Changing Acquisitions at Detroit Public Library

J. Randolph Call

Detroit Public Library is midstream in changing Acquisitions work and workflow. Acquisitions functions and staff have been redistributed to combine ordering and cataloging into a unit renamed the Bibliographic Division; receiving functions have been merged with the Technical Processing Department; and payment functions have been merged with the Business Office. These dramatic changes are producing positive results. This process would have been smoother if more testing had been conducted.

Detroit Public Library (DPL) is midstream in changing acquisitions work and workflow as part of dramatic changes in relationships and organizational structure within Technical Services. In essence, the last ten years of collective thought and experience about making Technical Services more responsive and productive are being implemented at DPL now.

Acquisitions at DPL was a department-level unit within Technical Services. It was automated only in that ordering from our primary vendor, Baker and Taylor (B&T), was over standard voice-grade telephone lines using B&T-supplied software running on a stand-alone personal computer. All other functions were manual, including approval and notification plans, collection development tools for branch ordering, all non-B&T ordering, order tracking, receipt, payment, invoice tracking, and accounting of approximately 150 funds. There was no link between Acquisitions and DPL's NOTIS database. Many acquisitions practices had not changed in ten to twenty years, and over that same time span, the unionized staff was also very stable. Backlogs existed at most steps in the acquisitions workflow, and there were frequent complaints from public services about those backlogs.

Two years ago, DPL's Technical Services managers began planning to improve Technical Services' efficiency and responsiveness. We began implementing changes in fiscal year 1995/1996. That implementation will continue through 1996/1997.

DPL now has no organizational unit called an Acquisitions Department. Acquisitions functions and staff have been redistributed to combine ordering and cataloging into a unit renamed Bibliographic Division; receiving functions have been merged with the Technical Processing Department; and payment functions have been merged with the business office. Bibliographic Division and Technical Processing both report to the same manager, the Bibliographic Services Coordinator.

In addition, DPL

1. implemented the acquisitions modules of our NOTIS system, including all ordering, payment, and accounting functions,

J. RANDOLPH CALL is Bibliographic Services Coordinator, Technical Services, Detroit Public Library.

2. converted approval plans so that materials sent according to our profiles are purchased automatically, with only defective books and the rare title that should not have fit our profile specifications being returned to the vendor,

3. contracted with materials vendors to receive full, MARC format bibliographic records for automatic purchase items,

4. began to capture bibliographic records prior to order, with the expectation that this record would be used for cataloging once materials were received,

5. became tape-loading members of the OCLC Online Computer Center, Inc., and

6. began generating collection development lists using NOTIS bibliographic records downloaded into ProCite.

Dramatic and drastic impacts on acquisitions staff were seen:

1. Introducing automation made it possible for staff members to learn new ways to do their jobs.

2. Staff members wound up reporting to different managers and working—sometimes very closely—with different Technical Services staff.

3. Most staff members also gained new responsibilities to learn.

4. From staff members' point of view, the stability and support networks built up over years virtually disappeared.

Individual staff reacted very differently to these changes. Even though the changes we implemented are producing and will produce long-term benefits for both DPL and the acquisitions staff, change this drastic is a lot to learn to live with in the short term. It can be particularly frustrating where work environments have been static.

Despite those caveats, DPL's dramatic changes are producing positive results. They simplified and streamlined a number of acquisitions procedures, particularly in managing approval plans and in financial control and accountability. That, in turn, solved long-standing problems that the acquisitions staff had been aware of and frustrated by for years. For example, some backlogs disappeared, while the rest were significantly reduced, with the result that morale among the acquisitions staff improved.

Acquisitions staff members' morale improved for other reasons, too. Implementing NOTIS acquisitions removed the "left-out" feelings that some acquisitions staff members had; this feeling was a result of the fact that acquisitions functions were nearly the last DPL operation to be automated. Also, integrating acquisitions, cataloging, and processing into one workflow and organizational structure allowed them to see better how they had always fit into the bigger picture. Overall, the integration of Technical Services into one workflow improved DPL's relations with acquisitions vendors, too. We are questioning existing services and relationships much more and have changed some vendors and services.

However, one of the most significant changes—empowering the staff—was one that I thought would be almost universally welcomed; in practice, it turned out to have both positive and negative aspects. Some welcomed the increased personal responsibility and personal control. Some approached it cautiously and needed more supervisory and managerial support when anything they perceived as new occurred. One of their concerns was that empowerment would delegate decision making to paraprofessional level staff.

This concern about decision making made the changes in acquisitions workflow an issue for several DPL unions. This issue is now under discussion in a series of meetings between DPL senior management and union officials.

And, of course, there have been outright negative results. As mentioned earlier, the staff's security of knowing whom they work with and how to deal with them—as well as their security in knowing how to do their jobs—disappeared almost overnight: almost all felt threatened to some extent. There was also concern that the better financial control DPL gained by implementing NOTIS would result in as much labor-intensive work in acquisitions as the manual procedures NOTIS replaced.

The most important negative was that our internal needs caused this drastic change to be implemented faster than would have been ideal. The new workflow and procedures were discussed and re-worked many, many times in planning. But we never made resources available to run a large-scale simulation of the entire new workflow. DPL's implementation never benchmarked all facets of the new workflow at once.

When we tested, we always did specific functions with small samples of data. Using small samples masked problems that might have been solved before implementation. Staff confidence in the new workflow suffered because of those problems.

Of course, we anticipated there would be negative morale impacts and worked to help the acquisitions staff adjust. We gave more day-to-day personal attention and increased support from both immediate supervisors and middle managers. DPL involved them as much as organizationally possible in planning and started training for the NOTIS acquisitions modules as soon as we could schedule it. Most important, we created a much more open communications environment. Supervisors and middle managers listened to staff issues and complaints, and when we talked, it was to the staff, not at them.

If we could do this over again, there are some things I would do the same and some I would do differently. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of taking the time to plan carefully and thoroughly. You have to understand your existing workflow well enough to know why it is not producing all the results you want, as well as know how it can be changed to produce what you want. Even with the nearly two years of planning we invested in these changes, we should have built in time and resources to run the simulation using the full system and real data that I lamented earlier.

I also cannot emphasize enough the need to communicate with the staff members affected and involve them in planning as much as your organizational culture will allow. It is important to make sure you communicate the reasons for change and expected results so that staff members understand them whether they

agree wholeheartedly or not. In our implementation, it was crucial to communicate to staff members and unions that DPL did not intend for existing members to lose jobs because changes were happening. Maintaining open communication channels will solve just as many problems as careful and thorough planning.

Finally, if I were doing this all over again, I would again insist on viewing Technical Services as a system, viewing it as an interconnected, interdependent set of functions—not as the traditionally discrete units on an organizational chart. In DPL's case, much of the knowledge necessary to improve "acquisition" problems came from "cataloging" and "processing." The "acquisition" changes in turn changed the workflows of both "cataloging" and "processing."