Taking Stock version of Thinking Outside the (Process) Box

In the summer of 2017 the Library service at Leeds Beckett University, in common with many other HE institutions, was facing budgetary constraints and reduced staff hours, whilst simultaneously trying to maintain, even improve, the level of service we were providing. Part of our response within Collections and Acquisitions was to undertake a full review of our acquisitions processes.

In June 2017 I attended a Dawson Books Day in London, and as part of the program of presentations I listened to a talk about the benefits of standardisation in book servicing. I had not previously considered the sheer variety of servicing requirements asked for by different academic libraries, and the impact this had on workflow, throughput, and supply times at major library suppliers. Institutions were cited as requiring as many as 24 servicing interventions – stamps, labels, stickers, pen-markings and so on - as part of their bespoke shelf-ready provision.

A couple of weeks later I attended the annual North East and Yorkshire Academic Libraries (NEYAL) members' meeting in York, and found a key topic of conversation there was the NAG Servicing Guidelines document, which had been published just a few months previously. A phase that stood out to me described the intention to -

 "*Encourage more standardized servicing requirements to enable academic libraries to streamline their supply chain, to provide better customer service through greater efficiency, and to make cost savings*."

This almost exactly mirrored what Dawson Books had said; and on returning to LBU I suggested that as part of our workflow review we look into our servicing requirements for shelf-ready print material.

At that time, in addition to the supply of a MARC record, our SR provision consisted of the following physical processing:

- Book protection cover on paperbacks, and jackets on hardbacks
- Spine labels with a class number
- Spine labels to be under book protection cover *or* label protected
- One ownership stamp on the edge of the book
- Further ownership stamp inside the book on page 42 (or 11)
- A barcode on the title page
- An RFID TAG inside the back cover
- Process box (grid stamp) on title page verso

We had a team discussion, and immediately agreed that having two ownership stamps was probably excessive, and we could live with just one, on the outside of the book. Conversely, date labels were provided as standard under the guidelines, but we did not require them – which would technically make us non-standard, and therefore potentially liable to incur an extra cost. We contacted our major suppliers and were reassured that missing-out date labels would not incur any type of "non-standard" penalty.

Other than these minor differences, we found that we were remarkably close to the recommended standards, except for one thing:

- Process box (grid stamp) on title page verso

The process box consists of a small grid and the University's name. As part of the accession process, our acquisitions assistants would manually enter the following information into the box:

- Item barcode
- Fund code
- Order number
- Date of receipt onto LMS
- classmark

The main use of the process box was to identify damaged items, for example where a tag or classmark had been torn off the book, and the information in the box remained the only means of tracking or identifying the item. Whatever else we changed in terms of servicing, the stamp was seen as pretty much essential. However, we did ask ourselves the question of whether the information we were including in the box was the best use of this space, or should we be including other information instead? We decided to try some practical experiments to find out.

We did this by systematically removing information from books – tags, stamps, barcodes, the data inside the process box – then having team members try to identify the individual copy using what information they had left. An example would be using the RFID pad to identify a book that had no barcode or process stamp. Another variant would be to remove all identifying features from a book except for the barcode; or just having the spine label and nothing else.

To our surprise, the maximum time it took to identify a specific copy of a book was five minutes. This included going to the shelves and looking for gaps, in cases of multiple copies. In most instances, items were identified via the LMS in under two minutes. It looked very much like we were filling in hundreds of process boxes a month, on every physical item that entered our stock, for no apparent reason. We then asked ourselves how many times a year does this situation arise in practice, and guessed it was perhaps a dozen. Twenty at most. Certainly not *900 times a month*, which was the average number of new items coming into the library - meaning around 10, 800 process boxes, filled-in by hand, every year...

So we decided to get rid of it.

This would make our servicing requirements even leaner than the recommended NAG standard, because we had already discontinued the use of date labels. We let our Head of Service know our decision, and we sent our suppliers the revised instructions – but we didn't tell anyone else. We reasoned that the process box was primarily, and in all likelihood exclusively, a tool for Collections and Acquisitions, therefore we would implement a "soft launch" of the new servicing, and await feedback. We could always revise our position if the move proved unpopular within the wider library, for reasons we had not considered.

That was October 2017. To date (December 2018), we have received no feedback whatsoever.

However, the impact has been considerable.

The time it takes for the team to receive new items onto the system has been halved.

Not only is this a positive result in its own right, but it also means that the team are free to use that time to focus on other things – for example, our ordering backlog has been completely eliminated,

despite a migration of the LMS at the start of the new financial year, which meant we couldn't order anything for two weeks. The team are also now able to spend more time working on our newly implemented reading list system, cleaning up meta-data and rogue records on the library catalogue, and getting involved in various short-life projects and working groups – in short, far more productive, valuable, and interesting work than copying data into boxes that no one ever looked at.

And financially we're making on-going savings, as we are no longer paying a premium for a unique (and unnecessary) servicing template.

This was a small initiative, involving very little effort on our part – essentially it was the work of an afternoon to run the tests and draw our conclusions - a quick win, which has had generated substantial positive outcomes.

We continue to review our processing requirements, and aspects of our acquisitions workflow, and to test them and see if they're legitimate. Where they are, fine; but where they are not, we've learned that even a small change can make a really big difference.