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Technical Services by the Seat of Your Pants: A Brief Outline of Technical Services Responsibilities

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The good news is that you have just been hired by a law firm to manage their law library. The bad news is that you will now be responsible for technical services, and you have no idea what this function entails. Perhaps the last time you cataloged a book was in library school—and maybe not even then.

The good news is that you have just been hired by a law firm to manage their law library. The bad news is that you will now be responsible for technical services, and you have no idea what this function entails. Perhaps the last time you cataloged a book was in library school—and maybe not even then.

Most commonly, technical services work involves managing the life cycle of information resources. These resources can be commercially purchased, such as books, journals, reports or documents and available in various formats: print, online, DVD, etc. Increasingly, librarians are also managing internally-created content such as briefs, memos, or other documents. These resources are collected into institutional repositories. Regardless whether you are managing materials purchased from content providers and publishers or materials created internally, the functions are similar. Here is a quick outline defining the life cycle of these various resources, including what you as the librarian may be responsible for handling, what you should inquire about, and what you should implement in order to successfully fulfill this function.

Information Resources Life Cycle

The life cycle of an information resource can be defined by five stages:

1. **Ordering:** the process of ordering new titles, renewing existing subscription or standing orders, or bringing internal documents into an institutional repository;
2. **Receiving:** ensuring that everything you have ordered or requested has been received;
3. **Paying:** maintaining a budget and ensuring that all invoices are paid in a timely manner;
4. **Organizing:** establishing a system of organizing resources so that they are findable; and
5. **Access/Collection Maintenance:** ensuring that your library users have available everything that they need.

Required Infrastructure

Successful Technical Services operations involve accurate recordkeeping and documentation of workflows and expenditures. An online catalog or integrated library system (ILS) is critical for managing the library collection. For internally created documents, vendors offer knowledge management (KM) or content management systems. If your institution has already purchased either of these systems, become familiar with the various modules for tracking orders, receipts, payments, and collection access. Contact the vendor for training or other assistance as quickly as possible.

If your library does not have an ILS or KM system, consider whether the volume of work can be properly tracked with desktop software such as Excel or Access. These packages can handle the recordkeeping for several hundred subscriptions and a couple of dozen databases. If your collection starts growing beyond that number, you may want to investigate purchasing a library system.

You will also need to determine how things have been done in the past. Find the policy and procedures manual. Even if this manual is outdated, it will provide a roadmap that you can adjust as necessary. If no manual or other documentation exists, start putting one together as you develop your procedures. It can be as simple as a collection of emails or short paragraph documents. Written documentation will enable you to be consistent and to explain decisions or justify actions. As you begin your work, identify the decision makers in your organization, determine how much information they like to receive, and communicate your activities to them using the mechanism they prefer.

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[1] I would like to thank Matthew Mahaffie, Librarian, Silverstein and Mullins, for his assistance preparing this article.

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Ordering

The life cycle of a resource begins with the initial order or renewal. For internally created documents, ordering involves clearly defining which documents are to be collected, determining whether incentives are in place for creators to add their documents to an institutional repository, and identifying who is responsible for enforcing collection policies. For commercially published titles, ordering involves determining available funds, identifying exact titles and appropriate formats, anticipating number of users, selecting a vendor, and choosing a delivery method.

Before you order or renew your first commercially published title, learn as much as you can about the budget process in your organization. First, determine the library's collections budget for purchasing resources, and what you will be expected to include in that expenditure. Second, determine the budget cycle or the dates of your fiscal year, any expected expenditure or reporting milestones, when budget decisions are made and the process of closing out the fiscal year as well as establishing the budget for the following fiscal year. Third, determine what types of records you are required to keep and keep a paper trail of all decisions, particularly cancellation decisions. That way, you will always be able to answer the question of why something was cancelled and who authorized the cancellation.

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Once you have an understanding of your budget, you need to understand the process to actually expend those funds, either through purchasing new titles or renewing existing ones. First, identify who is authorized to place orders—is it the librarian? a budget administrator? a firm partner? You may want to consider involving the department or practice group head when you decide to purchase a new title. Second, determine the process for placing orders. Will you be able to use a credit card to purchase books online via suppliers such as Amazon.com or Bordersbooks.com? Using a credit card will enable you to make purchases quickly, but there may be limits on what you can put on the credit card, how much you can spend on one purchase, or how much you can spend in one month. You should also keep careful records of all credit card transactions.

Third, be aware of timeliness and how to expedite orders. Books can be ordered and received as quickly as the same day if you order from a local book dealer and pick up via a messenger service. Fourth, know the format of what you are purchasing: is this a one-time purchase, like a book? Or is this a treatise which requires updates or supplementation? Is this a continuation which will require a renewal decision as well as additional funds in order to maintain the currency of its content?

Continuations, titles that are updated or published serially, require additional considerations. Typically, continuations are purchased for a year before they need to be renewed, but confirm the expiration dates of your subscriptions (titles which are paid annually and received as ongoing issues during the renewal period) and standing orders (titles which are billed with each issue, update or edition) when you place the order. Some digital resources are discounted if you purchase on a multi-year basis. Setting up a common expiration date for all your titles is a convenient way to organize the renewal process. Will your institution want to keep the content current? Will issues be routed or emailed to individuals as they are received?

You will also need to be aware of the various formats available for a particular title and determine which is most suitable or cost effective. Is the title available only in print, only online, or in some combination of the two? Does the online version require a print subscription? Does the online version provide additional content or less content? Is the online version available earlier or later than the print version? Are any of these differences significant to your users? And you may also consider using a subscription agent, such as Ebsco, Hein, Swets, or WT Cox. Alternatively, you might use a book jobber, such as YBP. The former provide services such as annual billing for renewal, claim processing, title change notification, and pricing projections or other financial reports for your periodical titles, while the latter can help you manage your standing orders or annual titles.

Databases and online resources present their own challenges. You will need to identify who in your organization is authorized to negotiate and sign license agreements for online resources. These agreements can be complicated legal documents. For quickly assisting your users with usage, content sharing or other potentially restricted activities, you should keep copies of any license agreements, even if the official document is kept in another department. These resources also require an awareness of access issues at the time of order. Determine what type of access is required: institutional access for everyone in your organization? Or individual access for a single user or group of users? If you are ordering individual access, determine how access will be restricted. If users will have passwords, devise a mechanism for maintaining the passwords and for making users aware of use or password sharing restrictions. And whenever possible, have online resources delivered to the library, not the individual users. Otherwise, the vendor may become confused about where to send invoices and renewal notices, sending them to users rather than the library.

Receiving

You must account for the receipt of everything that has been ordered or requested, including every book, every journal issue, and every document. Compare the items received with your online records to ensure that both everything you are receiving was requested, and that the vendor sent the correct title. Record the date received in your online system to prevent receipt of duplicate copies. After confirming the accuracy of the receipt, date stamp and property stamp every item as it is received. If an item needs to be returned for any reason, record the date of the return, any correspondence with vendors, and any payment credit issued.

For continuations, particularly journals, record each journal issue and the date received. A tracking system will help you discover what you have not received and will enable you to claim missing issues. If you are missing supplements, pocket parts, or journal issues, you will not be keeping the content of your collection current. You do not want your attorneys using outdated information. As soon as you notice that you are missing an issue or a supplement, contact the vendor. Many vendors will only honor claims that are made within a certain period of time. If you miss the time frame, you will have to purchase what you missed.

Paying

Fund management is the most visible aspect of technical services for managing externally produced resources. You will need to validate or approve for payment every invoice paid and record all collection expenditures, even if your accounting department actually pays the invoices. You may be required to provide an expenditure report for each invoice, specifying the amount and date paid, and what payment was for. Determine the requirements of your finance office. You may be required to provide an expenditures report on a monthly, annual, or even ad hoc basis. Be aware of your institution's fiscal year since it may differ from the calendar year. You may be required to pay every outstanding invoice before the fiscal year ends. The library may also be responsible for tracking annual budget comparisons, percentage increases, cost per title or usage, or the cost of all resources in a particular subject or practice area. Having an effective payment tracking system in place will greatly simplify that process.

Keeping accurate records is critical for successful fund management. If you are not using an ILS for recording payments, set up an Excel spreadsheet in order to show anticipated expenditures and actual expenditures for all titles in your collection. Vendors will send you invoices, statements, and credit memos. Date stamp all payment documents as you receive them. Invoices will often be sent repeatedly, so be sure to review each invoice to determine whether it is an original or a duplicate. Vendors are not always clear in their description of what you are paying for. On invoices, vendors use their own abbreviations for titles, may group various titles into a single category and may not specify renewal periods. Know what you are paying for and contact your vendors if the invoice is not clear. Some vendors send statements which summarize payment transactions for a specified time period. Review statements to be sure that payment has been credited to the correct title and to request replacement invoices. Credits are frequently issued in lieu of cash. Use your credits quickly, and record the reason for the credit as well as to which title the credit was applied.

Keeping accurate records is critical for successful fund management. If you are not using an ILS for recording payments, set up an Excel spreadsheet in order to show anticipated expenditures and actual expenditures for all titles in your collection. Vendors will send you invoices, statements, and credit memos. Date stamp all payment documents as you receive them.

Organizing

Your information resources, whether internally or commercially produced, need to be organized so that users can find them. This means that you will probably need to create and maintain some type of catalog. Don't panic: if you have never created a bibliographic record before, you may not need to start now. There are cataloging librarians who have done that work for you.

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You can download from a bibliographic database such as OCLC, and the online catalogs of academic libraries are readily available online. You can quickly find good bibliographic records to copy by searching the catalog of a university library.

For purchased resources, create a bibliographic record of every title ordered when you first place your order. Record the requestor, order date, estimated price, format (online, print, CD, etc.), acquisition type (monograph, subscription, standing order) and vendor. This bibliographic information can also be used to record your acquisition as well as circulation data.

For internally-created resources that do not have a catalog record, you will need to create some type of record, but this is still not cause for panic. You will need to define the data fields which will assist with document retrieval. Typically, these include: title (transcribe the title as it is found on the title page), author, publisher, year of publication, subject headings or other topical information, and note field for free-text notes about the particular item in your repository.

As you develop your organizational scheme, keep several principles in mind. First, be sensitive to the needs of attorneys or other library users who may prefer to have certain titles in a particular place. Before organizing or reorganizing the collection, know your users and consult with them. Second, create a policies and procedures manual as you develop your online catalog or repository. When you determine how you will handle certain titles or from which source you will obtain bibliographic records, document all your decisions.

Third, be consistent. If you have documented a decision, you can then apply this policy to other titles in this category. If you handle similar titles in a different manner, you will not be successful in putting together lists or finding particular titles. If you decide to change an earlier decision, you should go back and update the information for all similar titles.

Finally, keep it simple. You do not have to use LC subject headings, AACR2, or RDA. You just have to have a reasonable methodology for recording information. You can even use the name of practice groups as subject headings. Document your decisions and apply those policies consistently.

A librarian who is aware of not only which titles need to be ordered or which documents need to be requested, but also how to order new titles and renew existing titles effectively, how to record receipts, how to record payments, how to organize the materials and how to maintain access will be able to ensure that the library's users are getting the materials they need.

Access

If you have ordered, received and paid for the appropriate resources, and developed an organizational scheme so that users can find what they need, but then do not maintain access, you may as well not have the resources at all. You need to know where your materials are located. Define your locations. You may have several locations within the library including reference, periodical section, code section, and treatise collection. Some titles might be kept in attorney offices. Be sure to identify these office copies quickly, and make sure that these copies are kept current. Collection maintenance is equally important for online resources as it is for physical items.

Keeping material current is critical. File pocket parts and supplements immediately. If you do not have the personnel to maintain loose leaf filing, consider hiring a company to do this for you. A loose leaf which either does not have the most current update or which has misfiled pages can be misleading or unusable. Check links to online databases and resources regularly. Actually click on the links which reside on your catalog or website, and update broken links before your users discover them.

Just as the collection grows, it also contracts. Weeding is an important part of collection maintenance. But you need to weed with an understanding of your users and what they need. What look like outdated, superseded materials to you may turn out to be a critical archive of irreplaceable documents. Before undertaking a weeding project, be sure to define your parameters and consult with your users.

Version control is critical for internal documents. Be sure that you are collecting the most current version of each document. Record the dates of all documents as you receive them.

Successful technical services work is defined by understanding the life cycle of resources in a library collection or repository. A librarian who is aware of not only which titles need to be ordered or which documents need to be requested, but also how to order new titles and renew existing titles effectively, how to record receipts, how to record payments, how to organize the materials and how to maintain access will be able to ensure that the library's users are getting the materials they need. **LLL**