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Outsourcing: Boon or Bane for Law Libraries

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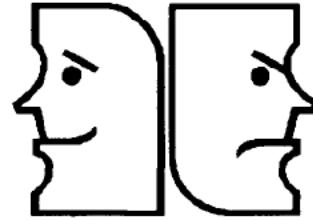
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**OUTSOURCING:
BOON OR BANE FOR LAW LIBRARIES?**

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This program was held on July 18th in Pittsburgh during the AALL annual convention, and Naomi Goodman (Valparaiso) was the coordinator. The first speaker was Karen Wilhoit from Wright State University (WSU), who is a very popular speaker these days, since her library system was probably the first to outsource all of its cataloging. She began with a brief history of cataloging at WSU. There had been a number of efforts to improve the workflow and efficiency, but apparently to no avail, as turnaround time was still poor and the backlog was growing.

So WSU prepared an RFP and chose OCLC's TECHPRO service. The cataloged records are placed in WSU's save file and are then downloaded at WSU. Ms. Wilhoit mentioned the benefits of a quick turnaround time, the fact that no new titles were being added to the backlog, and the savings of \$250,000 in the first year. She emphasized the fact that all savings were retained by the library system. Ms. Wilhoit did mention that she was not sure if legal cataloging would lend itself to outsourcing, due to the high level of maintenance involved with many law titles.

Cynthia Whitacre of OCLC's TECHPRO service was the next speaker. She pointed out that we already do some outsourcing and gave the examples of approval plans and retrospective conversion work. For libraries lacking funding and staff, outsourcing can be essential. This explains why many clients use the service for the cataloging of foreign language material for which their own library lacks

the appropriate expertise. TECHPRO began in 1985 as a natural extension of OCLC's retrospective conversion service, yet it was not until 1992 that publicity on TECHPRO really began. Since 1985, the staff has grown from 3 to 27 members.

Ms. Whitacre characterized part of the mission of the service as being to catalog titles that might not otherwise be cataloged. She emphasized that TECHPRO can help to supplement local cataloging operations rather than replacing them. Pricing is customized and physical processing can also be part of the package. Ms. Whitacre had a few tips for entering into a successful relationship with TECHPRO: Be explicit about what you want done, document this carefully, and communicate regularly.

The final speaker was Janis Johnston of Notre Dame Law School Library. Ms. Johnston pointed out that our use of the bibliographic utilities is also outsourcing, as was our use of the LC card program which was so widespread before the utilities were born. Notre Dame has experience with two outsourced projects over the past ten years or so, both with Amigos. Ms. Johnston said that some quality control was lost, but that access to the project titles was made possible quickly and affordably as a tradeoff.

Why do administrators like outsourcing? Ms. Johnston answered this with four reasons:

1. Cataloging has become too labor-intensive; it is better to let a small group concentrate and improve quality (the CONSER program was offered as an example of this)
2. Staff costs, especially benefits, have become very expensive
3. Variety of services that we provide is growing rapidly
4. We never really had competition until now, and as it almost always does, competition drives the price down.

According to Ms. Johnston, we have two alternatives. We can become ultra-efficient or we can hire others to do selective parts of our work. She pointed out that the outsourcing vendors are librarians who value quality, just as we do. Ms. Johnston also emphasized the necessity of having a well-constructed contract. In her opinion, outsourcing is

inevitable, therefore, it makes sense for us to take the initiative, in order to retain as much control as possible over the process. Ms. Johnston encouraged us to learn to negotiate quality at the lowest cost and to use outsourcing strategically.

I found this program very interesting. I confess that I have not been a huge fan of outsourcing, but I think it is clear that it is here to stay and that cataloging is a function well-suited in many ways to contracting out. The speakers on this program gave excellent insight into a variety of perspectives on the topic. Ms. Johnston also distributed a bibliography on outsourcing, and I picked up a number of TECHPRO handouts. If anyone is interested, please contact me.
