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“Linchpin or weakest link?: challenges to current document delivery practice and services”

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Abstract

Purpose: The main purpose of this paper is to generate discussion on the necessity for document delivery services to re-position themselves, thus “adding value” within the information chain.

Approach: Empirical, based on working practice in a major academic library. Review article, based on practice.

Originality/value: A synthesis of current practice, outlining current shortcomings, and challenges.

Keywords: Interlibrary loans, document delivery, Great Britain, Ireland.

Paper Type: Opinion

Introduction

Shifting patterns in document supply traffic in academic and research libraries have been well documented in the literature, with this journal no exception (most recently Lobban, 2006; Paine, 2007). With few exceptions, the most noteworthy being data from the American College and Research Libraries (ACRL), the general trend worldwide is downward. The relationship between increased access to electronic materials and this decrease in volume has also been documented (Kidd, 2003). With the multiplicity of resource discovery tools, including search engines, the frustration is not with the identification of information, but with what Jubb (2007) has expressed succinctly as “the last mile” of the process, which “actually delivers the document or other resource that has been searched for”. This paper will argue that document supply services, as currently practiced, are failing to meet the requirements and expectations of users, and have, in fact, become the weakest link in the information chain. In this discussion paper, some of the reasons for the impediments in the development of more streamlined services are explored and explained, and in outlining future challenges, the growing complexity of the field is considered. It is suggested, therefore, that rather than becoming redundant, as is sometimes insinuated with the decrease in activity, the role of the document supply librarian in the future will become more specialist. Investment in this “niche” service could “add value” to the infrastructure supporting an increasingly competitive research environment. The relationship of document supply with other library services and developments is also examined, and synergies identified. The methodology is largely evidence based. This is a discussion paper intended to stimulate debate on how document supply can develop to maintain relevancy, and contribute to the information infrastructure underpinning teaching and research in third and fourth level education. It is argued, therefore, that paradoxical as it may seem at this time of

diminishing volume, more investment in document supply services, rather than less, is required to satisfactorily meet users' requirements.

University profile

University College Dublin (UCD) is the largest university in the Republic of Ireland, with a student population in excess of 22,000, of which about 25% are postgraduate. It employs about 1000 academic staff. The library structure consists of the James Joyce Library (JYL), which houses the library administration and centralized library services; it also provides library facilities to the Colleges of Arts and Celtic Studies, Human Sciences, Business (undergraduate) and Law, Science, Agriculture, and Civil and Biosystems Engineering. Four satellite branch libraries provide service for Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Studies; Health Sciences; Veterinary Medicine, and Postgraduate Business Studies. Document supply services are not centralized and all statistics contained in this paper refer to the James Joyce Library only.

The changing pattern of document supply service provided by the James Joyce Library concurs with the reported literature (Lobban, 2006). In the last decade the volume of outgoing requests from the James Joyce Library has fallen by 60%. The sharpest decrease was in 2002-03, which coincided with both an increase in cost to the reader to help counteract a 79% increase in BLDSC charges to Irish libraries, and also with increased accessibility to electronic resources. The ratio of non returnables to returnables has also shifted in that period from 75:25 (1997-1998) to 44:56 (2006:2007), with 26% of returnable items supplied by libraries other than BLDSC, of which 77% were from Higher Education libraries in the United Kingdom, predominately the CURL libraries.

A review conducted by the Document Supply Unit (JYL) in the wake of the increase in costs in 2002, concluded that at that time there was no viable alternative to BLDSC for quality document supply across the spectrum of disciplines which the James Joyce Library supports. However, since then there has been fundamental and rapid change in the information ecology. The Irish Research eLibrary initiative (IReL) has facilitated consortia access to 6,000 journal titles in Science and Technology, and to 18,000 titles in the Humanities and Social Sciences, together with access to 42,000 e-books, primarily through Early English Books Online (EEBO), and Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), thus strengthening the collections of all the Irish universities. Open access publishing also increased in usage in this period. The use of search engines became ubiquitous, as quantified by OCLC, (2005) who reported that 89% of students use search engines in the first instance in information searching, citing ease of use, speed and convenience as the advantages of this usage. The argument that Google conveys the impression that everything and anything is discoverable online (White, 2007) can be extended, to the expectation that document supply services can deliver the full text of what Google does not. The environment, however, appears complicated to the user, as there is often a myriad of access points to many of these electronic resources, based on institutional subscriptions to electronic resources, pay per view services, publishers' electronic archives and Open Access publishing. The divergence between reader expectation and document supply service provision has widened in recent years, as the practice of document supply has failed to develop and streamline services within this new environment. This dissatisfaction was expressed last year in response to a UCD Reader Services' Planning and Development Survey. A similar survey undertaken at the

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same time in another university echoes a similar response [1]. Conference attendance and networking with counterparts in other institutions, and membership of e-mail discussion lists such as lis-ill, suggests that although there may be some local differences to meet institutional and organizational requirements, current document supply practice in higher education in Great Britain and Ireland is fairly uniform.

Current environment

The common denominator for document supply in Great Britain and Ireland is its centralized model, established under the aegis of the British Library Document Supply Centre and its forerunners. This service has served us well and indeed has been the envy of the world. However since its peak in volume in the late 1990s, there has been a fundamental and rapid change in the information environment, encompassing the introduction of the “big deals”, consortia purchase such as IReL as described above, pay per view services, digitization of back files by major publishers and Open Access publishing; all of which have impacted on volume supplied by BLDSC. The lack of published statistical data by BLDSC in the last few years has already been noted (McGrath, 2007a), but the calculation of a decline of 46% in document delivery to the academic sector in the period 1996-2006 (Creaser, 2006) is in line with BLDSC’s overall drop in volume. At its peak in 2001 the British library supplied over 3.8 million items per year, but during the last 7 years demand has fallen by more than 50% to 1.6m items in 2007 (Pfleger, in publication). Critical mass has obviously been reached, and BLDSC is fighting to maintain viability. Its survival strategy is a combination of partnership, existing product enhancement and involvement in multiple parts of the supply chain, all to be achieved with limited investment. New markets have been sought, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Higher Education sector will be overtaken by the commercial, as BLDSC’s principal market, in terms of revenue.

In a recent study of material requested from BLDSC by the Document Supply unit in the James Joyce Library over the past two academic years, 2005-2006, and 2006/2007, it was noted that no one journal title could be identified as a potential purchase consideration. The majority (52%) was for pre 1995 publications and 40% were single requests from titles. Of the remainder, the identifiable trend was that multiple requests from particular titles were made by single users, thus supporting specialist research. Similarly, multiple requests from particular titles were not sustained over the period (2005-2007). Some speculation that the eventual unpicking of the “big deals” will result in an increase in document supply is unfounded, and IReL’s recommendation regarding coverage is to: “Investigate the range of subscription models, e. g pay-per-view, in relation to individual journal titles outside major publisher packages” (<http://www.library.dcu.ie/Eresources/IReL/IReLSurveyReport%20Final.pdf> – accessed 13/2/2008). It is interesting to note that the increase in document supply in the United States is for returnables (Beaubien, 2007). Factors cited for this increase include greater access to resource discovery tools, user-friendly services including user initiated requests, and diminishing purchasing power due to “flat” budgets, increasing journal costs and unfavourable exchange rates (Beaubien, 2007). However, these factors also feature on our document supply landscape, but are not matched by an increase in demand. The difference between the U.S. model and ours is in the pricing structure. This was ably articulated by a Fulbright scholar at University

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College Cork, in her statement, “It had never occurred to me that there would be a fee” (Ashton,2007),

The introduction of BLDSC’s Secure Electronic Delivery (SED) service was in response to the ease of delivery their competitors, mainly publishers and aggregators, enjoyed. This service was introduced in the James Joyce Library in September 2006, and emphasis placed on delivery directly to the requestor, using the “requestor e-mail” facility, which TALIS ALTO and UCD’s library management system facilitates. In 2006/2007, 27 % of non returnables to James Joyce Library readers was delivered directly to their desktops, and as a result of a proactive education and awareness programme and enhancements to university e-mail services, it is expected that this figure will increase in the current year. To improve document supply turnaround time, current practice in the James Joyce Library is to use SED for all document requests, and for those not requested for direct delivery to the user to be downloaded and printed within the document supply unit and sent to the reader. However the aim is to at least invert the current electronic: paper ratio.

While speed of service is one of the main benchmarks of quality document supply, it is not the sole indicator. The criteria cited for the use of search engines, i.e. ease of use, speed and convenience, must also be applied to effective document supply services. The development of unmediated document supply in the United Kingdom and Ireland, has been impeded by the interpretation of copyright legislation, led by BLDSC’s requirement that the requesting library obtain and hold the physical signature of a copyright declaration for each request prior to ordering library privilege paid copies. This has perpetuated a restrictive practice, which has resulted in overly bureaucratic local practice for the submission of requests. It has also meant that it is usual that either the “patron initiated” or “add address” facilities of library management systems (where they exist) are used, but not both, which could otherwise result in a seamless desktop to desktop service. More recently the use of readers’ IDs and PINs as an acceptable form of electronic signature has been explored (Titley, 2007). Not all library management systems have secure PIN allocation, and alternatives must also be explored through the utilization and development of university portals. Copyright law is complex and open to interpretation, and it could be argued that the dominance of BLDSC in the market, has meant that many practitioners, although compliant with BLDSC’s requirements for document supply, have failed to engage fully with the legal complexities. Sections 38 to 43 of the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act (1988) includes nothing about electronic document delivery (Mueller, 2007), although it can be expected that the UK Copyright Law Consultation, launched in January of this year, will address this area. The high profile SUBITO case in Germany has largely been overtaken by an amendment to German Copyright Law in January 2008 (Mueller, in publication). However the relationship between document supply and European law is still not clear, and may yet be tested in the European Court of Justice (Mueller, in publication). This is of particular interest to those of us whose main suppliers are located outside our own jurisdiction, but it is also likely to impact if document supply models become more decentralized. Similarly, in our consideration of constraints to the development of seamless services, it is important not to confuse copyright with license agreements. The latter are international in nature, and are brokered by individual publishers for particular products, and are usually governed by the law of the country most favourable to the publisher.

The dominance of BLDSC has also resulted in document supply being the least developed function within library management systems, and the dependence on, and requirements of the BLDSC's services has informed the little there is. While BLDSC is still the dominant supplier in the United Kingdom and Ireland, a more distributed model for returnables has been steadily growing in more recent years. This is substantiated by the figures for the James Joyce Library for 2006/2007, which indicated that 27% of items borrowed were supplied by libraries other than BLDSC. Yet library management systems have failed to develop interoperability, and it has recently been acknowledged that "traditional monolithic automated library management systems were not developed in a manner that enables system interoperability" (White, 2007). Nevertheless, existing protocols, such as ISO-ILL have not been adopted by all library management systems, especially by those who do not operate outside the United Kingdom and Ireland. In some respects, the banker function facilitated by BLDSC, reduced the urgency for such interoperability as it facilitated "third party" lending through a central billing system. This point is substantiated by the fact that the interoperability provided by ISO-ILL has been adopted and is much more vital in areas such as North America, and Australia and New Zealand, where the centralized model facilitated by BLDSC does not exist, although central payment facilities, such as OCLC's ILL Fee Management (IFM) service, exist. However, it is worth remembering that the continuation of the labour intensive banker function is reviewed regularly by BLDSC, and a recent increase in the charges levied per transaction may provide a clue as to its future.

Free and easy access to a growing number of online catalogues, including OCLC's WorldCat has resulted in improved resource discovery, but current library management systems fail to support the "last mile". The lack of interoperability is a serious impediment to the streamlined acquisition of material from libraries outside the United Kingdom and Ireland. This necessitates either the use of BLDSC's cumbersome and prohibitively expensive worldwide search service, or the maintenance of dual systems, with multiple methods of requesting and multiple methods of payment, although the use of the IFLA voucher system goes some way to alleviating the latter. A recent JYL request by e-mail to a large United States university library was rejected, as its service only accepted requests through OCLC's ILLIAD system, by fax or by post. Similarly the reliance on a single supplier, BLDSC, has also meant that the accounting processes within document supply modules are under developed, and generally fail to include currency conversion facilities.

The relatively low use of electronic transfer services, such as ARIEL, in the United Kingdom and Ireland, is also indicative of the primacy of BLDSC. This also means that the supply of documents from library to library, albeit low in volume, is still largely based on photocopy services, with delivery through postal or fax services.

The reliance on a centralized model has resulted also in the lack of development of a resource sharing ethos, which is in contrast to communities where document supply services are more distributed. In the UK, COPAC is *de facto* a national union catalogue, and unfortunately, Ireland's equivalent, IRIS, has failed to develop an operational Z39.50 platform. Nevertheless, the practice in UK and Ireland, is to try BLDSC in the first instance, and then apply to COPAC and other locations. The ethics of administering charges for document supply is also questionable, as education and public library services are on the whole publicly funded bodies, with revenue emanating from the same source. The argument that publicly funded research

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should be deposited in national or institutional repositories, is also valid, as is the practice elsewhere, e.g. Australia.

Finally, a less obvious impediment to the lack of development of document delivery services and models, is the “deprofessionalisation” of the service and operation. With the incremental decrease in volume, many document supply units have managed to remain within budget, thus drawing less attention to their operation than when the reverse was the case a decade earlier. The close correlation between increased electronic journal acquisition and the decrease in document supply activity has presumed that in time, document supply requirements will effectively disappear. This is a false premise, as access to electronic resources is not evenly spread across all disciplines and gaps in coverage are likely to remain, with requests increasingly for “Long Tail” items. However, with the reduction in both volume and expenditure, document supply services occupy a diminished profile within library services and operations, and are frequently managed by experienced practitioners, who have a wealth of experience in the field, but may not be directly involved in decision making processes. As document supply services intersect all library functions and operations, it is vital that their interests are represented at the strategic level and that the impact of decision making processes on its service development and potential is fully realized. The fact that document supply is often viewed in negative rather than in positive terms has also contributed to its reduction in status within library operations. The service is more likely to be perceived as the manifestation of weakness in the library’s collections, rather than as a quantitative and qualitative service which is an integral part of the infrastructure of research support.

Challenges

The concept of document supply is well established, having its origins in the sharing of materials among the monastic monasteries in the first half of the first millennium. The need for libraries to share is unlikely to disappear as not even well endowed educational institutions, can hope to meet all their information requirements from their own stock. However, while recognizing the shortcomings in current practice as outlined above, it is imperative that document supply personnel recognize the rapid changes in the dissemination and accessibility of information and tailor services accordingly. The requirement to become user focused is paramount, and changes in the information ecology must be met with correlating shifts in service provision. Thus, McGrath’s recent challenge to the British Library’s traditional definition of ILDS as “the process of obtaining material not readily accessible locally,” is thought provoking. His assertion is that today “locally” does not just mean held physically in the local library, but notes that a user can be “at home in Singapore, accessing material held on a server in Holland, via a link at their university which itself can be anywhere in the world” (McGrath, 2007b). It is well known that most students and researchers will use the principle of least effort in their information seeking practice; it can be argued that the print material held by the university library may now be considered not readily accessible to the user population, as many now work remotely from their educational institution. It must also be remembered that even in this ever increasing electronic age, libraries are still spending large amounts of money, and substantial proportions of their annual budget on print journals. In the UCD library service subscriptions to print only titles account for just over 10% of the total. However reliable quantitative data on their usage is not readily available. It is probable that such collections are underutilized, due in part to their lack of convenience to the reader. Many researchers will be satisfied with what is available to them

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from their desktop. The development of services which includes document supply from the library's own print holdings to the user, in a format most convenient to them, might not only promote the use of the library's print resources, thus ensuring more value for money, but could also strengthen research support structures. This point has an increasing resonance as more users think of the library in virtual terms rather than as a physical space. This was borne out recently when a frustrated reader called to say the library did not have the paper she wanted, when in fact it was held in our print collections. This reverses the experience of a decade ago, when the marketing of electronic resources was in its infancy.

Demographic diversification of the student population is also a factor, and a recent Higher Education Authority (HEA) report has shown an increase of 170% in the number of foreign students in third level education in Ireland in the last decade (Flynn, 2007). Thus, material which in the past would be sought from "abroad", may very well be familiar to our readers and be held in "home" institutions, or in the universities in which primary degrees were obtained. In short, our reach has had to become global, and extend beyond the British Isles. Some of the anticipated increase in research students in Ireland will be wooed from abroad. However, the expectations of researchers and scholars from abroad may not be met by current practice in U.K. and Ireland. This has been articulated recently in relation to the passing of charges to readers as part payment for document supply services, a practice not prevalent in the United States, where library services seem to be better resourced (Ashton, 2007).

In the reforming of document supply services, it may be necessary to place more emphasis on delivery and less on loan, and to use the most effective means of access, be it document delivery from an agent such as BLDSC, pay per view, or purchase. A recent request reported "nukl" (no UK locations) by BLDSC was found to be available on Amazon for the princely sum of \$0.88, but currently our document supply unit does not have the use of credit card facilities, so the reader had to be advised to purchase. His response was patient, but such a scenario does not stand up to scrutiny, either from the perspective of service provision, or common sense. In short, as a document supply unit we were willing to pay approximately €20.00+ postage to borrow the item for a relatively short period, but could not purchase for \$0.88 (€0.56) + postage. Furthermore, it may also be more economically viable to purchase recently published material for which interlibrary loan requests are submitted. It has always been our practice in JJJ to inform the appropriate liaison librarian of requests for such material, and purchase is a frequent outcome. However, in this framework, the cost of the item requested should be taken from document supply funds, satisfying purchase on demand criteria, rather than from specific school designated fund codes, some of which are insufficiently resourced anyway. However, to adopt this practice, it is important that the reader's request can be satisfied in approximately the same time frame as a returnable item is supplied, ideally within a week. The acquisition of such material is therefore outside usual acquisition policies and procedures, and may well necessitate an agreement with a particular supplier to support such an initiative. To delay cataloguing and processing this stock until returned by the reader would also make sense, thus reducing delays in supply to a minimum.

In repositioning document supply to its central role in facilitating access to material in an increasingly complex information environment, it is imperative that flexibility is built into workflows and processes; and to develop user centred services. Cognizance of shifting patterns in research output and variations across disciplines must be accommodated.

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Developments in publishing, electronic access and digitization programmes must be noted, account taken of copyright legislation and compliance, and digital rights management understood. The development and requirements of institutional repositories together with the obligations of the research community is also pertinent in the provision of document supply services. Resource discovery tools must be further developed so enhance “Search and Find” processes, thereby not only delivering a service, but also encouraging an ethos of resource sharing. A clear understanding of the infrastructure required to support such processes is a requisite, so that existing library management system providers can be prevailed upon to develop products to meet requirements, or that such requirements are seriously considered when evaluating new products and systems. The development of document supply services will also benefit from close collaboration with colleagues across the entire library service. In turn document supply statistical data provides a rich source of information which can inform collection development, and together with electronic resource usage data, may be used to inform new license negotiation and renewals. Surely much could be gained from inter-institutional collaboration in the development of collection building policies and their practical implementation?

As stated, the practice of interlibrary lending is centuries old, but the development of document supply services is much more recent. World War II compounded the necessity for streamlined information provision, as concomitant with rapid technological advance, was the vast mass of information across all disciplines emanating from the war effort. The guiding principle of The Royal Society of Scientific Information Conference in 1948, is worth re-visiting:

“Science rests upon its published record, and ready access to public scientific and technical information is a fundamental need for scientists everywhere. All bars which prevent access to scientific and technical publications hinder the progress of science and should be removed”. (Bernal,1949).

Document supply is a vital link in the knowledge chain. It is our responsibility to rise to the challenges outlined above, and to regenerate and rejuvenate our services in order to strengthen the infrastructure to support research and scholarship across all disciplines, in the manner most appropriate to them. In so doing, document supply services will become a linchpin in academic and research support rather than the weakest link.

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