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British Library Document Supply: an information service fit for the future

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to describe how the British Library Document Supply Service (BLDSS) is responding to changes in the provision of research content, redefining its services to suit varying audiences' requirements and building on a flexible technology platform.
Design/methodology/approach – This study is descriptive in nature.
Findings – The British Library is responding well to the current competitive environment for Inter Library Loan (ILL) and document supply.
Originality/value – This study includes an up-to-date assessment of the BLDSS and the changes, driven by the changing landscape, that are taking place.

Keywords Document supply, ILL, Partnerships, Open access, BLDSS, Digital

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Responding to the wholesale shift in scholarly communication from print to digital can be a challenging experience. Information organisations are disappearing as fast as new ones are emerging, reinforcing Darwin's statement that it is not the strongest or fittest species that survive, but those most adaptable to change. They say that before you design a forward plan you should reflect on where you have come from. During the course of this research, slides made as part of a 1977 presentation came to light. At that time, document supply at the British Library (BL) was a labour-intensive activity and, for many, a primarily physical and hunger-generating activity, involving large numbers of staff. For them, the price of food in the canteen was an important aspect of their working day (Figure 1).

The title of the next slide in the deck was interesting – "Automation and the move towards a digital age". Aspirations today are the same as they were then in many ways: to use technology to improve the customer experience and drive down costs, thus, allowing the service to be more productive and to grow (Figure 2).

There is no doubt that demand for document supply services grew up to the late 1990s and then declined rapidly, and these changes in fortune have been described in the past (see *ILDS*, Vol. 38 No. 1). Since 2000, when the service peaked at four million requests, demand has steadily reduced to the current 3/4 million requests (Figure 3). This is due largely to the emergence of the Internet and other digital technologies, facilitating easy access to information through providers like Google and new publisher business models, such as "big deals" and pay-per-view. International demand reduced significantly when the Library made the decision to cease the provision of "Library Privilege" to overseas users towards the end of 2011. This was to protect the Library from claims of copyright infringement with a view to exploring a publisher-approved licensing scheme for non-commercial overseas use[1].

Up to 2007, the way in which the Service was managed and presented to its customers had hardly changed. The Service had a long history and considerable credibility within both the commercial and non-commercial sectors, in particular, higher education. But, the decline in income[2] and static costs was making the business model untenable, and a new approach was required.

This paper outlines some of the key changes in the information industry that have led to this situation, before moving on to describe what the BL has done to move its Document Supply Service into the digital age and its plans to ensure that it remains an information service *fit for the future*.

The market place and how it is changing

The triennial Outsell Benchmarking Report provided an interesting insight into the current document supply market (http://go.infotrieve.com/outselljun14). Although, Outsell has historically reviewed around 12 document supply organisations, in the 2014 paper, there were only three: Infotrieve, Reprints Desk and the BL. This reflects the contraction of the traditional document supply market around a smaller number of major competitors. Recent work to renovate the Service has allowed the BL to compete in this environment, and Outsell recognised that more is yet to come, commenting that, "with direct online ordering and API integrations already available, and integration into end-user

Figure 1 Canteen price list, BL, Boston Spa, 1977

Figure 2 "Automation and the move towards a digital age", slide from 1977 BL presentation

Figure 3 Trend in demand for BLDSS, since it started in 1961
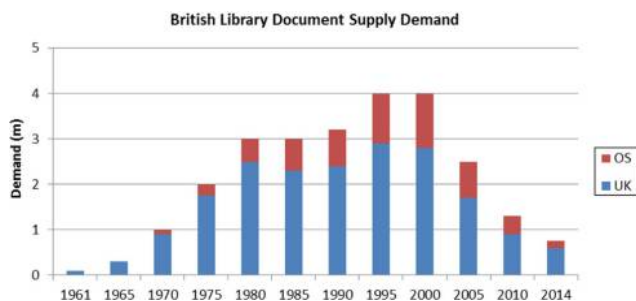
discovery environments in the pipeline, British Library Document Supply Service (BLDSS) is reasserting itself as a key player". That it, as a national library and public institution, can still contend with agile commercial providers is a testament to the new approach.

The British Library's Document Supply Service is unique in its wide range of sectors and customer types, which remains an important and fundamental aspect of the business model. The majority of the Service's demand currently comes from two distinct and very different sectors: commercial users, to whom copyright fees are

applicable, and the UK public good users, who enjoy library privilege and are exempt from copyright when using documents for pure research. This creates significant technical challenges, not least, that of assuring 100 per cent copyright compliance to every customer.

To plan how to meet the needs of each sector, detailed market research has been undertaken and has provided the following insight into our users' requirements (Table I).

An interesting way to review the market place changes is by using a PESTLE analysis (Table II):

Customer consultation was a key aspect of redesigning the BLDSS, but, of course, this is a fast-moving environment, and new requirements continuously evolve, which, in turn, provide the fuel for continuous improvement.

The current position of British Library Document Supply

In 2008, responding to the market forces described above, the BL launched a new strategy (Figure 4), which underpinned a series of projects entitled "Document Supply Futures".

Based on the BL's brand as a trusted supplier of a vast range of content[4] with complete copyright compliance, two complementary pillars – new technologies and

**Table I** BLDSS market research findings by sector type

All sector requirements	Access to contemporary digital content and "long-tail" print from a single provider
	Access to free and OA content alongside paid-for material
	Seamless workflow integration with LMS (Case Study 1)
	Options for library outsourcing, for example, collaborative (shared) storage[3], licensing and even acquisition
	Text and data mining
Commercial specific requirements	Intuitive search, ease of access, more content, mobile apps and widgets
	Demonstrable value for money (VFM)
	Detailed reporting and usage analytics to inform acquisition and popularity trends
	No encryption
	Access to chapters and/or short loans of e-books via a single provider on a single platform
	Content management with analytics to enable libraries to demonstrate return on investment and VFM within their organisation
Non-commercial (public good) requirements	Options for student-unmediated access
	Mobile access on multiple devices
	Reuse rights and content combined to support educational courses, reading lists, etc.
	Coordination of interlibrary loans and potentially consortia agreements
	Location information of alternative providers

Table II PESTLE analysis

	Change factors	Detail
Political	OA	This situation is far from clear, but it will inevitably shape the future of the document supply landscape. Currently the Library's approach is to work with key stakeholders to agree to metadata relating to reuse rights and consult and engage with the wider research and publishing communities
Economic	Cuts to acquisitions budgets (for customers and the BL)	Researchers have an expectation for an increasing range of content offering best VFM. To decide the best acquisition route, good management information is required
Socio – cultural	Customers expect instant, flexible and intuitive access	In this fast-moving, technology-driven, consumer society, researchers expect services that look and feel like Amazon, Netflix and Google
Technology	New digital, business-to-business, consumer, research and mobile technologies	Probably the biggest influence on service delivery and consumer behaviour, technology reaches into every facet of the business: content, storage, search, ordering, access and supply. All require increasing levels of technological sophistication as providers must actively push innovation forward to maintain market share
Legal	Digital rights management in the context of complex license regulations and cross-border supply	The Library's cessation of library privilege supply to overseas customers has had a major impact on demand (Figure 3) Partnerships with RROs are very important to combine rights and content
Environmental	Changing competition and a market perception that the British Library is a more traditional service to use for "long-tail" publishing	Environmental changes vary depending on the customer group. Small, agile commercial providers are emerging, who, with a handful of publisher deals and newly developed technology, can engage with contemporary commercial users. Research in the UK Higher Education and other public good institutions tends to favour free online resources, direct deals with publishers, followed by Document Supply and ILL (Ithaka S+R, Jisc and Research Libraries UK, 2012 - www.sr.ithaka.org/research-publications/ithaka-sr-jisc-rluk-uk-survey-academics-2012)

Note: ILL, Inter Library Loan

Figure 4 The Document Supply Futures strategy
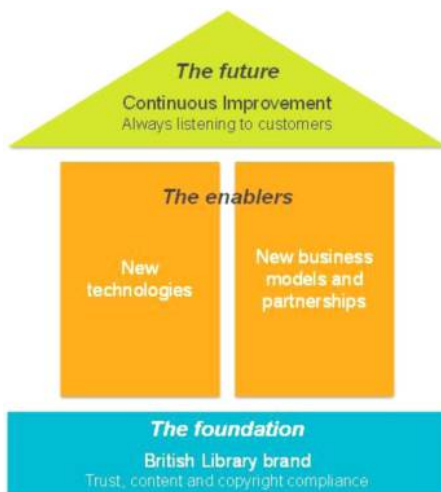
re-engineered business processes and models – support future service development. Neither pillar can support growth without the other, and its continued survival is entirely dependent on the final piece of the puzzle: actively listening to and engaging with its customers to drive the constant improvement of its services:

CASE STUDY 1: Integrating BLDSS into university Library Management Systems
Artemail has been the "language" of Library Management Systems (LMSs) for many years with the vast range of Reply Codes being very familiar to research librarians. The challenge to the BL was to implement a more modern protocol at a time when current customer LMSs still required this method of connectivity.

The new BLDSS enabled the design and implementation of an Application Programming Interface (API), which offers significant advantages through integration with LMSs and aggregators.

Clio's Interlibrary Loan system (www.cliosoftware.co.uk) has implemented the BLDSS API with great success, and now the Universities of Stirling, Limerick, Huddersfield and many more enjoy instant availability and pricing information about BL collections and order from them seamlessly as part of their workflows.

Jennifer Perkins of Clio reports:

> The API allows LMS providers to bring the BLDSS features into the LMS workflow, so that users gain all the benefits of the BLDSS without the need to run systems in parallel and duplicate their effort. The LMS provider can pick the features that are most useful to their library customers, and weave them into the LMS workflow, with the LMS and BLDSS working together to automate many of the tedious steps, and increase the accuracy/efficiency of the document delivery process. The improved structure and detail of the messages exchanged between the systems also allows the computers on either end to communicate more effectively and precisely. Our customers have reported a 75 per cent reduction in failed requests following adoption of the British Library's Document Supply API.

The projects informed by this strategy have started to build a more sustainable service and reduce costs, despite the continuing reduction in demand. The Document Supply Futures projects included:

1 *In 2008*: The introduction of operational management and continuous improvement to right-size the business and balance cost with income.

2 *In 2010*: The re-engineering of business processes, building on a new e-commerce platform, which provides a modern, online, pay-as-you-go interface and an integrated, system-to-system solution, using an API (Case Study 1).

3 *In 2013*: The introduction of tiered pricing, differentiating between the supply of scanned print and born digital material, bringing down the price to our customers and promoting greater use of electronic content.

4 *In 2015*: The following customer-focused enhancements are planned, which will further reposition the Service as an agile digital content provider:

- Connecting to publisher sites where licence agreements permit, providing users with a seamless choice of BL subscribed (purchased) and licensed content.
- Combining content with rights for reuse through partnerships with Reciprocal Rights Organisations; for example, the Copyright Clearance Centre and the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA).
- Making the service mobile friendly for researchers on the move. Converting the user interface to HTML5 to enable ordering and delivery on hand-held devices is the first step, and a mobile app is under discussion.
- Extending use of the API and searching of the newly configured, article-level database (formerly ETOC) to more customers through their LMS and large aggregators.

CASE STUDY 2: Benefits gained through using the BLDSS at a leading Russell group university

"Sheffield's promise to our users is: if we haven't got it we'll get it for you", says Tracey Clarke, Assistant Director of Library Services at the University, "without British Library Document Supply, we couldn't come good on that promise". British Library Document Supply allows the University Library to get their students and researchers the material they need quickly and easily.

Yet, the benefits of working with the BL go far beyond access to unique research content. Alongside the Document Supply Service, students and researchers at the University take full advantage of EThOS (Case Study 3), and Sheffield has also been a major player in the UK Research Reserve, a collaborative space-saving initiative across the UK Higher Education (UK HE) Sector and underpinned by the British Library Document Supply. Through UK Research Reserve, they have been able to free up 3,490 m of shelf space, allowing them to create 64 new study areas across two floors of the Western Bank Library. "It's been a win-win project", says Tracey, "it saved us from an impending capacity crisis and we've been able to create a world class study environment in the process".

The long-term vision for British Library Document Supply

There are many elements required to create information services *fit for the future*. The Library will require strong leadership and vision, as well as penetrating insight, to ensure its long-valued services remain relevant to future customers. The pressure on costs will surely continue across sectors, so the need for a "lean", streamlined back-office supply chain is also paramount. This will require highly sophisticated operational models and creative employment frameworks that optimise productivity. However, two elements are central to the BL's vision for the future of its information services:

content and partnerships. This section will address the Library's vision for the future in both of these areas.

Content

As the national library of the UK, the BL's role is to preserve and provide access to its collections. The Library has pursued a policy of unifying its collection and removing barriers to access as much as possible so that researchers have the greatest choice of material and modes of access when they come to the BL for information (Figure 5).

Open Access

The BL's policy statement describes its position in support of open access (OA) to research that has been funded from the UK public purse and states:

- We support the principle that open access to publicly funded, peer-reviewed, UK research should be freely available within, and also beyond the academic research community, to benefit business researchers, life-long learners, citizen scholars and the general public.
- We believe that the wider accessibility of publicly-funded research, combined with flexible reuse conditions, will raise the social, economic and cultural impact of UK research.
- We are committed to serving both researchers today, and future generations, by collecting, preserving and providing access to scholarly content.
- As the national library of the United Kingdom, we will collect and preserve in perpetuity UK-published open access research outputs.
- We recognise that research is collaborative and international in its nature. Therefore, we will enable our users to access the growing range of UK and international Open Access content by connecting to appropriate content through our discovery services.
- We will work in partnership with other libraries, the research community and publishers in the UK and internationally in seeking out collaborative and sustainable solutions for Open Access.

Intrinsic in this responsibility will be the gathering of data and information to support how OA requirements translate into system and service requirements. The ability to serve up OA content alongside traditionally published resources presents an extremely powerful and convenient tool for researchers.

Figure 5 The BL collection available on demand (does not include Legal Deposit)

As the BL's acquisition budgets reduce alongside those of its customers, how it will continue to provide access to contemporary content needs to become more inventive. It must supplement traditional "collecting" with more "connecting", while making those connections far more dynamic and intuitive. Evermore sophisticated ways of matching of rights data with customer data, something in which the BL has a wealth of experience and expertise, will be key in this space. Any developments will also need to be customer-led and, wherever possible, work on a "just-in-time" model:

CASE STUDY 3: PhD theses, EThOS and UK HE
EThOS, the UK's e-Theses Online Service, was launched in 2008 as the digital equivalent of the BL's long-standing British Thesis Service. Print theses were scanned by the Library on behalf of the UK HE institutions and added to EThOS, from where users could download e-theses to support their research.

Six years on, EThOS still provides a "digitise and supply" service for print theses: 500 are scanned every month. But, EThOS has also developed into a repository hub for the UK OA theses, connecting users with the best of the UK's graduate research wherever the theses are held, and establishing itself as the national discovery service for all PhD theses.

It's an excellent example of a service that has evolved from print to digital and from "supply" to end-user access, and it is now one of the BL's core researcher services.

Partnerships
Partnerships are an integral component of the revised business model (Figure 2). These include publishers, rights organisations, customers and technology providers. When looking to penetrate new markets or provide services in a completely new way, it is often better to look to a trusted partner to contribute their expertise and knowledge rather than attempt to do everything in-house. Partners also enable the Service to respond quickly to changing technologies and customer demographics.

By making use of partners' expertise and knowledge of the market sector they service, partnerships enable the Library to segment its customer base and differentiate its services according to specific customer needs. Working from the BLDSS e-commerce platform as the foundation of all service options, partners can add functionality through our API in accordance with customer needs and desires:

CASE STUDY 4: Partnership with the CLA
In September 2014, a tripartite agreement between the BL, the CLA and National Health Service (NHS) Scotland was launched, which combines content delivery with rights management.

The model leverages the wealth of content, held by the BL and the NHS libraries themselves, together with the robust management of appropriate permissions granted by the CLA and publishers. NHS Scotland are now able to receive unencrypted copies from the BL or scan and copy items from their own collections, with the reuse rights of permitted material fully covered by their central licence with the CLA.

Mat Pfleger, Managing Director of the CLA, says:

We are delighted to have in place this agreement with NHS Scotland and the British Library; it supports NHS Scotland's digital strategy by providing a simple but very effective rights and content solution. The initiative provides a platform to extend this approach to other organisations and will help CLA realise its goal of simplifying copyright and access to published content.

In summary
This paper has given an overview of recent market trends and their impact on document supply at the BL. In recent years, the Service has responded well to these trends, but it is clear that, as the pace of change builds, there is yet more to be done and maintaining relevance in the new information world will require some fundamental reassessment of the models on which we have operated for the past 50 years.

The Library's overarching ambition, to enable online access to the entirety of its collections and supplement them with seamless connections to content held by other providers, will take some time, but, nevertheless, is in its sights. Furthermore, as the national library of the UK, it has a unique role in supporting the UK research and making its outputs accessible. This position makes the Library a key player in negotiating and facilitating the new publishing and access models that are on the horizon.

Notes
1 The International Non-Commercial Document supply service model has not proven a viable alternative because of the complexity of requirements that are making the service unattractive.

2 The British Library Document Supply Service is a discretionary part of the British Library portfolio and accordingly has to cover its costs.

3 An example of this is the UK Research Reserve in which the BL played a leading role – www.UKRR.ac.uk

4 In total, there are 87.5 million items, including published content and comprising: 3,000,000 monographs; 296,000 International journal titles of which over 25,000 are currently received; 300,000 British and North-American doctoral theses; 5 million research reports and official publications; and 400,000 conference papers and proceedings.

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