Change and Decay

Peter Kingsley

Some problems of managing acquisitions in a time of change are analyzed here. The concept of preparing for change is described as the most potent, often most difficult and least considered prophylaxis against decay of staff morale. The author considers some of the pros and cons of an integrated system from an acquisitions viewpoint as experienced in a major transition at New York University, then describes some of the variety of problems encountered and how they were resolved.

When I was a schoolboy at a small private prep school in St. Paul, Minnesota, we were indoctrinated, Christian, Jew, and Muslim alike, in our morning assembly with Protestant prayer and song. I believe this indoctrination has had two very positive effects on my life. One, I have grown up to reject all organized religion, and two, this background affords me a starting point for this article. You see, I believe these words to an old Protestant hymn are more than appropriate to the subject of this discussion—Managing Acquisitions in a Changing Environment:

Change and decay in all around I see,
Oh God who changeth not abide with me.

Please note how change is directly linked with decay, and stasis is linked with God and through him to peace and harmony. I, who have lived through two major changes in acquisitions departments, first at Columbia University and now NYU, know that change does not necessitate decay, nor is an unchanging God likely to abide with me for very long if I don't change. As already confessed, I am not a religious man or even a professional librarian, but I can spot a special plea when I hear one. You won't have to listen very hard to hear this plea on Roman Catholic tongues; on Muslim or Jewish ones; on tongues of blacks, whites, Asians; on male and female tongues; and on the tongues of little children. Something is there that does not like change—"Better the devil we know than the one we don't know"— and if your Acquisitions Department is going through a major or even a minor revamping, as a manager or supervisor you might as well face it: change will not be automatically welcomed in all quarters by your staff.

One of the reasons that change was a positive experience for our staff was our choice for an integrated system (Advance GEAC) with which to replace the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) database as our main acquisitions module. Its positive aspects for the acquisitions staff are many:

1. It is an integrated system on which we can order, receive, and invoice materials and that links directly to our online catalog (Bobcat).
2. The new system was relatively easy to learn how to search, to order, and to

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receive, even though its command structure was totally different from RLIN's. Its database is composed solely of NYU and our consortium libraries' data, making the record of any given item far easier to locate.

3. The system allows a flexibility while remaining a precise tool with which to acquire materials by allowing order records to be transferred from other databases.

Although this new system added many positive features, let me quickly add that the joy I here express is not without alloy, and I will cover some of the problems encountered in due course. Nevertheless the new system has allowed measurable increases in the total number of orders placed, received, and processed while throwing up fewer hurdles for the staff to negotiate in all respects. The result has been a generally increased level of staff satisfaction with their own work while increasing the throughput of the department as a whole.

Perhaps as large or even larger a change for our staff and me to assimilate as the switchover took place was the simultaneous and complete revamping of our Serials and Book Acquisitions Departments into one single Acquisitions Department. This change involved the coordinated efforts of the department heads, of the architects involved, and of the office of the dean of the library to update, correct, and revise every aspect of the acquisitions flow. I believe that if any single one of those groups had not been able to involve itself intensely and in a coordinated manner, the change would have been a far rougher and a far more dangerous one.

First, our department head, Beth Jacoby, spent long weeks planning and revising the changeover from two parallel departments into one. Instead of separate ordering and receiving units for books and serials, we were combined into three overarching ones: ordering, receiving, and invoicing for all books and serials. I was shifted from books receiving supervisor to invoicing/payments supervisor for books and serials together. The workers who had worked in serials or books units previously were assigned similar work in their new units—becoming in effect specialists in, say, series receiving or monographs ordering. It was through Beth's painstaking care that this redivision of labor was successful and harmonious. Feedback and consultation with me and other staff members allowed us input into the decision-making process while it kept us informed of what was developing.

Second, the library administration took pains to support this redivision by giving orders to their architects to redesign the entire office space. They tore down walls, installed workstations, and upgraded furniture and wiring in order to provide all workers with their own terminals or computers. The close coordination of the architects with the changing needs of our new department was successfully overseen by the head of Technical Services, Arno Kastner, and head of Systems, Susan Kallenbach. Without their consultation, input, and oversight, the transition would not have been a successful one.

Last, the dean of the library, Carlton Rochell, approved the expenditure of considerable funds for the revamping and streamlining of the department, ensuring that we would have the ability to operate an up-to-date Acquisitions Department well suited to the demands of the present and future.

THROW OUT THE LIFELINE

While I think you can now see how careful planning and coordination of effort were required to overcome stasis and blunt the shock of change, the time has come to confess that not in every instance was stasis overcome nor was every shock buffered. One hymn that we did not sing in prep school, because it wasn't really a hymn but an old revival favorite, "Throw Out the Life Line," might have had peculiar resonance with NYU's implementation of all these changes:

> Throw out the life line,
> Someone is drifting away,
> Throw out the life line,
> Throw out the life line,
> Someone is sinking today.

But I believe the negative aspects of our changes impacted our staff only temporarily because of all the reasons cited above. Still, that awful day came in August 1994 when the entire department was rooted up out of its old home and given temporary shelter while its new home was being built. It is important to note that only during this time of gross and daily uncertainty did we as administrators lose control of our changing environment and merely cope from day to day. Lurching from crisis to crisis, we attempted to aid and comfort those staff members who needed it.

Very little hand-holding, however, was required even in those dark days. I believe this was because the staff had already been carefully prepared for the changes to come; they could plainly see that a great deal of effort and expense was being directed at them and their department, and they were willing to give us the benefit of the doubt.

We were lucky. There were little or no construction delays. The new system worked once it was installed, and in fact all the pieces of this elaborate jigsaw puzzle came together without major problems. By the middle of September 1994, we were in our new home. All the physical stuff of a new environment—ergonomically designed workstations with independent lighting sources, adjustable keyboard holders, new office chairs, and a new database—were in place and on time!

There were wrinkles, of course. Those couple of days in December when all our new orders and receipts were inexplicably lost by the new system, for example. More seriously, a severe loss of data in the serials records forced us to create new order records, to add notes to indicate the loss of data, and to catalog reconstructed records by the hundreds or possibly the thousands. Also there have been breakdowns in the system that have resulted in several full days and weeks of downtime and loss of work. Since we did not receive a procedures manual, we administrators were asked to write a procedures book—which is a time-consuming and not-very-accurate method of making procedures standard throughout each unit.

Surprisingly, there has been a very low level of complaint from the staff during all of the bumpy parts, and morale has remained high. This, as previously observed, was the result of careful planning, the staff's perception of a work process made simpler and easier, and downright luck.

Therefore the most negative aspect of all these changes was the anticipation of them. The most positive aspect of the changeover was the administration's willingness and ability to work to predict what and when the changes would be and the overall improvement in the workplace environment.

The result? On the whole, I would say that the combined efforts of department heads, administrators, and staff succeeded in implementing major change without once ever having to "throw out the life line."