

New Applications

The Future of Document Supply: Is There an Alternative to the British Library Document Supply Centre?

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INTRODUCTION

In an earlier issue of *Serials*(1), the outline and preliminary findings of a research study examining the possibility of cooperation between the 5 major academic libraries of the East Midlands were presented. The article posed, in particular, a number of questions about the possibility of establishing an East Midlands academic document supply scheme which would replace the service provided by the British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC) and, the likely changes of demand made on the BLDSC service if it had to adopt a full cost recovery system.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the document supply findings of the East Midlands research project(2), the possibilities offered by a recently published British Library study(3), and the recent debate in the professional press about the future of the BLDSC (5-10); in so doing existing document supply arrangements within the context of existing pressures, problems of efficiency and effectiveness, and the impact of new technology will be examined. The article therefore seeks to invite librarians to reassess traditional modes of thinking, to reassess their document supply procedures, and to plan a strategy for the future.

BACKGROUND

The days when library and information services could be self-sufficient have disappeared, and many academic librarians have explicitly recognised in their strategic plans an access role by obtaining information from other sources, or alternatively, directing users to other locations, rather than attempting to act as a comprehensive repository. Thus librarians requiring material not available within their own library services apply directly to a

known location, or more usually they apply to BLDSC as a central national facility. In the UK the tendency has been to apply first to BLDSC for material not available within the library's holdings. The reasons for this include:-

1. there has been confidence, especially for academic libraries, that the item will be held at BLDSC (success rate of between 80-90%) or that a location will be provided.
2. the majority of items will be supplied within a week.
3. the pricing structure (BLDSC forms) has continued to be relatively stable.

But can this situation continue?

Bernard Naylor commented;

"the UK adopted the romantic approach of handling the problem to a single Titanic organisation — seeing signs of the development of a networking approach in which the Titanic organisation will eventually be just a component part"(4)

The key word here is "eventually", but what about this transitory stage? Schemes such as LASER's Viscount system, which is of particular use to public libraries, are gaining ground, but will the advent of new arrangements contribute to a new strength, or herald the breakdown of the BLDSC?

Recent events may not, at face value, give immediate rise for undue concern; librarians may believe that the BLDSC satisfaction rate will continue to be achieved at a reasonable price. The BLDSC is, after all, investing in new technology, although the ability to provide a fast and efficient document delivery service by Group 4 fax is frustrated by communications problems not of their

making. However, this gloss may disguise a real concern. There is a continuing, and ever increasing pressure, in all library and information services to economise; to look for further efficiency and effectiveness, especially in cost terms; to exploit new technology to its full; and to use alternative arrangements. The combined effects of serials subscriptions cuts, and an access rather than a holdings access only policy, will place even greater reliance on external supply sources.

In such circumstances there is bound to be some concern, and some unease about reliance on an all-embracing supplier such as BLDSC. It, too, cannot escape the demands of government policy and the rigours of market forces. Will it be able to deliver the goods at a reasonable price and in good time?

Naylor summarises the present position when he says;

"When I look at the impact of advanced information and networking technology on the way that libraries are changing to respond to traditional demand I am struck principally by a feeling we are going through a stage of variety and confusion"(4)

The level of concern has been raised in a series of letters and articles, in particular, Friend (5) (6), Bradbury (7), Naylor (8), Line (9), Parry (10).

The major points were raised in Friend's initial letter (5);

"Are the days of the Document Supply Centre numbered?"

"Will we still need Boston Spa in ten years time?"

"Whether the Centre has reached the peak or even passed the peak of its usefulness as a means of document supply."

"Are other means of document supply developing so quickly that within ten years the Document Supply Centre will appear an expensive anachronism?"

"Cost advantage of Boston Spa will be eroded."

"... rely upon specialist document supply companies."

These are statements and questions which both focus our attention and highlight certain concerns which need to be addressed. So much so that the BLDSC Director responded;

"Will the Government oblige us ultimately to

change so much that libraries go elsewhere for documents."

"... there would be no alternative channel readily available for the great majority of requests coming to Boston Spa, demand on us would fall, leading to reduced reserve for us, to pressure on our acquisition rates, and again to further reductions in demand. We see ourselves as part of the "national library economy" an economy driven by consideration of national good and by market forces, and we see the maintenance of the right balance between these as vital for our profession."(7)

Thus there is a range of opinions on this subject, but it has not been supported by research which could help to prove, disprove or even contribute in a general sense to the debate. Many comments are simply position statements.

The concern expressed by librarians often remains at that level. Basic management information such as how much it costs for each process of a loan, or supply of an item, has been conspicuously absent. Neither is there evidence of attempts to establish whether there could be a more efficient provision, and there is little evidence to suggest that librarians have been looking at alternative methods of providing serial requirement through the creation and use of different models.

There is, however, some evidence from an examination of JANET E-mail to suggest that certain libraries have shifted their emphasis to obtaining a proportion of their material direct from libraries rather than from BLDSC. It would be interesting to know whether the librarians involved in supplying or receiving the documents have calculated the actual operational costs. One suspects they have not!

In short, there is little proof that librarians have been giving enough attention to cost-effectiveness and to new possibilities of document supply in a clear and rational frame of mind.

Recent Research

There has been one recent research project which sheds some light on the questions raised earlier in the paper. The COPEMAL study(2) (Cooperative Project East Midlands Academic Libraries) examined various aspects of cooperation which could gain from a cost effectiveness, cost efficiency, and cost benefit analysis.

(Acquisition/storage, transport infrastructure, access and reciprocity, impact of new technology and document supply). The background to the study has already been reported(1) and details of research have also been discussed (11) (12). It is therefore necessary only to give basic details.

The study embraced 5 major academic libraries in the East Midlands which are sited on a north to south axis covering some 30 miles : Nottingham Polytechnic (then Trent Polytechnic) and Nottingham University; 15 miles to the south, Loughborough University and 15 miles further south, Leicester Polytechnic and Leicester University. The 5 libraries in 1987/88 spent a total of £7 million of which £2.5 million was spent on the acquisition of library materials, and they obtained 70,000 inter-library loan requests per annum, of which 90% were met by BLDSC, the majority within one week. One-third of a million pounds was spent on document supply.

To establish whether there could be any scope for cooperative document supply within the 5 libraries it first had to be established how far the libraries could be self sufficient in meeting each other's requests. The survey discovered that in 1987/88, 26% of all requests generated by the libraries could have been met from within the holdings of the 5 libraries; (27% serials and 23% monographs). The initial findings suggested an overall satisfaction rate of 32%, but checking of the shelves reduced the figure to 26%. This was due to wrong bibliographical references or missing material, (misplaced, stolen or borrowed).

Even if the 26% satisfaction rate were considered significant enough within the region, the cost dimension of supplying material would need to be addressed, as would the administration and infrastructure requirements to support any new document supply system.

It is interesting to note that calculated across the 5 libraries, the average ILL staff cost per hour was £4.96 (1988). The projected notional saving on that figure by non purchase of BLDSC forms in a local scheme is £2.72 (1988) which equates to a time gain of 33 minutes per loan in which to perform some or all of the following list arising out of the introduction of local scheme:-

- all extra checking of every request,
- suffer some unfilled request, obtain the monograph despatch and receive it back or

- photocopy a serial.

Further analysis of time expended on procedures and allocation of costs for obtaining and receiving inter-library loans suggested that the BLDSC request forms would have to cost more than £3.47 (1988 prices) before a local scheme in the East Midlands would break even. How much more is difficult to calculate because any system of inter-library loans between the 5 libraries would have to devise, create, and maintain a serials holdings catalogue; address such problems as whether heavily used material should be loaned to others; and compensate for the imbalance between heavy supplier and borrower.

Put simply, the libraries in the East Midlands could not compete with the BLDSC in terms of cost effectiveness, cost efficiency or cost benefit.

How would this change if the BLDSC had to recover more of its costs by raising the price of its forms, and, if its acquisition budget had to be recovered within the price of the form? If, for example, £4 million needed to be recovered, this could raise the cost of the form from £2.72 to approximately £4.26. There might, in that case be some scope for an East Midlands cooperative document supply venture. The breakeven figure of £3.47 for the East Midlands though does not include administration costs of a new service, or the guarantee of a fast and efficient service. So cost savings could be small, with a possible diminution in service.

The research project demonstrated that at the time (1988), it was more cost effective to obtain material from BLDSC than to obtain it from within the 5 major libraries of the East Midlands, although a move towards full cost recovery by the Centre would make a local scheme more viable. Calculations in 1990 suggest that the situation is much the same.

Alternative Methods

Regional

The regional approach, at least as far as the major academic libraries of the East Midlands is concerned, has no realistic viability in present circumstances, but if market forces and Government thinking combine, then there will be a need for some quick thinking. Nevertheless it should be remembered that the project referred to a

26% satisfaction rate. There is no guarantee that this level can be maintained, especially with pressure to reduce expenditure. In addition, even if it could be maintained, the East Midlands would still be looking to an external agency to satisfy its known 74% of requests which could not satisfy from its own holdings. If this situation were repeated elsewhere, one suspects that the total loss of business to the BLDSC would upset the equilibrium and, to some extent the Centre would need to raise costs for supplying the remaining 74% to cover the shortfall in revenue.

Apart from these possible new schemes, there are still the regional bureaux. In view of the East Midlands findings, one can only speculate as to the economic viability and efficiency of some of these regional schemes so long as the BLDSC continues to offer its present document supply service.

New Technology

New technology encompasses fax, networking CD Rom application etc., and is variously dealt with below, but in passing it is worth highlighting that technological developments do not always spell immediate efficiency and effectiveness for libraries and information centres. In document supply terms, if JANET is used for catalogue access to holdings then problems may be experienced: in gaining access through a spare port; in lack of complete catalogue records; and low level or non-standard MARC records.

New technology offers more possibilities but it does not offer a complete solution. In this transitory phase it adds another level of complexity which needs to be managed. Document supply require an adequate infrastructure, and if it is not properly developed, (for example communication problems which prevent the smooth transfer of Group 4 fax), then efficiency and effectiveness can be reduced.

Publisher/Electronic Journal

The potential for publishers to provide electronic journal publishing, and CD Rom application, may offer exciting possibilities in the document supply area but it has yet to be realised effectively. The Adonis project could not be claimed to be a great success, and even if it were successful in the sciences, the humanities and retrospective requirements would still need to be addressed. In addition the initial optimism that there would be an

immediate supply of economically priced electronic journal articles by publishers as an alternative to purchase of complete journal subscriptions has not been justified. Research in 1986 (13) suggested that the price of an electronic journal article transmission in the present state of technological development and costing would leave the librarian at a severe disadvantage. The same is true in 1990. There is little evidence to suggest that there is a concerted move away from hard copy.

Commercial Suppliers

If technology cannot solve document supply needs in the short term, could individual libraries offer a document supply service? This may sound attractive initially but there would need to be a contractual arrangement between supplier and receiver to ensure continuity of fast, reliable, efficient and effective service. Most libraries with a requirement to give their own clientele priority would find it difficult to provide a complete service. The COPEMAL study suggested that there was some scope for increased cooperation between two of the institutions and that there could be some possibilities in considering a courier service for the delivery of material, but it would require a carefully designed feasibility study.

The Future

From the available information there would appear to be no sense of impending doom for libraries, or, innovative alternatives for their document supply requirements. The BLDSC continues to reassess its service provision, and strives for further efficiency and effectiveness within a competitive price structure. The East Midlands Study may suggest that the continued present use of BLDSC is the most cost effective method for academic libraries but hints that in purely economic terms BLDSC is in effect subsidising their use. The real pressure will come from government requirements and market forces in a confused environment where libraries are being expected to cooperate and compete at the same time.

Friend stated that "if the answers are not yet favourable to the status quo we should be aware of the implications and if possible prepare an alternative strategy" and although the position still remains reasonably favourable it is recommended

that librarians should become more proactive rather than reactive and think ahead.

There is therefore a need for an immediate consideration of:-

1. alternative strategies and contingency plans which could be assessed
2. the recognition of the need for a better support infrastructure within the regions as part of any assessment
3. an acknowledgement that efficiency of document supply, (ie. speed of delivery and reliability of service) should feature significantly in any analysis.

There is now a need for more libraries to be involved in the modelling of their inter-library loan procedures and processes. The British Library has already responded by commissioning a computer modelling package for use in libraries. The report was published and software made available in 1990(s). It is hoped that librarians avail themselves of this facility.

A framework for the future of document supply is needed. Perhaps this should be one of the initiatives arising out of the Library Information Plans. Precipitous or selfish moves by libraries could destroy the system. It should be borne in mind that any regional or alternative document supply system could cream off business from BLDSC and the viability and economics of such ventures would need to be borne in mind. The instability could result in potential or spiraling costs which would affect the delicate balance maintained by BLDSC.

We may find then that Naylor's quotation about the BLDSC being a Titanic (4) may be interpreted as a ship rather than a god. It is to be hoped that such a gloomy prognosis will prove to be ill founded.

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