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WHAT A TECHNICAL SERVICES LIBRARIAN WANTS THEIR LIBRARY DIRECTOR TO KNOW

Promoting the value of technical services librarians in the digital age.

BY GEORGIA BRISCOE

It's not easy being a law library director these days. There is tremendous pressure to reduce costs and increase the library's value to its organization by improving productivity and having more librarians take on other organizational responsibilities, such as teaching, website management, digitization projects, law school committee work, or organizing alumni events. Since most technical services (TS) librarians do not hold JD degrees, they usually do not teach. This may give them a perceived second-tier status as librarians who are not valued as much as those who teach.

Explain in Detail and Show Your Value

The first thing I want my director to know is that it is vital to recognize the value each librarian brings to the organization. Also, to really value TS librarians, you must also value bibliographic control. Show your TS librarians that you understand what they do and that you appreciate their work. When I first started at the University of Colorado Law Library, the director brought a monograph to my office and asked why it was classified the way it was. It made

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me realize she was paying attention to what goes on in TS.

Conversely, I think it is important for TS librarians to keep their directors informed about what goes on in their departments. I have always had regular meetings with my technical services departments and have taken notes of items discussed. The common phrase, “communication is the key to success,” holds very true for libraries.

Since there is important, detailed information in the TS meeting notes that every library staff member would benefit from knowing, I use a red font color to highlight what is new and especially important for public services (PS) members. I route the notes to each department with a list of the initials of each department member, and I include my name last. When the notes return to me with the initials checked off, I know everyone has read them. That way, when a reference librarian tells me

they are shocked that we canceled a title or didn't know we subscribed to a new database, I can point to the TS notes. If you are a director and your head of TS isn't providing written updates of what goes on in their department, ask them to start doing so. When my law school hired a new library director about seven years ago, I started sending the TS meeting notes to her several months before she actually started.

The second thing I would like my director to know is that keeping good bibliographic control is a library-wide enterprise. For example, decisions on what to order come from throughout the library. After TS has handled the acquisition, cataloging, payment, distribution, and end-processing, who makes sure all library staff are aware of the new acquisition and trained in its use, if, for example, it's a database? This is where workslips or checklists come in handy. Many of our workslips go from TS to PS, before ending up back at my desk so I know it made the rounds.

Third, I want my director to know that almost nothing we do in technical services is a simple task anymore. Everything is complicated and requires quite a bit of extra work and time. Canceling a subscription sounds like an easy task. We can notify the vendor/publisher, handle any credits, edit our bibliographic, check-in and order records, and attach stickers on the volumes, but more often than not, the subscription just won't end. Whether print or online, subscriptions don't seem to end on time and continue on long after they have been canceled. I must admit that I'm a major culprit here, in that I have a hard time tossing a very expensive journal issue that has been canceled but still arrives. But if we keep it, we need to change our decisions and alter all the records.

Help Directors Appreciate the Ins and Outs of TS

Law libraries used to work with roughly 25 small legal publishers. Now, with all the consolidations leaving far fewer legal publishers, one would expect that our technical services work would be easier. But the large conglomerate



companies we deal with these days are actually much harder to deal with. For instance, our purchases have been tax exempt for more than 100 years. But for the last three months, invoices from our largest legal publisher have tax added and no one seems to be able to give us a clean invoice without the tax. Time is wasted on both ends. Another example concerns our order of an online series of study aids from another big legal publisher that came with bibliographic records. We found several of the records have links to the wrong edition of the title and some of the titles we expected are not even available.

Part of the additional complexity in technical services work is keeping current with the constant changes in electronic resources. For example, since Practicing Law Institute (PLI) titles recently split from BNA, we need to suppress all those records and decide if we should subscribe to the new PLI platform. What detail do we want our online catalog and discovery platform to reflect? Directors might assume our discovery platform takes care of all this for us, but that is definitely not the case. Quality control is the only way to be sure our patrons can discover all our new and changed titles. Quality control usually falls to me, and I admit that it is difficult to keep current with all the changes.

For good bibliographic control, we want our library electronic products to deliver as “Amazon-like” an experience as possible. We all know our libraries are far from being able to do this. But to get as close as possible, we need to constantly be loading and reloading bibliographic records from electronic vendors such as Hein, Bloomberg, Wolters Kluwer, and Lexis. This takes much of our metadata librarian’s time. Since we also try to be careful with authority control, we find frequent and time-consuming problems.

Keeping current with title changes, for example, titles that have become online-only, is part of keeping bibliographic control high. One way to understand how much time this task takes is to have detailed procedures written down so others can literally see what is involved.



Advocate for Why TS Matters

Jean Pajerek, director of information management (formerly head of technical services) at Cornell, makes an informative comparison of our libraries to a fancy hotel. Our patrons could have a wonderful experience in our library (or hotel) with wonderful interactions with the staff. But if the patrons get to their room and find the sheets are dirty, this will override all the other experiences. TS is responsible for keeping the sheets clean. It is the infrastructure under the veneer and the information disseminated by the reference and circulation desks. The library can spend extreme amounts of money on library holdings, but it can all be wasted if the infrastructure doesn’t allow for quick and easy access. The better TS does its job, the less visible it is. Access to library materials is non-negotiable. It is easy for administrators to calculate the costs associated with TS, but it is not easy to measure and articulate the value TS departments create and deliver. When library directors understand what goes on in their TS departments, they can better advocate to their administrators the value and justify the costs of technical services librarians. ■

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AALL2go EXTRA

Watch the 2016 AALL Annual Meeting program “Promoting the Value of Technical Services at Budget Time: Practical Advice for Directors and Managers,” at bit.ly/AM16TS.

READ

Sarah E. M. Lin’s article “Managing Technical Services Long Distance,” from the July/August 2016 issue of *AALL Spectrum* at bit.ly/JA16TS.



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