Against the Grain

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Outsourcing Technical Services in a Health Sciences Library

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Introduction

Outsourcing in technical services was an especially hot topic in the late '90s and early 2000s. Most libraries, even in a smaller way, have used outsourcing to complete a project or wrap up a workflow. After decades of fixing problems and smoothing complications between vendors and libraries, outsourcing can be a relatively seamless process if the library staff and administration are all on board and educated about the project, workflow, or position being contracted out. Everyone involved should know why the job is being outsourced and the implications of outsourcing the work. If there is a factor that affects the work, however, outsourcing can become a complicated, time consuming, and overly expensive process. This article explores the challenges of outsourcing technical services when you have no technical services staff, how to overcome those challenges, and tips learned from successful and unsuccessful attempts to help administration understand why technical services skills are vital to a library's success.

Background

The **Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED)** is, at 46 years old, a young institution. As a standalone, public medical, pharmacy, and graduate school, its beginnings were a cooperative effort between four northeast Ohio public universities: **Kent State University**, **The University of Akron**, **Youngstown State University**, and **Cleveland State University** (referred to as regional partner universities). Because the University does not have its own hospital, regional hospitals serve as affiliates where students go for clerkships and where many of the faculty practice medicine. The libraries at the hospitals are included in this affiliation, so **NEOMED** and the hospital libraries formed a consortium that still survives today. The consortium consists of hospital libraries and the **NEOMED** library.

duration of the project to address cataloging of high-priority materials. Conversely, other institutions may be able to use this model on an on-going basis to address a backlog or to prevent its growth. **Duke** and **UNC** look for opportunities to use this cooperative cataloging model for size- and time-limited projects, but currently do not have a project in the pipeline. In either case, the model used in the pilot is flexible enough to be adapted accordingly. 🐾

NEOMED library administers the library services platform (LSP) that they share with the hospital libraries and historically is responsible for every aspect of the cataloging process. The consortium also does some collaborative purchasing and training when possible and meets as a group 2-3 times a year. The partnership between the hospitals and the **NEOMED** library presents unique challenges for technical services. The hospital libraries have a lot of autonomy, some have their own proxies and discovery layers, but they also depend on the **NEOMED** library for all their cataloging and loading of electronic records. Working in a shared catalog with multiple locations with local practices can be a challenge, even for an experienced cataloger, without being trained on local practice.

As with many libraries, staff numbers at the **NEOMED** library have steadily declined in the last decades. **Demetria Patrick** is the Technology Librarian and manages the LSP as well as other systems and implements emerging technologies. When she started in 2010, the **NEOMED** library had a director, two reference librarians, three full-time public services staff, one technical services librarian (responsible for cataloging, acquisitions, collections, and electronic resources), one full-time staff cataloger, and one part-time cataloger. **Melanie McGurr** was hired in 2013 as the Assistant Director of Content Strategy (hereafter called Content Strategist) where she managed technical services which encompassed collections, cataloging, acquisitions, and electronic resources. She was also interim Chief Medical Librarian for a portion of her three years at **NEOMED**. The title for the head of the library has changed from Chief Medical Librarian to Director in the last five years. When **McGurr** left for another position at one of the regional partner universities in early 2017, there was no one left with experience in collections, acquisitions, or cataloging. Unfortunately, her position was not approved to be filled by the University administration, although library administration understood the importance of the position.

The lack of a Content Strategist position was a problem for the **NEOMED** library as well as the seven affiliated hospital librarians mainly because this position was responsible for cataloging for the whole consortium. Despite the ongoing efforts of the library administration and staff working to advocate filling the position, there is still no full-time staff to complete technical services work. Currently,

in the **NEOMED** library, there is one reference librarian, the Technology Librarian, two and a half public services staff, one part-time graduate student, and an interim Director who is also responsible for another department at the University. In 2018, this staff level was serving 942 students and hundreds of staff and faculty. Full-time faculty, along with doctors, and pharmacists from around the region teach classes at the university and are supported in their teaching by the library.

When the authors worked at the institution together, there was also a long period of time when the library did not have a reference librarian. The purpose for mentioning this is that with three, and sometimes two, librarians at the library, there was very little time for cross-training. The Content Strategist was not trained to work much in the system and the Technology Librarian was not that familiar with the intricate aspects of technical services including cataloging and electronic resources. Despite good intentions, the frequent change in leadership and staff hindered their cross-training process.

Literature Review

Perhaps the most famous outsourcing story in technical services is that of **Wright State University**, who outsourced its entire cataloging department in 1993.[1] This wholesale outsourcing of the department served as a catalyst for outsourcing discussions at the academic level for years. In the search of the literature, outsourcing stories abound, from publics (**Hawaii Public** and **Fort Worth Public Libraries** probably being the most discussed), academics, and law libraries.[2] Out of the literature, only one article was on health sciences libraries and outsourcing, specifically on the outsourcing of collections.[3]

Therefore, when facing the idea of outsourcing at a health sciences library, the literature offers little help in specifics, but a lot of discussion and tips for general outsourcing. One of the largest problems with outsourcing at **NEOMED**, is that there is no one at the library who fluently "speaks" cataloging, acquisitions, or collections. As **Hirshon** and **Winters** discuss in their book, *Outsourcing Library Technical Services,* "Outsourcing brings an added complication: you must understand what you are doing before you can outsource it. Without in-house expertise to make effective decisions, the library could find itself inviting the foxes into the chicken coop."[4] In the case of **NEOMED's** library, the concern was less

about the vendors having too much power, and more about the lack of understanding between the vendors and the library. The library was not always sure what to ask for, and the vendors did not always understand how to support the library's lack of knowledge.

Outsourcing Strategies

Ohio has a collaborative state university system and **NEOMED** library has a tradition of collaborating with vendors and other libraries, including numerous academic institutions, on various projects. As a founding member of **OhioLINK**, a large, state-wide consortium, it is natural for the staff to turn to their regional partner universities and state partners for support. **OhioNET** is a regional consortium that offers discounts on resources and consulting services, including training, loading electronic records, and systems work. **OCLC**, as the mainstay of cataloging and an Ohio company, was also a natural place for the staff to turn to for outsourcing help. Another source of assistance were the regional partner universities and hospital libraries.

Hospital librarians were previously trained to add item records, add copies, or make edits to their own print items, but did not have cataloging or bibliographic record privileges. When **NEOMED** lost the Content Strategist, a backlog of print books for the library and hospital libraries began to accumulate. The need for course reserves, reference books, and general collection monographs to be processed was pressing. With no immediate permission to hire a cataloger, library administration decided that on-the-fly records could be a relatively easy solution to the problem for print materials. This decision was met with concern from some staff because they felt this temporary solution would need a large clean-up project. The Technology Librarian was asked to create instructions for making on-the-fly records. These instructions were distributed with the temporary situation in mind because the **NEOMED** library staff believed that a cataloger would be hired soon.

The on-the-fly situation began as a short-term solution but is still going on over two years, and more than 1000 records, later. Most of these records are true on-the-fly records, very sparse with no subjects, **OCLC** numbers, and sometimes no call numbers. A few hospital librarians filled out as much information as possible on the record to make the record look and act as a fully cataloged MARC record. Most of the hospital librarians only put records in for new print materials, but the lack of thorough training, cataloging experience, and miscommunication caused duplicate records and other errors to be created. These on-the-fly records alleviated a pressing problem by making the materials findable but caused a larger one. The records were suppressed from view in the **OhioLINK** catalog, the holdings were not set in **OCLC**, and the inconsistency of the records affected the integrity of the catalog. To solve the problems, the on-the-fly records would need to be either batch processed by a vendor

who could handle this variety of records or they would need to be fully cataloged one-by-one.

Another issue was the electronic records loads from **OhioLINK** and other vendors. As a consortium with a core of collected resources, **OhioLINK** distributes electronic records for new e-journals and eBooks frequently and includes records for replacement and deletion. When the Content Strategist left, no one had experience with record loads, so the catalog was outdated. As with the print records, the library needed the backlog to be addressed and a workflow for ongoing loading.

Several plans were suggested, including outsourcing the cataloging work to one of the regional partner universities. The Chief Medical Librarian continued to express the importance of hiring a Content Strategist to the University's administrators, but the position was not approved to be filled. He then presented a proposal to administration that suggested the library should hire a consultant and eventually received permission to move forward with hiring a consultant to catalog the backlog. Although the cataloger had experience, he did receive health sciences and local practice training from the former Content Strategist. Because **McGurr** worked close by at a regional partner university, she was able to help her former co-workers. The consultant soon found a full- time job, and the Chief Medical Librarian attempted to find another consultant or part-time, temporary cataloger without success. After the Chief Medical Librarian left the University in the summer of 2018, the staff began looking into other options for cataloging.

A staff member contacted **OhioNET** (for electronic resources) and **OCLC** (for print cataloging) to investigate how the vendors could help with the backlog and ongoing cataloging. They both returned a quote for the contract of work and the staff discussed the implications of moving forward. In late 2018, a new Interim Director began working at the library and the staff presented the problem and proposals as potential solutions for the backlog. After multiple conference calls and emails between the staff and vendors, the staff agreed that the proposed projects were the best solutions to quickly fix the problem. The Interim took the proposals to University administration, and after some back and forth about ongoing costs versus one-time funding, the library was granted permission to pursue the contracts with **OCLC** and **OhioNET**.

The library was interested in contracting with **OhioNET** to load a backlog of electronic records from **OhioLINK** and other vendors. The library has a long-standing relationship with **OhioNET** because they serve as a vendor for purchasing resources and hosted the LSP for several years. The staff at the library were comfortable working with **OhioNET** staff, and **OhioNET** understood the limitations of the library's knowledge in cataloging and electronic resources. **OhioNET** caught up on the backlog of electronic resources, which were easily retrievable from **OhioLINK** and the vendors, and continues to load records on an ongoing basis.

OCLC was contacted concerning cleaning up the on-the-fly situation and ongoing cataloging. Before moving forward with a contract for work, **OCLC** asked the staff to complete a project questionnaire to get a better sense of what was needed. This questionnaire would be used to help **OCLC** generate conditions to best serve the library's needs. The Technology Librarian and Reference Librarian worked together to complete it but had to eventually schedule a conference call with **OCLC** for further clarification about the form. The general questions regarding the local practices, number of titles, and physical processing were easy to answer. The form also included more advanced questions regarding MARC fields, indicators, and subfields that required a level of expertise that did not exist at the library. Although the Technology Librarian was familiar with the major MARC fields to manage the project, she still had to seek help and clarification from the former Content Strategist and the LSP vendor to answer the advanced questions. As the **Hirshon** quote stated earlier, the need for someone with the proper experience to interact with vendors is imperative.

Although the **OhioNET** project got off and running with little trouble, the **OCLC** project required a lot of investigation and work. After making the decision to put the project on hold until after the beginning of 2019, the Technology Librarian made little progress in completing the questionnaire in a satisfactory manner. After sending the completed form to **OCLC**, the Technology Librarian and Interim Director were informed that the submitted information was not complete enough for **OCLC** to automate the process.

To help the Technology Librarian better answer the questionnaire, **OCLC** sent a few test records to load in the LSP. After unsuccessfully trying to load the records the Technology Librarian reached out to the former Content Strategist for direction. The former Content Strategist asked her colleague from her new institution to help troubleshoot the issues. Although the issues were resolved and the records were successfully loaded by adjusting the process and load tables, the Technology Librarian understood that fixing this issue would not completely help her answer all the questions on the **OCLC** form in a timely manner. The Interim Director and Technology Librarian decided to put the **OCLC** project on hold once again because it was too time intensive for the Technology Librarian.

As the **OCLC** project unfolded, a library search committee was simultaneously looking for a part-time Cataloging Specialist to help manage the **OCLC** print backlog project, with the Technology Librarian managing that person. The Interim Director contacted a regional partner university with a library and information science graduate school program for help with finding potential candidates. Her contact at this library suggested some names of student workers, and the library moved forward with the interview process. Unfortunately, the search committee failed to find someone for the Cataloging Specialist position.

The Cataloging Specialist position transitioned into a Graduate Student Assistant (GSA) position in the hopes of finding a student needing experience. Fortunately, the student contacts shared by the regional partner university were interested in an on-campus interview, and the library successfully hired a GSA worker with cataloging experience. After evaluating the backlog and the GSA's experience, the library staff decided to put the **OCLC** project on hold indefinitely, and the GSA helped the library move forward with the backlog project locally. The GSA worked on updating documentation, processes, and procedures and shared them with the affiliated hospital libraries. Although the library believes that the GSA can get them through the backlog and help them build up documentation and cross-training efforts to move forward, **OCLC** is still a possibility for the future.

Conclusion

Currently, the library has a part-time GSA processing print material and **OhioNET** loading electronic records. Some work is still not being completed; no true collection development is being done, and licensing is handled by a staff member and the Interim Director. There is not the time or expertise for database maintenance, deselection, or other projects. Although not ideal, the situation is an improvement from the last two years. The current fix is only possible because of the tenacious work of the staff and library administration to find alternatives to fill the gap. Much of the work is covered this way, but it is a long road for the rest of the staff, especially the Technology Librarian who is currently managing all technical services projects and slowly incorporating more clean-up tasks to restore the integrity of the catalog.

The following suggestions come from **NEOMED** library's experience, either as something we tried or something that, in hindsight, we should have tried, to assist libraries who may find themselves in a similar situation:

Try partnering with a library that can help you move forward, such as fellow consortium members, or a larger school that might be willing to work with you. Approach consultants and vendors of all types, individuals or companies. Even if they cannot do the outsourcing work for you, perhaps they can help interface with the vendors or hire knowledgeable students. Ask on listservs, including listservs at library schools, if anyone can suggest solutions or would be interested in working as a consultant. The **NEOMED** library tried many of these ideas and found that a combination of a company/vendor and a student works for them for now. This is not a solution that promotes growth, however, and it isn't a permanent fix.

Complete a time and/or budget study for how much time is taken up by liaising with vendors and what is being done versus contract costs to show administration the difference. Also, compare the cost of a full or part-time employee to what you are paying for outsourcing.

Ensure that university and library administration understand that many librarians are each differently trained. A cataloging or electronic resources librarian is trained specifically for a certain job that another librarian might not be able to take on.

Be prepared to go to administration about a workflow or position, using any data and/or research that you can gather. Keep this information up to date. If the request does not work the first time, you will have the information for the next try. Make it clear what is one-time and ongoing funding to avoid any confusion or disruption in workflow.

Survey and/or get letters of support from other stakeholders, like faculty, consortium members, and students, if you have that option. Use a recent internal review from the university or complete your own self-study using library staff or an external reviewer.

The conversation about outsourcing that arose in the 1990s never disappeared, but the discussion has new dimensions now. **NEOMED's** most pressing challenge is its lack of technical services expertise in a consortium that is depending on that expertise and compli-

cated by the fact that no one on staff "speaks" enough technical services to make negotiating outsourcing easier. The outsourcing situation at **NEOMED** library is a small example of what could potentially become a much bigger problem. Declining enrollments, tight budgets, and other current trends could bring more staffing challenges, and outsourcing has the potential to become even more complicated.

References

Hirshon, Arnold and **Barbara Winters**. *Outsourcing Library Technical Services: A How-to-do-it Manual for Librarians*. New York: Neal-Schumer Publishers, 1996.

Martin, Robert Sidney, **Steven L. Brown**, **Jane H. Claes**, **Cynthia Ann Gray**, **Greg Hardin**, **Timothy Judkins**, and **Kelly Patricia Kingrey**. *The Impact of Outsourcing and Privatization on Library Services and Management*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2000.

Blecic, Deborah D., **Saskia Hollander** and **Douglas M. Lanier**. "Collection Development and Outsourcing in Academic Health Sciences Libraries: a Survey of Current Practices." *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 87, no. 2 (April 1999): 178-86.

Endnotes
1. **Arnold Hirshon** and **Barbara Winters**, *Outsourcing Library Technical Services: A How-to-do-it Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schumer Publishers, 1996).
2. **Robert Sidney Martin**, **Steven L. Brown**, **Jane H. Claes**, **Cynthia Ann Gray**, **Greg Hardin**, **Timothy Judkins**, and **Kelly Patricia Kingrey**, *The Impact of Outsourcing and Privatization on Library Services and Management* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), 29-31, 32-37.
3. **Deborah D. Blecic**, **Saskia Hollander** and **Douglas M. Lanier**. "Collection Development and Outsourcing in Academic Health Sciences Libraries: a Survey of Current Practices." *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 87, no. 2 (April 1999): 178-86.
4. **Hirshon** and **Winters**, *Outsourcing Library Technical Services: A How-to-do-it Manual for Librarians*, 23.

nications) and her Penthouse Interview *https://youtu.be/Oafwv72pYb8*.

The **APE (Academic Publishing in Europe) Conference** took place in Berlin in January, 2020. **Anthony Watkinson** and **Sven Fund** attended for *ATG*. The pragmatic **Roger Schonfeld**, recently posted a report on the **SSP's** *Scholarly Kitchen* — see *https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2020/01/21/global-science-chinas-rise-european-anxiety/*.

Speaking of which, the energetic **Mr. Watkinson** has just celebrated 18 years at **CIBER**

Research. **CIBER's** expertise lies in making sense of how very large numbers of people behave and consume in the digital environment. They map, monitor, and evaluate digital information systems, platforms, services and roll-outs using innovative research methods. What a mouthful! *http://ciber-research.eu/CIBER_Research_Ltd.html*

It has happened! The fascinatingly opinionated **Mark Herring** will retire as **Dean of Library Services** at **Winthrop University's Dacus Library** in June 2020. I told him that we want him to continue with his columns in the new year! Congratulations, **Mark**, retirement is pretty special!

Saw that **Allen McKiel** Dean of Library and Media Services at **Western Oregon University** is celebrating 12 years of service at **Western Oregon**. It has been too long since we heard from **Allen**! Did you know that **Allen** started as a programmer analyst? He merged his technical skills with librarianship with two library software developers — **OCLC** and **NOTIS**.

Mike Shatzkin has been at the **Idea Logical Company, Inc.** for 41 years! He founded the company in 1979 which consults to book