and provide better products. Natural partners will be the bibliographic utilities, book and serials vendors, and systems vendors that we deal with at present. The nature of our relationships may be quite

different, however. At the very least libraries will work more closely with service providers on the development of services that will be marketed to libraries to ensure that the services are successful. Libraries may also start aggressively marketing their own expertise, services and products to these partners (who may in turn re-sell them to other libraries).

"The future will ... see a stronger alliance and convergence of library functions."

New services offered to libraries will recognize the joint responsibility that has evolved between acquisitions and cataloging in managing records and enhancing the bibliographic database. Records that form the basis of the catalog will be supplied by a variety of sources that will have differing focuses and costs. These records may be also bundled with other services intended to streamline cataloging and acquisitions. Clearly these services will depend more and

more on development of technology that support easy transfer of records and information.

Managing smarter: The future will be met by having a firm understanding of local costs and services, and by managing an expanding, more integrated library database. The primary challenge for technical services lies in maximizing decreasing resources, particularly staff resources. Technical services will continue to need well-trained people to manage and perform the work of technical services. But constantly fluctuating costs of local services must be evaluated and compared with the costs of

new services provided by outside sources. Increasingly staff will be deployed to manage difficult problems, monitor quality and costs of services, and develop new services and products. Outsourcing will occur only in conjunction with libraries retaining enough expertise in-house to manage the core activities and to manage the outsourcing process. Systems will be expected to provide productivity enhancements to decrease

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in-house costs (the old but true adage, "automate the routine," will become increasingly important). At the same time systems will be move away from managing a library catalog to managing a database that is an infrastructure for all the technology that supports library services. The library system will be reconceived from a catalog to a primary resource that links the staff to the public, and both to the resources within and outside the library in an integrated, transparent interface.

While acquisitions and serials continue to acquire materials, more time will be spent in negotiating services and contracts, managing and purchasing records or access to databases (bibliographic and pattern data), and developing standards that facilitate communication and interfaces with suppliers. Catalogers will spend more time on organizing presentation and access to resources (through the OPAC or other interface), providing links among records in various databases, and also managing contracts and services provided by outside sources. Systems will develop productivity tools and customized local interfaces for the public to access library information, and enter into more agreements with more and more suppliers of technological enhancements and services.

As more services are offered by utilities and vendors, they may by necessity be vanilla flavored. If so, then technical services in the library will provide the customized or specialized services that complement the standardized "one-size-fits-all" services that are developed to serve as many different libraries as possible (or may be developed to serve one particular client and then offered to others "as is"). Management of technical services will have to tend the delicate balance between providing customized local services/products and depending on what the service providers supply.

Cross-fertilizing: This can be defined as in-house partnerships where all staff are committed to the same goals and understand each others roles in the library mission. Cross-fertilization will rely on cross training, and cross functional teams of some nature. Cross-fertilized staff will cooperate, develop better products, programs and services, and develop a shared commitment to library goals. Cross-fertilization already occurs in upper level management groups that plan library strategy and services, but more will occur among the staff at all levels and in all departments to share limited resources and foster creativity. The future will probably see a stronger alliance and convergence of library functions, particularly in the acquisition and control of electronic re-

sources.

Cross-fertilization may be more natural in certain areas of the library, such as among the staffs that acquire and manage serials collections. Alliances will form that are driven by individual and differing subject needs that may be increasingly divergent in an electronic world. A system of cross-functional teams that are responsible for developing and monitoring quality for specific areas of library services will develop across traditional departmental lines. Cross-fertilization will also be required to monitor the services provided by outside sources, as these services will become increasingly cross-functional (and competitive) as well.

One of the worst future scenarios would be one dominated by service contracts and license agreements that demand greater resources to monitor and may even contradict one another. (Imagine a future where print and paper collections are reduced only to be

supplanted by numerous print and paper contracts!) Libraries will be hard pressed to enforce all these contracts and to document them in a condensed, usable format that will assist in enforcement. But even worse is a future where technical services is relegated to the back room and becomes isolated from the rest of the library just as the convergence and integration of services needs to occur. Managers of technical services can't let that happen.

The future scenario presented could be summarized as one dominated by a business orientation, intense planning, and communication. If this scenario is true, then how should one prepare for the future? Regardless of functional specialty, technical services librarians will need to develop skills in creating business plans, tracking and analyzing costs, understanding and negotiating contracts, and marketing their services. We had better get cracking — the future is upon us. 

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