

The Impact of Approval Plans on Acquisitions Operations and Work Flow

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Introduction

Many papers about approval plans address their effect on collection development and subject bibliographers. We are told that approval plans provide systematic coverage of profiled subjects, and ensure that libraries will not miss newly published titles. We also are informed that approval plans allow our subject bibliographers and/or faculty to more closely evaluate monographs so that they can make wise purchase selections. In addition, they free up our professionals from the time-consuming work of title-by-title selection. All of these statements are true. Approval plans have made a world of difference in the area of collection development.

Few papers on approval plans, however, address the impact they have on our daily acquisitions operations and work flow. This paper will focus on their impact on acquisitions procedures and the personnel who process them.

Approval Plan Popularity

It is clear that approval plans have been and continue to be extremely popular. In fact, in a 1988 survey of The Association of Research Libraries, over 90% of the respondents claimed that they used approval plans.¹ Even back in 1968, Peter Spyers-Duran, who organized the first conference on this new phenomenon, bravely stated that "approval gathering plans are here to stay."² These days, one is hard-pressed to find a university library not using approval plans to one extent or another.

Benefits of Approval Plans

Papers which have focused on approval plans from the acquisitions perspective have cited savings in staff time as one of the most important benefits for acquisitions. Back in 1971, one such article claimed that a "well-managed approval plan can save at the minimum one full-time position, with significantly higher savings possible depending upon variances in internal procedures."³ In 1979, Cargill and Alley were citing a savings in time and labor as rationale for the use of approval plans⁴ In addition, the 1988 report of the Association of Research Libraries stated that "savings in staff time"⁵ was the most common reason cited for having an approval plan. Today, as the demand upon libraries continues to increase, and budgets continue to

decrease, approval plans are often seen as a way of coping without increasing staff.⁶ Acquisitions librarians see approval plans as a way of reducing the number of firm orders which must be processed on a daily basis,⁷ thus absorbing some of the workload from our overburdened staffs. As our libraries continue to downsize, approval plans can be seen as a way of coping with reduced staffing levels.

Thus, papers which have dealt with approval plans and acquisitions departments, for the most part, cite savings in staff time as one of the most beneficial reasons for setting up a profile. Perhaps it is time to say that this is not necessarily true. Approval plan processing in acquisitions can be extremely labor intensive, as well as disruptive to work flow.

Negative Impact on Acquisitions

Time Intensive

Is it possible to say that approval plans are labor intensive when we are supposed to be utilizing them because they save us time? The answer is yes. First, we must consider the extra time spent in monitoring the plan. Depending on the institution, monitoring the plan can involve either professional or clerical staff. As was eloquently stated by Robert Nardini, even "the most discriminating selectors cause the most work for acquisition."⁸ A bibliographer may ask acquisitions personnel to verify why a particular title has arrived at the library and perhaps to what portion of the profile it applies. In addition, and along these same lines, even before a firm order is placed, the library with an approval plan might need to think in terms of the profile before simply placing that order. For example, if a library has a university press profile, and a bibliographer submits an order for a university press title, various on-line databases and/or microfiche, need to be checked first to verify whether or not that title might automatically be arriving. Again, this involves greater labor effort and is time intensive.

Not only is monitoring of the plan time intensive, but so are the inevitable book returns. Searchers at Syracuse University library found that many duplicates are received with an approval plan.⁹ That could very well be due to procedures as they are implemented, but regardless of the reason why this happens, returns are time consuming and costly. Our staff, must alter the invoices, cull out the titles to be returned and prepare financial calculations; all labor intensive activities. Although the author cannot cite specific statistics, it is felt that the proportion of firm order returns compared to approval returns is marginal.

At times, manual files need to be kept and consulted. If a library chooses not to establish records in their on-line system for a title selected from form selection, for example, searchers may be required to sift through an alphabetized file of all titles ordered on approval to avoid duplication. Once the book is received, it may then be necessary to once again review the file to remove the slip.

Labor Intensive

Magrill and Corbin's suspicions that staff time saved at one point of the work flow is merely transferred to another¹⁰ is absolutely correct. The selection time saved for collection development librarians is simply transferred to the extra time it takes to process these titles in the

acquisitions department. As Martin Warzala states, "by adding labor intensity to library processes associated with approvals . . . the client is defeating part of the purpose of approval service."¹¹ Approval plans often involve exceptions to routine work procedures, and it is those exceptions which make the processing of approval plans labor intensive.

Joe Barker states that rather than approval plans resulting in a reduction of staff at Berkeley, "approval plans result in a shifting of work from one area to another."¹² He adds that, as an example, their receiving unit took on more approval plan receipts, selector review shelves, more returns and more disruptive checking and creating of records on receipt.¹³

The library at Syracuse University is in the practice of returning hardbound books received on the approval plan when a subject bibliographer has determined that he/she would like the less expensive paper edition. Again, this is another exception to handle. It involves a return as well as placement of a firm order for the desired paper edition. Because it is out of routine, work flow is affected and extra labor is spent.

Disruptive to Workflow

Approval plans are disruptive to acquisitions workflow. As stated, they tend to be the exception rather than the norm, and with exceptions one tends to associate the problems.¹⁴ Usually, we need to maintain separate files. We also tend to write special handling procedures. These exceptions to the workflow require more complex procedures in order to effectively process them. Approval plans prescribe "a more complex set of acquisitions practices than would be needed if everything were ordered using one method."¹⁵

One staff member at Syracuse University stated that "everything stops"¹⁶ when the approval shipment arrives. Firm orders are pushed aside as approval titles are given priority due to their nature and the necessary review process. We need to provide special viewing areas, and set up review schedules. Our work flows "must accommodate the needs and schedules of selectors visiting the approval review shelf,"¹⁷ and that is disruptive. For libraries receiving a very large number of approval titles on a weekly basis, both "physical and staffing problems"¹⁸ can result when attempting to display the titles for review and schedule their removal. Also, constant reminders to bibliographers to review these shelves is disruptive as well.

Possible Alternatives

What can be done to make approval plan processing less problematic to acquisitions workflow and procedure? It is important to view approval plans in conjunction with other acquisitions procedures rather than as a separate entity. The less exceptions to the workflow, the better. Do not view approval plans in isolation from other acquisitions functions. As Axford says, "this is analogous to designing a powerful new automobile engine without facing up to the necessity of also redesigning the extra drive train to achieve the desired level of performance."¹⁹

Supervisors need to make certain that they are constantly examining the workflow and not making exceptions to procedures. It is important to involve the staff who will be processing the material in all procedural decisions. Find out what can be handled in the least disruptive way

from those directly involved in the process. Every effort needs to be made to streamline processing as much as possible.

We must also keep in mind that technology is constantly changing. Back in 1987, the Survey of The Association of Research Libraries noted that "the effect of automation on approval plans is not yet very great."²⁰ However, the report continued to say that "advances in the automation of acquisitions processes may change the way approval plans are handled in the future. Direct electronic transmission of bibliographic files from the vendor to the library may make it possible for libraries to do title-by-title review."²¹ Not only is this occurring now, but our staffs are able to toggle between bibliographic utilities, local library management systems and internet resources on one personal computer. This is certainly a help when trying to process our approval plans more efficiently.

It is important to make use of the new technology in order to make approval plan processing less tedious. Manual "on order" files should be reflected on-line; software such as Blackwell North America's New Titles Online (NTO) should be readily available and consulted. The searcher should be able to toggle between NTO and their on-line system as well as their bibliographic utility, once again in an effort to streamline workflow.

Of course, the advent of Promptcat is certain to change things even further. With this service, when a book vendor sends a new approval title to a particular library, they will also inform OCLC of the transaction. OCLC will then automatically add the library's holding symbol to the corresponding OCLC record, and transfer the record to the library's own on-line system. This product is designed to "increase efficiency in technical processing."²² PromptCat attempts to streamline acquisitions and cataloging "with minimal intervention by library staff."²³ During testing of PromptCat at Michigan State University, it was reported that staff time was saved "due to efficient processing and reduced editing time."²⁴ As Marda Johnson from OCLC states, "you can shape PromptCat to your library's workflow"²⁵ by selecting various processing options which meet your library's specific needs. Again, this is the key to the efficient integration of approval plans in technical services-consider work flow and staff when processing approval plans and make sure procedures are streamlined as much as possible.

It will never be possible to treat approval plans the same way we treat firm orders, but the less disruptive we make procedures, and the more we try to conform to the work flow in place, the more our approval plan will work for us rather than fight us. If our acquisitions department procedures are efficient, and our approval plan processes are well thought-out and constantly examined, we can minimize the disruption to work flow, and perhaps, just perhaps, make our approval plans work for us.

References

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