

Cataloging: how to take a business approach

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Abstract

In this paper, ten standard business principles are considered in relation to library cataloging. These principles are intended to suggest methods that may decrease the time necessary for processing new library materials without adversely affecting access to the materials. This purely rational paradigm offers ideas about how to modify the cataloging philosophy and workflow, to reduce costs and improve patron service. By applying these basic principles, cataloging departments can accomplish traditional tasks more efficiently. Furthermore, the adoption of this approach will help to ensure the department's perceived value and relevance by freeing catalogers to focus more fully on the description and access of electronic resources.

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Introduction

Cataloging is a high-cost activity. Thorough and ongoing studies performed at Iowa State University Library (2001), Vanderbilt University Library (2003) and Notre Dame, among others, have demonstrated the expense in a variety of ways. Vast cataloging backlogs in many libraries provide even more convincing evidence that the cost of cataloging is too high. In many cases, though not all, backlogs exist because cataloging departments still seek to provide a level of service that is not supported by the institution. Backlogs can be eliminated by changing either the process or the product. The bottom line is that catalogers, reference librarians, patrons and administrators must all learn to accept the quality (or the level) of cataloging that the library can afford.

In the early 1990s, many libraries began to adopt a standard business approach to technical services. As part of this trend, OCLC's PromptCat service and vendor supplied records for English language monographs emerged and have since been widely adopted by small, mid-sized and large academic libraries throughout the country. In order to maximize their efficiency, many libraries curtail or even eliminate in-house scrutiny of these records and assume they are acceptable. Outsourced shelf-prep has also been widely embraced for these materials, thereby creating the previously unimagined possibility of a 1 day turn from dock to shelf.

In this paper, we examine the trend of outsourcing technical services for English language monographs. By focusing on the business and production principles that inspire and govern this practice, we hope to encourage more widespread use of a business approach to cataloging additional library materials. The business principles that have specific relevance to library cataloging include:

- know current cost structures;
- control the "Expert Mentality";
- adhere to standards;
- maximize use of available resources;
- design and produce an economically viable product;
- adjust capacity to match demand;
- automate and/or outsource;
- establish production goals and measure performance;
- control quality via sampling; and
- be strategic.

Application of these business principles clearly inspired the current trend to outsource the cataloging and shelf-prep of current English language monographs. Applying these principles to non-English, music, multi-media formats, serials and rare book cataloging may result in even



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more library efficiency. Significant movement along these lines typically requires a mandate from library administration. By adopting these principles, the library will be better able to control costs, improve patron access and free cataloging resources for the newer and growing concerns related to electronic resources.

Know current cost structures

Even very simple costing methodologies can generate vital data which are surprisingly underused in cataloging departments. Catalogers often reject the notion that their work can be quantified, and refuse production quotas because every piece is unique and because so much of their time is spent on “overhead” – meetings, professional development, search committees, training, record review, etc. In this environment, cataloging costs can be truly exorbitant insofar as all of these activities must be calculated into the library’s total cost of cataloging (Morris, 1992).

It is only when record costs are known (salaries, benefits and overhead – the number of records), that useful cost benefit analysis can be performed and alternative approaches can be evaluated. Once costs are understood for each task or product, various members of the library community can engage in meaningful discussion of service options.

Control the expert mentality

Many library administrators are subjected to the “expert mentality” – particularly prevalent in cataloging and catalog maintenance departments. Operational and planning meetings with catalogers easily deteriorate into arcane discussions regarding complex and primary manual approaches to solving workflow issues. In some libraries there is a sense that only an expert, item-specific approach is valid in addressing a problem (like a backlog), and that non-catalogers cannot possibly understand the issues or implications.

This expert orientation is not uncommon, but is the opposite of a production mentality and often impedes progress. “Experts” sometimes use their knowledge to obfuscate and confuse others, thereby retaining control of whatever project is under discussion. Managers need to weigh costs against benefits and make specific choices about how to use resources. They also need to determine the level of service they can live with as a result.

While professional and non-professional catalogers should be highly valued, managers and executives must put their role into perspective. Management has the responsibility to decide whether, in light of the library’s multiple

objectives, the expert approach is always worth the time and expense required. At times, there are good reasons to approach backlogs or conversion projects with a systematic or automated solution to increase speed and reduce cost, or to outsource a project to keep expert staff focused on more important or difficult tasks.

Adhere to standards

This principle suggests adoption of national standards. The elimination of unique local cataloging practices offers critical opportunities for lowering costs and increasing capacity. Non-standard local cataloging is always a barrier to the possible advantages of automation and outsourcing. More specifically, cost efficiency requires the following.

- *Shelf-list to national standards.* This issue should be considered carefully as it can have serious access implications. If the library has historically modified call numbers in non-standard ways, various parts of the collection could be split by an abrupt change. In many situations, it may be a difficult but responsible choice to live with “split” collections at least until current backlogs are cleared. Once backlogs are eliminated, and depending on the size of the affected collections and the level of consternation among browsers, it may be appropriate to adjust the non-standard call numbers, re-label and re-shelve the materials.
- *Accept duplicate call numbers.* The importance of shelf-arrangement has declined in the automated and interdisciplinary environment. Patrons rarely use classification or call number in OPAC searching, even as a secondary search. Duplicate call numbers are not a significant problem, even for patrons who browse the stacks. The two items will still be co-located. The time spent in identifying and eliminating them is not worth the cost. Adherence to national standards will make it possible to acquire low-cost, third party records for some streams of material.

Maximize use of available resources (copy)

Cataloging costs will be minimized by strictly limiting the review and revision of available copy. Libraries must:

- Increase automatic acceptance of LC copy. Eliminate review of non-essential fields of the MARC record. Eliminate physical measurement of the piece. Focus exclusively on patron access.

- Seek to acquire catalog records from a third party for backlogged materials. Greater numbers of records are available once the item has been held for even a brief period of time.
- Accept, rather than edit, Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) Core Standard Records. A well designed study at the University of Colorado Libraries indicates that this choice will not unduly sacrifice patron access (Czeck *et al.*, 2000).
- Accept records from other non-primary sources including Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) and OCLC's Connexion.
- Load vendor created records without scrutinizing each one. Rely on sampling to ensure accuracy (see later.)
- Consider or reconsider participation in the PCC. The PCC generally adheres to standard business principles, with a primary goal of making more and better catalog records available faster and cheaper. Additionally, the PCC supports important initiatives related to non-english, non-roman, music and rare book cataloging.

Design and produce an economically viable product

A business approach to cataloging requires the application of basic economic logic. Ask these questions: Is the investment worth the cost? Are you providing the service your patrons (customers) want and need? Can a lesser service still meet the need? Can cataloging staff be re-deployed to provide other more valuable services?

Remember that costs and benefits should be valued from the perspective of the user community. For example, one must recognize that most users search for a known author or title, or by subject keywords, and not by classification number. As more and more content becomes available electronically, full text keyword searching will require continuous re-consideration of the time-honored format of the catalog record.

Most libraries agree that at least minimal review of copy is necessary, but the extent of the review varies dramatically. To reduce costs, it may be necessary to eliminate review and revision of "non-essential" fields of the MARC record. Consider limiting review to the fields below as they are universally considered to affect access:

- 100/600/700s: correct spelling of all personal names
- 250: edition statement matches that on item
- 245: title on copy matches title page
- 260: year of publication on copy matches year on item

Eliminate review of other access points. Focus exclusively on patron access according to known patterns of behavior. At every opportunity, cataloging departments should evaluate, then minimize or eliminate low-value/high-cost activities, regardless of tradition or esthetics.

Adjust capacity to match the demand

Cataloging backlogs are evidence of inadequate capacity or production, not to mention poor patron service. In a business environment, backlogs are disallowed as they incur significant and avoidable costs. Since technical services staffing in academic libraries is so often fixed (or declining), it finally becomes necessary to change either the process or the product to keep pace with demand. In order to meet new and dramatically higher expectations for timely throughput, it is often helpful to re-consider both.

Automate and/or outsource

Opportunities for automation will be determined in large part by the library's Integrated Library System along with its configuration of vendors. In any case, a mainstream of material should be defined and a linear process implemented that minimizes physical handling, item-specific and manual procedures, and judgment calls. Batch processing should be incorporated whenever possible, to facilitate efficient searching, editing and loading of records. Skilled catalogers should be reserved for exception processing and problem resolution.

Outsourced services are almost always more cost-effective than similar services performed in-house. It is sometimes more important, however, to recognize that by outsourcing certain categories of routine work, the library is able to increase its capacity for cataloging higher value, perhaps unique local content.

There are of course, staffing considerations here. Automation and outsourcing typically eliminate the need for low-level and assembly line positions, jeopardizing continued employment for some. Likewise, more capable staff members will be required to augment their skills to process materials heretofore backlogged.

Establish production goals and measure performance

Production goals and performance measures should be used to monitor strategic cataloging

choices like the ones described above, track the demand, calculate capacity and predict cataloging costs. Despite the negativity often leveled at production requirements, individual and departmental performance nearly always improves when the organization establishes specific expectations, tracks productivity and rewards high volume, high quality throughput. Even professionals should be held accountable for the way they spend their time and for a measurable level of production. Without this kind of information, there is no way to calculate or control cost. Perhaps, surprising is the fact that by establishing specific goals and by measuring performance, staff morale almost always improves along with productivity.

Control quality via sampling

Everyone in the institution must recognize that cataloging errors are a fact of life. Regardless of the procedures used, it is impossible to buy or to produce 100 percent error-free records. Cataloging is a complex task performed by humans. Rather than seeking or expecting perfection, it is important to establish and communicate an acceptable error rate. It can be as low as 2 or 3 percent and still be useful for purposes of workflow efficiency. The point is to have one. This may be the most crucial element of cost-effective cataloging.

Cataloging departments should set simple standard checks against a small number of specific fields (as described above), and count errors only if found in one of the critical fields. At the outset, ensure that all sources (every person, every department and every third party) generate records with an error rate of less than 2 or 3 percent. A 100 percent record review should cease once a new staff member or new cataloging source meets this goal. The department should move to sampling no more than 5-10 percent of their records, but should perform this same level of quality review on every source including all levels of in-house catalogers and every third party source. This practice will ensure that 98 percent of all records added to the catalog are accurate.

Recognize, accept and communicate this level of accuracy. Knowing and reporting your error rate is actually the best way to inspire confidence in the service. When errors are found in the OPAC, they should be fixed as quickly as possible without discussion and without re-routing to the one who made the error. This approach is more cost-effective, and helps to re-inforce the new philosophy.

Be strategic

At its most basic level, strategy involves awareness of the cataloging department's environment, assessment of potential threats and opportunities, and most importantly, choices about how to respond – how to adapt the department so that it survives and thrives. Strategic choices determine how resources – financial, human and technological – are allocated and what enterprises take priority.

Although the cataloging strategy is necessarily influenced by the larger library and institutional context, the act of thinking in longer and broader terms can be instructive. The main priority must always be to gain or regain control over the current operation. Eliminate backlogs (catch up) and revamp procedures to match the demand (keep up). Once short-term survival is ensured, it becomes possible to look ahead and to formulate other strategic issues for consideration. How should the cataloging department accommodate the rapid growth of electronic resources? How will the growth of e-resources affect the print collection? What is the best way to expand metadata expertise? What is the best strategy to raise the library's profile in this area?

Understanding how information discovery works, as well as the classification structures and metadata standards that facilitate that discovery, is one of the most valuable competencies that catalogers can offer. Cataloging departments in every library have an opportunity to take a leadership role, and enhance their value to the entire institution. These opportunities should be explored and formalized. By anticipating some of these developments, and by taking steps where possible, cataloging departments can position themselves as primary resources, perhaps revenue generators, thereby ensuring long-term relevance and economic viability.

Barriers to taking the business approach

Before any business plan can be introduced or implemented, the entire organization must be evaluated to identify any obstacles to the plan's success. If barriers are identified, they must be examined to see if they can be overcome. The most common obstacles are related to the following.

- *Inadequate library-wide buy-in.* In order to reduce costs and streamline cataloging functions, the entire library needs to support the effort. The expected time and costs savings will not materialize if reference services staff make it a practice to return items to cataloging for correction of non-critical

errors. While it is a mistake to assume that non-catalogers have no understanding of the full range of time, skill and implications involved in cataloging an item, there are many who do not. Non-catalogers need to invest time in learning how cataloging is performed. This initial investment will pay off as it will assist them when deciding when a problem needs to be returned for correction, or whether it is merely a nuisance.

- *Specialization of subject matter.* The degree to which a library has subject specializations can pose a problem. In order to take full advantage of pre-existing copy, the least amount of critical review is assumed. This works best in public libraries or libraries with generalist collections. But, a degree of disservice will occur in a highly specialized library – for example, a library serving a natural history museum. By accepting copy without critical review, a book may end up on the shelf with the subject heading “Natural history” rather than a specific subject, such as “Paracyclops”. Obviously, any book other than a general survey on natural history with the “Natural history” subject heading is negatively affecting this user group. What needs to be determined is how often this scenario would occur. If there is a low occurrence, the few items can be returned to cataloging when discovered.
- *Resistance to change.* It is human nature to resist change. Many feel threatened by it, while others look upon change as an opportunity. By performing less critical reviews, employees may feel devalued and unchallenged by their job. There is always a learning curve when a change in business practice occurs. If a savings in staff time is a result of the new procedures, then management can overcome staff resistance by adding new, valuable and challenging duties to their activities.
- *Foreign language material.* The percentage of foreign language material in a collection will greatly affect the ability to use existing copy, as copy may not exist or be of little value when it does exist. When there is a high percentage of foreign language material added to the collection – especially non-Roman script items – there is a greater likelihood that true economies of scale will not be applicable.
- *Gift material.* Gift materials that a library receives may be a burden rather than a boon. A common misconception is that gifts are free, but like all other titles added to the collection, gifts incur processing costs. They may also need repair or have other conservation issues to consider. Only gifts that are critically

reviewed should be considered for addition to the collection. Another issue with gifts is that they are often older, and may lack an ISBN or other identifiers used by PromptCat.

Similarly, older items usually are represented by pre-AACR2 copy. Again, management must decide if these records are acceptable.

- *The budget.* Perhaps the greatest single obstacle to saving money is the library’s ability to spend money. If the budget itself is inadequate to supply the library with all the new material it needs, then it will not be able to take advantage of book vendors’ approval plans or other such batch processing and technical services. An inadequate budget requires more staff interaction to select and process materials. It also encourages acceptance of more gift materials which are received uncataloged in-house, rather than shelf-ready as purchases may be. Every effort should be made by the library administration to protect and enhance the materials budget whenever possible. It is the only sure way to take advantage of every cost saving option available.

Conclusion

Since the early 1990s, pressured by shrinking budgets and increasing service and technology expectations, library administrators have been re-thinking priorities and radically re-designing internal processes to accomplish new goals. In many libraries, and for many reasons, cataloging operations although not impervious to budget pressures, have been slow to adopt new strategies, often maintaining a scholarly/artisan orientation to the work. By adopting a more business-like, production-oriented approach, the nature of the work and the nature of the catalog will be transformed to some degree. Every library must judge for itself whether the potential benefits outweigh the professional and esthetic drawbacks.

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