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Acquiring E-Books: Does (Should) Workflow Play a Role?

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Abstract

The methods in which e-books can be purchased vary greatly compared to print books. In the past, a print book was purchased either as an individual title (firm order) or through an approval plan. Once the books were received, there was little deviation in how the items were processed—purchase orders were created, books were processed, invoices were input and paid. However, with e-books, the work is more complex and there are many ways to purchase e-books—firm order, demand- (or patron-) driven acquisition (DDA), evidence-based acquisition (EBA), yearly front-file purchases, back-file purchases, or subscription to e-book packages. Each of the methods involves a workflow that goes from easy to somewhat complex. This begs the question of whether the acquisitions workflow can or should influence how e-books are purchased.

Overview

Over the past five years, the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) has seen its Technical Services department reduced from four librarians and 20 staff members to two librarians and nine staff members. We use Alma (Ex Libris) to manage our e-resources. For those not familiar with Alma, one component is the Community Zone, which includes records for titles included in various e-resource collections and is maintained by Ex Libris. In addition to this, the library has a preferred format of electronic. In fact, all print books are now housed off-campus due to library renovations. This means fewer staff are expected to do more complex work, including maintaining online collections, which is vastly different from maintaining a print collection. As of this writing, the library has 2,007,054 electronic resources and maintains 610 community zone resources/collections and 52 locally created collections. Given the changes to the department, it became obvious that some e-book purchase methods were more efficient than others.

We purchase e-books using DDA plans, EBS plans, front-file purchases, back-file purchases, subscription plans, and firm orders. In addition to traditional collection development goals, we also aim to support the Affordable Learning Georgia Textbook Affordability Initiative through our e-book collection purchases.

The Workflows

For this article, four workflows will be reviewed—DDA, EBS, firm order, and subscription. The four areas we looked at for each acquisition method are:

- Ownership—would the e-books be owned?

- Acquisition—automated or manual. Is the purchase triggered by a user, that is, PDA or EBS models, a subscription, or does a librarian or staff member need to physically place the order?

- Cataloging—can we use the Community Zone–provided records or do we need to bring in enhanced MARC records? Not all Community Zone records are good—many are basic KBART files, with just author and title, which does not help with discovery.

- Invoicing—is the invoice done at a title level or a collection level? Obviously, invoices that are done per e-book title take more staff time to process, not just in creating the purchase orders, but also in processing the invoice.

Demand-Driven Acquisition Workflow

With a DDA plan, the MARC records for titles that are part of the plan are loaded in the catalog and a predetermined trigger results in the purchase. An invoice is generated and then the purchase order is created before the invoice is processed. While the staff does not have to place the order with the vendor, the workflow is still somewhat complex as the purchase has to be recorded and the MARC record has to be pulled from the DDA pool. Mediation may be required for titles over a certain amount.

DDA plans can be managed with a deposit account or by invoice. The difference is that invoices received when a deposit account is in place do not have to be

| Workflow	Ownership	Acquisition	Cataloging	Invoicing
DDA/ATO	Combination	Partially Automated	Locally managed	Title level
EBS	Combination	Partially automated	Combination	Title level
Firm Order	Yes	Manual	Locally managed	Title level
Collection: Subscription	No	Automated	Fully automated	Collection level
Collection: Purchase	Yes	Automated	Combination	Collection Level

Figure 1. Process overview.
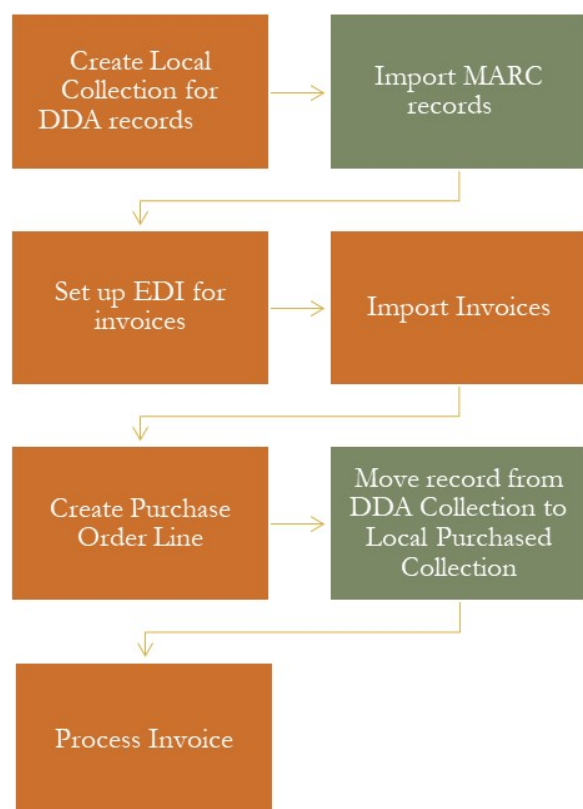
Figure 2. DDA workflow.

sent forward for payment, but if there is no deposit account in place, the invoices need to be sent to accounting for payment, adding another step to the workflow. Either way, funds should be allocated for the plan and monitored to ensure spending stays within set parameters.

This workflow also requires monthly work by cataloging librarians or staff to ensure that records in

the pool are up-to-date. This can take a little or a lot of time depending on the update for that month and depending on the number of DDA plans in place.

Evidence-Based Selection Workflow

As with DDA, EBS titles are a defined collection, but titles are made available for a set amount of time, usually for one year. After the specified time frame, access to these titles ends, title usage is reviewed, and those with highest usage are purchased.

Whereas with DDA, deposit accounts can be set up or funds expended as titles are purchased, EBS funds are spent upfront. Many vendors require a minimum spend amount for EBS.

The workflow has many steps. The collections must be activated in Alma (much like a subscription) and then deactivated at the end of the agreed-upon term, unless the EBS plan is put in place to be a continuous plan, which would require an ongoing spend each year, just like a subscription. If it is not continuous, the activation and deactivation of the collection creates additional work for the e-resources librarian and staff and can cause confusion and frustration for faculty and students when titles are no longer available. In addition, once the titles are selected, they need to be reactivated, usually on a title by title basis (though there are some ways to do mass activations, but that requires a bit of work as well). The unique thing with this plan type is that the invoice to pay for the titles has already been received and processed as a lump sum for the EBS plan. The trick is to make sure the selected titles are tied back to that purchase order.
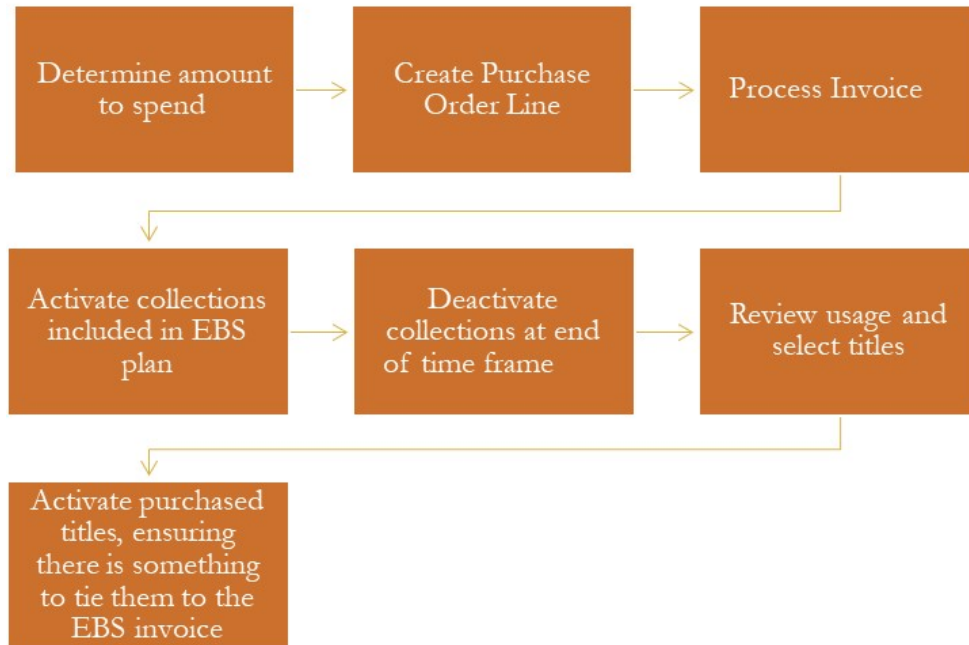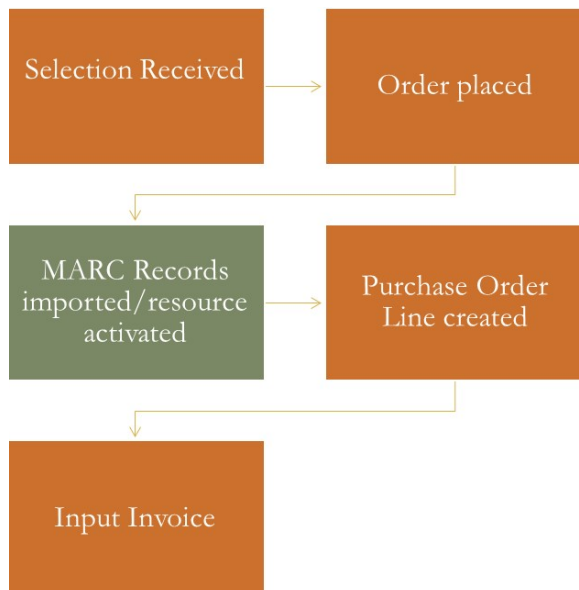
Figure 3. EBS workflow.

Figure 4. Firm order workflow.

Firm Order Workflow

The firm order process for e-books is pretty much the same as for print books, but instead of receiving a print book, the e-book is activated. The added advantage is that several publishers offer activation/access within hours, making the book available almost immediately. This still requires skilled staff, though, to ensure the correct titles are activated in Alma.

As with print books, deposit funds can be used, though funds should be allocated each year and monitored to ensure spending remains within the set budget.

Subscription Workflow

From a workflow perspective, this is the most streamlined workflow. In some cases, it can actually be more cost effective than other purchase methods. What really matters here, aside from funds, is the level of importance placed on ownership. For some collections, though, we'll posit that when having a subscription that will keep titles up-to-date, such as for technology or science collections, perhaps ownership should not be a consideration. With subscriptions, the collection is ordered, activated, and then the invoice processed. Titles are maintained in the Community Zone, with little to no work required by librarians or staff.

Purchasing front-file or back-file collections has a similar process, except the titles are owned. There are a couple of workflow tweaks, but it is as straight-forward as the subscription workflow, if the Community Zone–provided MARC records are good. If

Figure 5. Firm order workflow.

they are not, then additional work is done by both the cataloging and e-resources staff to create and maintain a local collection.

Cost Analysis

We compared the cost of moving to subscription plans from a selective plan, where the library managed the holdings for a set number of titles; moving to a subscription plan (all titles in the collection) from an EBS plan; and DDA versus firm order titles.

The cost used was $30/hour for a librarian and $16/hour for staff. If both librarian and staff were involved in the workflow, $23/hour was used.

The move to a subscription plan from the EBS plan saw the most savings. The calculations were based on 142 titles selected, 20 minutes per title. The effort to activate and deactivate the collection was negligible; however, time was also spent setting up the fund to manage the purchases, and of course, the initial EBS plan involved time to set up and tweak the workflows. Total labor cost for the EBS titles, based on librarian and staff time, was $1,104 and labor was 48 hours. Moving to the full subscription plan reduced the labor to two hours and the cost to $46, for a cost savings of $1,058. While we don't own the titles in the collection, it also enabled us to provide access to every title available from a very popular publisher and allows us to have the latest editions of the titles.

Moving to a subscription plan from the selective, managed title plan saved $420 and 14 hours of librarian labor. Due to the nature of the plan, the labor here was in managing the titles themselves, rather than the payment. However, there was considerable labor involved in activating and deactivating titles as they were moved in and out of the managed collection, so the savings may actually be higher.

Using a DDA plan rather than firm orders saved $200 and 12.5 hours of labor. The savings here are seen in librarian and staff labor in the selecting and ordering of the individual titles. Since the users are doing the selecting, from an acquisitions standpoint the order simply needs to be entered in the system and the invoice processed.

How Can Vendors/Publishers Help?

Many of the challenges we run into are because what is in Alma does not match the name of the collection being purchased or the Community Zone records are terrible, some just containing title and author, and we've found errors in those. In some case the invoices

Collection	Previous process	New Process	Savings
Moved from selective to full collection (*subscription*)	Labor: $480 Time: 16 hours	Labor: $60 Time: 2 hours	Labor: $420 Time: 14 hours
Moved from an EBS plan to an all-access plan (*subscription*)	Labor: $1,104 Time: 48 hours	Labor: $46 Time: 2 hours	Labor: $1,058 Time: 46 hours
DDA (based on 50 titles)	Labor: $400 Time: 25 hours	Labor: $200 Time: 12.5 hours	Labor: $200 Time: 12.5 hours

Figure 6. Firm order workflow.

provide no detail on what is being purchased, hindering processing, both in activating collections and in entering the invoice. Vendors can help:

- Provide robust MARC records rather than basic files.
  - At a minimum, subjects, ISBNs, and edition are needed in addition to title and author.

- Ensure collection names match what we purchase.
  - If we purchase Earth Sciences Full Collection, the collection name in Alma should not be Earth Sciences Complete.

- If front-files are sold each year, there should be a separate collection for each year sold, rather than combining all titles in one collection in Alma. The same goes for back-file purchases—the years purchased should have a corresponding collection in Alma.

- Ensure subject collections can be purchased rather than the entire collection. While most vendors offer this or something similar, not all do. This not only helps manage costs, but also helps libraries to better build collections targeted to their needs.

- Do not require a minimum spend for EBS or at least provide spend-level options. Minimums can be too high, thus pricing libraries out of the option of using that plan type altogether.

- All data should be included on the invoice, that is, if three collections are purchased, each should be listed with their cost. The

invoice should not just say "e-book collections." Not only is it hard for the library to show what is being purchased, but campus purchasing departments may ask for more information before paying the invoice. It also makes it easier to activate and order in our system.

Many publishers already do these things. However, over the course of three years, we've created over 50 local collections to manage e-book purchases and collections because one or more of the items were not met. Creating and maintaining a local collection is outside of the general acquisition workflow and should be considered when purchasing e-books. It is not something that halts the purchase, but when staff is limited, time has to be considered even if it's to acknowledge that there may be a lag between the purchase and when the records are uploaded to the catalog, though the serious downside is this hinders discoverability of the just purchased e-books.

While we can acknowledge that some acquisition methods offer a more streamlined workflow, this in itself is not a factor to not use PDA or EBS purchase models as there is value to these methods. What will ultimately stop any acquisition method is fund availability. It should be remembered that the difference between DDA, EBS, front-file purchases, and firm orders versus subscription plans is ownership. While some of the nonsubscription plans result in owned e-books and could be considered "one-time," they all in fact require yearly spending and budgeting. After all, if the library is purchasing e-book collections to support a program, those e-books will basically need to be purchased every year. Users will more than likely notice if they are not.