

Against the Grain

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Outsourcing: A Librarian Vendor Perspective

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Introduction

The decision to outsource technical services is a serious one that takes careful consideration and planning. Adding technical services work to the fulfillment workflow of library materials is, in many ways, the same as expanding your own operation. In a sense, you will be directing the work of a larger group of people than the one you have. Expressing your wishes and defining your local routines, conventions, and practices is time consuming and, although it is difficult to think of everything that your local staff do in every case, the effort can return benefits many times over. Outsourcing, when carefully planned and dutifully managed is a powerful boon to a library's workflows and time constraints because receiving catalog records and pre-processed materials will allow the library staff to devote time and energy to other tasks, backlogs, or administrative priorities. My experience has taught me that outsourcing technical services flourishes best under overarching goals that favor this model. The rest of what I will share here represents the experiences I have had both as an Acquisitions Librarian and as a vendor librarian who manages a technical services operation.

Preparing To Outsource

Preparing to engage a vendor for technical services may at first seem to be best guided by common sense. After all, we know the work that we are doing, so outsourcing should be as easy as telling someone else what we do, right? While that statement may be true from the 40,000-foot view, the devil, as they say, is in the details. Even if our local operation is small, the staff who are working with ordering, receiving, claiming, physical processing, and cataloging are making a lot of decisions every day that often do not make their way into procedural documentation. After all, if we were to record every single decision we make in the course of our work, our documentation would be vast, and our staff would be hard pressed to make good use of it. It is these day-to-day decisions — and how well our expectations are met as they are managed — that can wind up serving as the central hallmark of whether we judge outsourced technical services to be successful or not. It is very important not only to analyze the current procedural documentation that you do have, but also to ask the staff about the decisions they have made in the course of their work over time. Particularly where physical processing is concerned, deciding what to ask of the outsourcing vendor can become highly complicated due to concerns about stock, placement of items such as stamps and barcodes, and consistency, so it is vital to determine how important the steps your staff are following are to your collection management needs. If you feel strongly about a treatment or procedure, then ask the vendor for it. However, if you can live with some degree of flexibility, it may be easier to integrate the vendor's

services overall by waiting to see what the vendor will provide if such decisions must be made, provide feedback if the decisions need to be informed with additional detail, and build trust over time. Library services vendors see a wide variety of practices and treatments in use at libraries around the world, and they are never short of considerations as they make an on-the-spot decision for the one title that raises an eyebrow. However, the process of homing in on the particulars for your setting will take ongoing effort to settle and taking the time to prepare well can save time, money, and improve the overall experience.

Start At The Beginning, And Start Small

If you've been using a vendor for your book purchases, then you have likely ironed out how best to use their platform to make title selections. You may have also integrated the use of their platform into your collection development or selection program. Many if not most vendors will have a good understanding of the technical relationship between selecting and ordering and most vendors are aware of the many steps involved between placing the order in their platform and recording the order in the library system. So, it is best to start integrating technical services with a vendor at the point of order. Starting with an ordering service — usually one that will cut down on the necessary steps that get the catalog record and order record information (e.g., price, quantity, fund, location, selector, etc.) into the system — allows the library to establish a relatively low-cost relationship with outsourcing that will save time and labor hours (i.e., money) and is often less complex than outsourcing cataloging or physical processing.

While most vendors today are able to accommodate multiple ways to order, whether through the library system or on the vendor's platform, it is a good idea to ask which ordering method will make the order fulfillment process itself the most streamlined because not all ordering methods (e.g., email) may be automated on the vendor side. Many libraries have specific ordering concerns that center on formats (e.g., eBooks or print), funding (e.g., donated/endowment funds, regular budget funds, etc.), and particular content (e.g., juvenile literature or adult fiction), and one advantage of initiating use of a vendor with an ordering service is that you can start with just one of those concerns and easily build over time. Another distinct advantage of starting with an ordering service is that it will allow you to experience how your chosen vendor handles a variety of problem-solving scenarios, such as cancellations,

mistakes in order or selection details, claims, speed of fulfillment, and system glitches because these issues are more simple to resolve than, say, discussing a cataloger's judgment in descriptive cataloging. The dynamics of ordering allow the library and vendor to establish a dialogue that allows both parties to gauge service expectations and responsiveness and can give valuable insights into how to build a strong collaborative relationship.

Physical Processing

Remember those on-the-spot decisions the staff are making that I mentioned earlier? With physical processing, perhaps, the highest number of idiomatic and syllogistic decisions enter the outsourcing relationship. With no controls whatsoever imposed on publishers as to how their books will be shaped, sized, or printed, physical processing staff must be ready for anything. The problem is that it is impossible for the library to account for every way they may want processing to be handled in every given circumstance. Although there are many conventions that guide libraries in the arena of physical processing, such as those that result in many libraries using the same type of security systems, date due slips, and cover treatments, there are many options to choose from.

If the library has a developed preservation program, there may be more documentation available to guide decision making as materials are processed, particularly regarding labeling and stamping. In some settings, the Access Services or Circulation departments may have strong feelings about

where call number labels and ownership stamps are placed, particularly if there is unique text on the end papers or there are images or maps that mean alternative treatments are warranted. Also, consistency with the practices that would be followed by the in-house physical processing staff is often a concern, so it is also important to discuss their observations of how the vendor is performing as materials are received.

Where the in-house practices may not be documented in detail, the waters of integrating outsourced physical processing must be navigated with great care. For example, if your library uses Dewey Decimal Classification, do you truncate when printing numbers for spine labels? Where do you break lines? In what circumstances do you require a prefix or suffix for location or other information with the call number? Do you print in bold type or a regular weight font? Which font do you use? — and the list goes on. These appear to be simple questions and most of them are, but

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if your library has proliferated local practices around shelving that involve the call number — and many libraries have — those practices will need to be accounted for appropriately depending on the scope of services that are wanted. And, of course, in order to generate a call number, there needs to be a catalog record from which to get it.

Catalog Records

Catalogers seem to know a good record when they see one — or at least a *potentially* good one. By that I mean that it is relatively easy to spot those records that look just a little bit too brief, or that probably ought to have more subject headings, or that may need added entries. With time and experience, catalogers develop an informed sense around record quality and completeness. And explaining what we expect to receive from a vendor is greatly supported by the standards we work with, such as RDA, MARC21, the LC Authorities, and others. However, with cataloging there is also a great deal of judgment involved as the cataloger analyzes the item in hand, and any local conventions or rule interpretations that have been routinely adopted in the local setting should be closely reviewed before outsourcing cataloging. Explaining these practices may be somewhat involved and a phone call or meeting may be the best way to discuss how feasible it may be for the vendor to integrate them. Often, vendors are able to adopt a certain amount of local practice into their cataloging workflows for customers, but the production concerns of the vendor's environment can be quite different from those of a library, depending on the amount of cataloging they provide, the number of services they offer, and when cataloging has to occur in the order fulfillment process. Depending upon the amount of evaluation that is required to make the necessary decisions, the vendor may find it daunting to integrate certain practices, such as shelflisting, localized cutting, or complete call numbers for all eBooks. It is very important to ask, regardless. I have been pleasantly surprised on more than one occasion to find that a vendor was able to manage more than I had expected.

With respect to completeness of cataloging, the idea of a “full record” can be informed by a variety of nuances that impact our expectations. It is important to know what the local cataloging staff are thinking about as they flesh

out copy or create original records. Cataloging managers can usually provide relatively clear guidelines about the extent to which they expect their staff to develop catalog records, since they will be concerned about the delicate balance between quality and production in a similar way that the vendor is. While it is a good idea to ask to see sample records, they may only be so helpful without having the item in hand. It is possible, though, to look for descriptive anomalies and deviations from standards to an extent. Whether or not the vendor follows **Library of Congress** practices and/or RDA, for example, can be a good initial way to determine what other questions may need to be asked.

At the point of order, or later, when orders will be received, it may be possible to load a brief, placeholder record from the vendor. These records can play an important role in budget, discovery, deduplication, and inventory management, but they do mean that post-processing will be required in order to ensure full cataloging. The local workflows that manage these records, whether they be at the points of order or receiving, sometimes must be rethought to ensure that all these brief records are accounted for and receive the appropriate attention. When integrating outsourcing that mixes utilizing brief records from vendors with full records, complete shelf-ready services, or no records at all, it can be easy to miss the odd brief record. In all my work settings, the cataloging units always conducted routine audits to locate brief records that somehow missed being upgraded.

Building Trust For Long Term Success

Establishing solid quality control processes, at both the library and in the vendor's operation, is perhaps the best way to integrate routine evaluation of how well the services are performing. In terms of physical processing, the first line of quality control at the library is usually managed by the staff who receive the materials. Where catalog records are concerned, there may be multiple opportunities to review records as they are received, particularly for experienced staff who may be able to spot concerns on sight. On the vendor side, quality control is paramount as service charges are commensurate with the value offered, and services that are marred by high margins of error are not typically considered valuable. Even though the library may start small and add services and options slowly, eventually quality control will become more involved as

the relationship deepens. It is very important for both parties to be vigilant of opportunities to perform quality control and to discover any potential issues as quickly as possible. This commitment to the relationship will ensure its vitality in the long term.

As the library becomes more familiar with the vendor's capabilities, their reliability, and management of the unexpected, the relationship normalizes. This normalization allows better understanding of expectations on both sides and creates a working partnership that develops and matures into a true collaboration that can weather the ups and downs of materials budgets, standard and technology developments, and workflow changes. When the rapport reaches this stage of maturity, the library may feel more confident in asking about details, services, and activities they may want to add. Also, as services and collecting emphases change over time, options and choices that once fit the bill will need to be changed.

Through ongoing conversation about plans and needs, and close communication about day-to-day observations, the viability of the collaboration will become clearer and the bond between the library and the vendor will be tempered. The vendor needs to offer relevant and meaningful solutions and perform reliably while the library responds to environmental changes. Of course, the vendor will be designing services and options that promise to have broad appeal, while the library will need to manage the needs and expectations of its local collection development programs. This dynamic will test the boundaries of the services the vendor can confidently provide, drive how they develop new and better services, and it will also help the library to hone the awareness of its most critical needs.

Conclusion

With careful planning and commitment from everyone involved, the library-vendor partnership will thrive and achieve meaningful results. I have always found that using a measured approach with careful planning works best to allow new business partners to test and measure success, and to build trust over time. The working relationship inevitably gets stronger as reliability is proven, and as unexpected issues are resolved. Engaging fully — which invariably means keeping the lines of communication open and active — will be work for both the library and the vendor in order to achieve the biggest benefit, but the effort is worth it. 🌸

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University of Washington, Hall holds an MA in International and Area studies with an emphasis on Sub-Saharan Africa from **Yale University** and dual bachelor's degrees in Law and Society and Black Studies from the **Uni-**

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<https://www.infodocket.com/2020/01/15/tracie-d-hall-named-new-executive-director-of-the-american-library-association/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xx-MpezF2sCo>

The tirelessly competent **Ramune Kubilius** sends us a link to **NLM's** Fantastic Director **Patricia Flatley Brennan's** musings about what the upcoming 2020s might bring. <https://nlmdirector.nlm.nih.gov/2020/01/14/what-will-2020-bring/>. And be sure and connect to both her keynote in **Charleston** (Keynote Plenary: Anticipating the Future of Biomedical Commu-

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