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Acquisitions: So What and Where? In Perspectives on Acquisitions

By: Joyce Ogburn

For any segment of librarianship to flourish in the digital age, it will need to be reflexive, adaptive, flexible, and responsive. Core activities will remain, others will be added, and change will be constant. Acquisitions will not escape change nor the constant pressure to justify its existence, staffing, and costs.

In 1997, I wrote about the foundations and principles of acquisitions and called for librarians to build on these principles to make their future.[1] These principles reflect the roots and power base of acquisitions that are grounded in traditional functions, but are applicable to future developments. I stated that the management of an acquisitions program involves a set of activities, including assessment, prediction, control, choice, validation, and quantification. These activities were summarized as the following:

Assess the risk and feasibility of acquisition, the availability of the resources, and the chances of success; control the system and methods needed, the choice of the source, the supporting services, and the resources themselves; and quantify the resources, work and costs involved to conduct the business of acquisitions and measures of success.[2]

As basic management functions, these activities exist beyond the print realm. Acquisitions needs to build on this base to progress in delivering efficient and functional services that provide the patron with needed resources. The responsibility for serving the patron includes balancing selection with delivery costs--costs that include both goods and services. In the course of serving the patron, acquisitions will, and indeed, must move beyond emphasizing process to stressing service. This shift of emphasis could lead to outsourcing, but it does not preclude continuing to manage resources in the library.

Automation should be employed where possible. Even at this advanced stage in the evolution of integrated systems, there are numerous steps in the handling and processing of information and materials. Acquisitions must work in partnership with publishers, integrated library systems vendors, and materials vendors to develop better systems and to promote a rapid development of sustainable standards. Unfortunately, acquisitions work still requires local exploitation of off-

the-shelf software to accomplish much of the data gathering and analysis needed for effective management. The use of generic software takes expertise and time to implement.

Acquisitions librarians are moving into a records and materials management phase, placing increasing time on acquiring records, information, and services. Comparatively less time is spent in acquiring materials. The keys to success in this change are keen negotiation skills, the ability to develop and understand contracts, an entrepreneurial spirit, and strong systems skills. Many acquisitions librarians already have these credentials and they are in a pivotal position to move their libraries into the digital age.

Let me turn to two important articles that should serve as guiding lights to the development of acquisitions over time.

In a landmark article of 1992, Ross Atkinson called for acquisitions librarians to become change agents in developing the electronic library.[3] In this article he identified two main functions of libraries: delivery (the transportation of information packages) and mediation (the enhancing of the sending, receiving, and application of information content). He placed acquisitions in the delivery camp and asserted that for acquisitions to transition to the electronic library, three areas of knowledge needed to be increased. The first is the economics of publishing, the second information technology and telecommunications, and the third mediation. Atkinson's ideas stress acquisitions as a service program among other delivery services.

Atkinson's article is important as a clarion call and also as a reminder that acquisitions librarians still will have a role to play in the digital future. Every librarian needs a firm foundation both in the technology that permeates information service provision and in the interface with the patron. Acquisitions and collection development librarians have a special knowledge of the economics of publishing, and Atkinson rightly calls that this knowledge be increased.

The knowledge of the economics of publishing is as key to the provision of library service as is that of the information needs of the patron. How publishing occurs and at what costs profoundly impact the services of libraries. Having knowledge of the economics of the publishing venture enables librarians to anticipate and respond to changes in publishing and to understand where changes are needed and feasible. For example, if institutions take back the publishing function from the commercial publisher, there will be a change in the avenues and cost structures of acquiring the publications. Librarians will need to tailor their services accordingly. Librarians will need to determine their own costs and opportunities in accordance with this development.

In a philosophical article in 1993, Joe Barker discussed libraries in the context of "information soup" and the "soup hungry." [4] Barker defined three dimensions of libraries which involve interpretation: (1) identify, select, get, (2) label, and (3) interface. He then added the two dimensions of the library purpose and energy. Barker proposed a holistic approach to understanding the context and theory of acquisitions. His article defined the library as a system

that brings organization to the chaos of the information soup. He saw that acquisitions has its place in this system, but that it does not stand alone.

Reflecting on these articles and drawing on personal experience, I see a greater convergence of functions that may happen in digital libraries.

The first area of convergence is description and interpretation (mediation in Atkinson's terms). Description starts with records, which are contained in catalogs, Web pages, lists, bibliographies, pathfinders, and databases. These descriptions are based on sound knowledge of subjects, classification, abstracting, and information-seeking behavior. The biggest challenge here may be to know how much description is needed in what context to assist patron in finding information. This challenge can be rephrased as finding where mediation can best occur: in an impersonal medium such as a catalog or index (either print or electronic), or in direct human interaction with an information expert.

The second area of convergence is in the provision and acquiring of services, either in house or from an outside provider. The patron does not need to know how the library gets the needed information it should be transparent to the requester. The library will balance the economics and desirability of reformatting resources in the collection, purchasing for the collection, borrowing for the user, or purchasing for the user the materials that satisfy his/her needs. The librarians will manage whether the materials are purchased locally or through a consortium, is acquired without charge, or leased. When in electronic format, the patron need not know whether the information is mounted locally, on a CD-ROM tower, or accessed over the Internet. The patron needs to get the information in a timely manner and librarians need to anticipate how to accomplish this end most effectively.

One last area of convergence is access and preservation. Paul Conway describes how digital technology transforms preservation into an access function.[5] With digital technology, preservation and reformatting decisions are ultimately tied up with selection and interpretation. Preservation becomes an integral service in the delivery on information.

Acquisitions fits primarily in the second area of convergence, where service will transcend or replace processing. However, elements of acquisitions will align with the preservation function, particularly as more service providers offer shelf ready collections and access to digital resources.

As these convergences occur, the knowledge of contracts management and negotiating/evaluating vendor services will become ever more useful. But these skills need to be heightened and expanded to include a greater assessment, indeed demand, for accountability from service providers and the bench marking of services across a multitude of options.

In the development of the digital library, administrators need to be aware of the keen sense of service that acquisitions librarians have developed over the years, combined with the abilities

to find value in outside services, negotiate for services, and administer contracts. These skills are even more necessary in the digital library. The challenge for acquisitions librarians is for them to increase their knowledge of technology and its effects on and applications to library resources and services.

Although I began this article talking about the survival of segments of librarianship, libraries and librarianship are not divisible into pieces--they survive as a system. This system is increasingly dependent upon an expanding knowledge and recognition of the digital technology that is sweeping the information industry. Acquisitions cannot escape this transition. Acquisitions will not contribute to the growth of the digital library by hiding behind the processing that drives the acquisition of the print world. Its principles will remain the same, but its day to day focus will shift to a service management role.

It is not just the role of the acquisitions librarian to redefine the job, the future, and the profession. Administrators need to recognize the advantages of redirecting acquisitions activity to new areas. Atkinson has opened the door. It remains to be seen who will step through the door before it is closed.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Ibid.
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4. Joseph W. Barker, "Acquisitions Principles and the Future of Acquisitions: Information Soup, the Soup-Hungry, and Libraries' Five Dimensions," *Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory* 17 (Spring 1993): 23-32.
5. Paul Conway, *Preservation in the Digital World* (Washington, DC: Commission on Preservation and Access, 1996)