

# Automating serials

Serials automation has been described as the 'last frontier of library automation.' Whereas cataloguing, circulation and bookordering on line are taken for granted by most libraries, the software for the checking-in and ordering of serials has become available only comparatively recently. The whole scale and complexity of the operation and the amount of work involved in transferring serials to a computer system has inevitably meant that many libraries have delayed implementation, even if they have the software available as part of an integrated library system. If you are short-staffed, as most library serials departments are at the present time, the prospect of a large scale automation project is very daunting. At the British Library of Political and Economic Science we allowed ourselves to become 'guinea pigs' for serials automation when we agreed to become a second BETA test site for the Libertas serials module in 1990. This was feasible as the Librarian at the time was prepared to make the extra staff time available for implementation. I was seconded for one year from the Cataloguing Department to oversee serials automation.

## What does an automated serials system do?

On the automated system which we use, you can place orders for serials, obtain order slips and chasers as for books. Funds will be committed and expended from the budget. At the 'subscription end' date the order will renew automatically, unless instructed otherwise, and commit funds for the following year. Invoicing and payment are done on-line. The main feature of an automated serials system is the prediction of serial parts. For each title fed into the computer information regarding the frequency, regularity and parts structure (e.g. vol. no etc) is included. You also tell the computer the expected lapse of time between the publication date and receipt date for each title. Once this

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information is in the system, parts will be automatically predicted.

These parts appear on the **Check-in screen**, where they will be received. This replaces the kardex card and if a part is late, a claim is automatically issued which can be sent to the publisher. This is the main advantage of an automated system.

## Starting automation — selecting a system

Most librarians will not have a choice of which system to use as their library will already be committed to an integrated library system with a serials module. The advantages of an integrated system are that the order and check-in record for a serial are linked to the catalogue record and can be checked on terminals throughout the library. Libraries beginning serials automation have a bit of a head start if their serial records are already catalogued on-line. However serials systems developed purely for serials management (stand-alone systems) offered usually by serials suppliers have the advantage of being designed by experts in serials finance and management and may be more sophisticated.

If you do have a choice of a serials automation system you need to think about the needs of managing your serials collection and ask how each system can cope with, for instance, multi-site locations, routing, multi-funding of titles, one line invoices, society subscriptions and monthly newsagents' bills. Is there a facility for dealing with multi-part titles and regular supplements? How does autoclaiming work? Some suppliers are offering conversions of your manual serial records as part of a package.

## Planning automation

A lot of preparatory work is needed if you are doing your own conversions. It is a major retroconversion project as you need to create order and check-in records (and possibly catalogue records) for all your existing titles. Before you proceed with this you need to input parameters for claiming frequencies and the part structures which you will want to use. You need to key in supplier records with appropriate codes and you also need to add budgetary information and parameters governing price increases on renewal. As conversion is an on-going process (there is no automatic cut-off date for the manual system as for book ordering) you will be working with a manual and automated system side by side for a long time. This is because the process of adding records to the computer is time-consuming and because, even when a title has a check-in screen, you will need to retain the kardex it replaces to have access to records of earlier issues received. So it is important to have a plan for implementation, drawing up new work procedures in which all the staff of the serials department will be involved. Preparatory work like checking ISSNs will save time in the long run, especially as it is not always easy to alter records once they have been input.

## Living with automation

We have now been working with an automated serials system for over a year at the BLPES. 2,000 of our 13,000 titles are on Libertas. These are the frequent titles — monthly, weekly and quarterly. We have not tackled annuals yet, except of course where they have been new orders. We have found the main advantages to be autoclaiming — we now know if a title has stopped coming, or if a newly ordered title has not turned up. This was important for us as we have a large collection to manage, including a lot of not very reliable titles. Titles are on the whole easier to find on the computer than on a kardex, as you have the keyword facility.

Checking by ISSN is particularly easy. Staff can get at the computer screen more easily. In any case our old kardex is just about falling to pieces. We had to do something!

There are many pitfalls to which librarians can be alerted. Automated systems are not very good for irregular titles. You cannot predict parts for irregular titles and this means that you lose the advantage of autoclaiming. You create records for received parts as if you were using a manual system. Frequencies and regularities change. Weeklies fail to produce the predicted 52 parts for the year. This means that library staff have to delete predicted parts and change their claiming regimes. It also means that suppliers can be pelted with unrealistic claims for sometimes non-existent issues. This has to be monitored. We get less claims now than we did a year ago because we have been amending prediction patterns since the titles were input. But autoclaiming was a new concept. You have to decide the exact publication date of a quarterly and even an annual title. This often has to be guesswork.

Working with a computer and a manual system can be time consuming during the transitional period as titles may have to be checked on both systems. Also the fact that you get claims and chasers means that you do a lot more follow-up work for serials. This of course is an improvement in the way you manage your collection, but the effect on staffing is that more time is expended. This is desirable however if it means that more titles are claimed within the publishers 'claim period' and the need to re-order expensive backsets is to be avoided.

Finally serials automation is still in its infancy and some aspects of serials systems are not fully developed. The finance side of an automated system should be an advantage to budgetary control. In fact you may find that facilities provided do not match the realities of serials payment in your department. So there is still a lot of work to be done by the suppliers of automated serials systems. This can only be based on the experience of library staff in serials departments.