



Networked Information Resources

A SPEC Kit compiled by

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Kit 253

Networked Information Resources

December 1999

Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	9
SURVEY RESULTS	14
RESPONDING INSTITUTIONS.....	25

Representative Documents

TEAM CHARGE OR MISSION

Duke University

<i>Electronic Access Committee</i>	30
--	----

<i>The Purpose of the Electronic Access Committee</i>	31
---	----

University of Guelph

<i>TriUniversities Information Resources Group Mandate</i>	32
--	----

University of Iowa

<i>Collection Management Committee</i>	34
--	----

University of Kentucky

<i>Library Systems Group Charter</i>	35
--	----

Library of Congress

<i>Collections Policy Committee Subcommittee on Electronic Databases (CPCSED)</i>	38
---	----

University of Manitoba

<i>Networked Databases Committee (NETDOC)</i>	39
---	----

McMaster University

<i>Digital Information Services</i>	41
---	----

University of Michigan

<i>University Library Selection Structure Roles & Responsibilities</i>	44
--	----

<i>Electronic Resources Steering Team (E-Team) Charge</i>	45
---	----

University of Tennessee

<i>Collection Development & Management Goals, 1999/00</i>	46
---	----

University of Texas

<i>Collection Development Management Group</i>	50
--	----

SELECTION CRITERIA

Duke University	
<i>Criteria for Purchasing Electronic Databases</i>	54
McMaster University	
<i>Electronic Resources Collection Policy</i>	55
<i>Appendix: Selection Factors for Electronic Products</i>	56
University of Manitoba	
<i>NETDOC Criteria Worksheet</i>	58
University of Maryland	
<i>Collection Development Policy Statement: Electronic Resources</i>	61
University of Michigan	
<i>Selection Guidelines for Web Resources</i>	63
<i>Checklist for Acquisition of E-Resources</i>	65
University of Texas	
<i>CDMG Database Evaluation Procedures</i>	66
<i>General Libraries Digital Library Collection Development Framework</i>	68

REQUEST FORMS AND PROCEDURES

Duke University	
<i>Requesting the Purchase of an Electronic Information Product</i>	72
<i>Request for Review of Electronic Products (Electronic Access Committee)</i>	73
University of Minnesota	
<i>Placing Orders for Networked Electronic Resources That Involve Licensing</i>	
<i>Agreements</i>	76
<i>Template for Creating a Decision/Order Record for Networked Electronic Resources</i>	
<i>That Involve Licensing Agreements</i>	78
Purdue University	
<i>Electronic Information Request Form</i>	80
University of Tennessee	
<i>Serial and/or Electronic Media Request Form</i>	85

ELECTRONIC RESOURCES POLICIES

University of Guelph	
<i>Electronic Collections Policy</i>	90
University of Iowa	
<i>Policy for Electronic Resources Management</i>	93
Library of Congress	
<i>Collections Policy Statement: Electronic Resources</i>	98
University of Michigan	
<i>Electronic Resources Task Force Report, May 1997</i>	102
University of Minnesota	
<i>Procedures for Selecting and Providing Access to Networked Electronic Resources</i>	111

National Library of Canada
Networked Electronic Publications Policy and Guidelines113

Purdue University
Guidelines for Information Access127

University of Tennessee
Electronic Resources Collection Development Policy129

Selected Resources

BOOKS AND JOURNAL ARTICLES133



SURVEY



Executive Summary

Introduction

Until recently, neither the knowledge of available electronic resources nor their evaluation, acquisition, and dissemination were issues significantly impacting the daily operations of research libraries. Developments in computer technologies have irrevocably altered library operations; it is now the unusual library that has not in some way responded to the challenges of developing an awareness of, subscribing to, and disseminating networked resources.

This SPEC Kit examines how ARL libraries have structured themselves to identify networked information resources in the market, evaluate them for purchase, make purchasing decisions, publicize them, and assess their continued utility. For the purpose of the survey, a networked information resource was defined as a commercially available, electronic information resource (library database, full-text service, e-journal, etc.), funded or enabled by the library, which is made available to authorized users through a network (LAN, WAN, dial-in, etc.).

In the summer of 1999, the survey was distributed to the 122 ARL member libraries. A total of 59 responses (48%) were received. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents offered networked information resources to their users.

Staff Involvement

When asked to identify what categories of staff are responsible for each of the five steps in the process of managing electronic resources, survey respondents indicated that collection development bibliographers and reference librarians are the groups most often responsible for all aspects of electronic resource acquisition.

The numbers for these staff members are followed closely by the numbers for branch, regional, or departmental librarians, who apparently have a large degree of autonomous responsibility in the areas of identifying new resources, making prepurchase evaluations, organizing

publicity and carrying out a postpurchase assessment. Only in the purchase decision does their participation drop.

It is important to note that teams or groups of staff from different departments or areas are also often engaged with the entire process. Outreach or liaison librarians are a distant fifth, even though the comments indicated that in several libraries all librarians were liaison librarians. Few libraries include cataloging and classification librarians, teams within a department or area, professional staff other than librarians, circulation services librarians, and—remarkable to note—acquisitions librarians in the process.

Identifying New Resources. The identification of new resources arises from many departments. In almost all of the responding libraries, both collection development bibliographers and reference librarians share the primary responsibility for identifying new networked information resources. Thirty-four libraries assign this responsibility to a cross-departmental team. Ten libraries give responsibility to a team or group of staff from within a department or area. In more than half of the libraries, administrative services—including the director and associate directors—are also involved, followed by special collections librarians and staff from library consortia.

Prepurchase Evaluation. At most libraries, the prepurchase evaluations are conducted by the collection development bibliographers, the reference librarians, or the branch, regional, or departmental librarians. Teams maintain their high level of involvement, as do outreach or liaison librarians and special collections librarians. The participation of information technology librarians jumps in this area and seems to be their important role in the process. A few respondents reported engaging professional staff other than librarians for this activity.

Purchase Decision. The decision to purchase a networked resource is typically shared equally between administrative services and collection development

bibliographers. This may be indicative of dual fiscal responsibility inside the library. Once again, teams are an important component: in 60% of the responding libraries, the decision is made by a cross-departmental team and by a same-department team in 12%.

Publicity. The publicity for newly acquired networked resources is handled largely by reference librarians, collection development bibliographers, and branch, regional, or departmental librarians. In more than half of the responding libraries, outreach or liaison librarians and cross-departmental teams also play a major role in publicizing new resources. Compared to the responses for purchase decisions, the level of participation among administrative services drops by more than half, while participation among information technology librarians and departmental teams doubles.

Postpurchase Assessment. Reference librarians, collection development bibliographers, and branch, regional, or departmental librarians maintain a high level of responsibility during the postpurchase evaluation stage, as do cross-departmental teams. Participation by outreach or liaison librarians and departmental teams drops a bit, while participation by special collections librarians, information technology librarians, and catalogers rises. For the first time, circulation librarians become involved in the process.

Effective Methods

Respondents were asked to pick the three most effective methods for identifying new resources, evaluating them, making a purchase decision, publicizing new resources, and deciding to retain or cancel a resource.

Methods for Identifying New Resources. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that consortial memberships and decisions are one of the top three most effective methods for identifying new networked resources. Almost as many (55%) rely upon vendor demonstrations at national or local library conferences (e.g., ALA, ACRL). Forty-seven percent rely upon requests from faculty, while 43% favor vendor demonstrations in the library. Vendor notifications via regular mail, requests from library staff, electronic bulletin board or distribution list discussions, and product reviews are deemed effective by a quarter to a third of the libraries. In addition, vendor notifications via telephone and email; calls, email, and communications from friends and colleagues; recommendations from

students; and vendor demonstrations at national or local online conferences (e.g., National Online Meeting) are in the top three methods for 20% of the responding libraries.

Methods for Prepurchase Evaluation of New Resources. Virtually all of the responding libraries (97%) judged that a trial of the prospective networked resource is one of the three most effective methods for evaluation. Sixty-six percent ask for a vendor demonstration or presentation. Forty percent seek input from other library staff, while 38% seek input from user groups through individual contact, meetings, consultations, etc. User contact that was unfiltered through a librarian factored in 10% or fewer of the responses.

Interestingly, only 16% of the responding libraries seek input from other libraries that have subscribed to the resource or read published evaluations and reviews of the networked resource. Fourteen percent require that an evaluation form with a set of criteria be completed, and 10% seek input through service desks such as the reference desk. Seven percent seek input from electronic bulletin boards, newsgroups, or distribution lists and from questionnaires, focus groups, or some formal survey.

Methods for Deciding to Purchase a New Resource. Decisions to purchase new networked resources are made through consensus at 66% of the libraries, by the individual responsible for the relevant funds at 55%, and by virtue of function or job description at 24%. Survey comments reflected many different models of decision making operating at the same time in the same library, depending on the nature of the resource, its price, or its content. Many respondents chose more than one answer.

In 78% of the responding libraries, the decisions to purchase can be made at any time during the year. Twenty-six percent of the respondents, however, hold regularly scheduled meetings to discuss purchase decisions. Only 9% purchase networked resources at certain times during the year.

Criteria for the Purchasing Decision. Acceptable licensing language is the single most important criteria, listed in the top three by 76% of the responding libraries. Forty-five percent state that the resource must support the library's strategic goals, 40% that it must support faculty and graduate research, 35% that it must support undergraduate research, and 29% that it must support the university's strategic goals. Thirty-six percent of the respondents state that the networked resource must be

available on the web. However, only 24% state that it must fall within a certain price range.

Methods for Publicizing Resources. The most effective method listed by libraries (71% of respondents) is to publicize and offer access to the networked resource through the library's website. Forty percent of the respondents, however, use liaison meetings, consultations, or individual contact with faculty and/or graduate students, and 40% send information via broadcast email or electronic bulletins. Thirty-eight percent catalog networked resources in the library catalog, 33% give presentations to relevant faculty and graduate students, and 22% give group training sessions to undergraduate students. Articles in library newsletters and campus newspapers, informational fliers to relevant faculty and graduate students, posted signs around the library and campus, and "friends of the library" materials are all in the top three choices, but are generally deemed less important (5%–15%).

Methods for Deciding to Retain or Cancel a Resource. In determining whether to retain or cancel a resource, 45% of responding libraries evaluate statistics from patron searches, and 41% evaluate the price of the networked resource. Price does not play much of a role in the pre-purchase evaluation, so it is likely that the emphasis on price at this juncture is coupled with usage statistics. Twenty-eight percent say that usage statistics for patron display, retrieval of articles or citations, and patron sessions are highly effective indicators of the resource's value.

The opinions of other librarians play a role in 35% of the responding institutions, and the opinions of users from individual contact, meetings, consultations, etc., play a role in 33%. The opinions of users at service desks such as the reference desk are considered by 17% of the respondents, the inflation rate of the networked resource is considered by 16%, and 14% use as criteria whether the content format was bibliographic or full-text. Opinions from questionnaires, focus groups, or some formal survey are rarely utilized, factoring in the decision-making process only 5% of the time.

Teams

Teams that manage networked information resources play a significant role in 37% of the responding libraries. The majority of these libraries has one or two teams, but several have three to five teams. One has as many as eight teams. Sixty-two percent of these teams have a published

charge, indicating a high degree of organization and acceptance in the formal library organizational structure.

The distribution of team responsibility for various aspects of the process is fairly uniform across the five categories. It appears that most teams are involved with all aspects of the process, except, perhaps, for publicity.

The teams involved with some aspect of the acquisition process—from the identification of resources to the post-purchase evaluation—are surprisingly large, ranging from a mean of 8.3 staff members to a mean of 14.5, creating a high overhead for the team process.

In most cases (68% for Team 1, for example) membership on the team is due to responsibilities in the job description. It is therefore not surprising that in most cases (70% for Team 1, for example), the length of term of membership lasts as long as the team member is in the current position.

Budget

Sixty percent of the respondents have a separate budget line for the acquisition of networked information resources. Of those respondents with separate budget lines, the mean percentage of the total acquisitions budget spent on networked resources is 10.75%, the median is 10%, and the range is from 3.5–17%.

Forty-nine respondents stated that their budgets for networked resources have been increased by a variety of means. Eighty percent said that they had redirected monies from the library serials budget, 61% from the library book budget, and 16% from another university budget line. Seventy-six percent stated that there was a budget increase. Furthermore, 22% stated that they had received monies from gifts, 6% from grants, and 16% from somewhere else. There were also a number of creative solutions, including student technology fees, student library fees, special allocations from the provost, and reserve or undesignated funds.

Consortia

Fifty-six respondents (97%) belong to consortia for the primary purpose of acquiring networked information resources. The number of consortia to which the respondents belong ranges from 0 to 24, but the mean and median is 2. The mean number of consortia to which the respondents are members for any purpose—not just acquiring networked information resources—is 3.5, with a

median of 3.

Twenty-five of thirty-eight respondents (66%) stated that a consortium makes recommendations, but not purchase decisions. Twelve of the respondents (32%) stated that a consortium only make reports, and 11 of the respondents (29%) stated that a consortium makes the final decisions. The comments indicate that consortia's primary role is to negotiate discounted prices, and the individual library chooses whether to participate in the purchase decision.

Conclusion

In sum, reference librarians and collection development bibliographers tend to dominate the entire process. Branch, regional, or departmental librarians have a large degree of autonomous responsibility in all five steps of the process, except the purchase decision. Circulation and cataloging librarians are underutilized, especially since networked information resources tend to be put into the library's OPAC, and acquisitions librarians are underutilized as well, perhaps because their responsibilities are rarely as standardized or as formalized as the duties of reference librarians and collection development bibliographers.

Teams are an important component in the process of acquiring and keeping networked resources. Because the teams tend to be large, it is apparent that many people want or need to be involved in the process.

Consortia play a major role in identifying new resources and negotiating price, but are less significant in other steps in the process.

Lastly, there are intentionally competing bodies within libraries for the acquisition of network resources—typically, a cross-departmental team and subject bibliographers or liaisons. This development is an example of libraries' more fluid and responsive organizational structures. As one library put it, "It is the policy of [our library] to provide multiple pathways for the acquisition of any electronic resources, so that if interested librarians find one pathway to acquisition blocked for whatever reason, they may try another pathway."

Networked resources have changed the way libraries operate, and the growth in importance and number of these resources should push libraries even more into a cross-departmental, multi-channeled, team environment.