Outsourcing, 1995–1998

Outsourcing is not a new idea. It is used in inter library loan (ILL) and document delivery services, serials operations, acquisitions, approval plans, authority control, backlogs, collection development, music collections, pockets of special materials, retrospective conversion, and even reference services. But outsourcing also lends itself nicely to more routine and traditional operations in technical services. Years ago cards were typed manually and to expedite that process libraries ordered card sets from the Library of Congress. It was a change, but it was progress. When OCLC came along that was another change, but where would we be without it? Why in the world would we want to change? Could service be improved by outsourcing part of the operation? Outsourcing is not a bad word and does not need to have negative connotations. The decision to outsource should be viewed as a welcome change. It can be a positive way to increase productivity and an opportunity for both personal growth and job enhancement. Outsourcing, partnering, whatever the name, it is here to stay.

In Outsourcing Cataloging, Authority Work, and Physical Processing, outsourcing is defined as using the services of a contractor rather than in-house library staff to accomplish an activity. The following checklist of considerations is adapted from the book, edited by Marie Kascus and Dawn Hale.

1. What are the goals of a particular library?
2. Will staff with expertise and experience be needed in the future to provide access to information?
3. What are the implications of relinquishing some local control?
4. Can we insure quality in our bibliographic records and customize them as we wish if we do not directly control cataloging?
5. What is the status of current projects?
6. What are the real costs and what are the hidden costs?
7. What will be the user impact? What is the impact on Reference service if the database quality deteriorates?
8. What are the system implications?
9. What changes will have to be made in technical services work flow?
10. Is there an inventory of uncataloged items?
11. What will be the turnaround time?
12. Is it threatening to our profession to have vendors who are physically and psychologically removed from our institutional missions?
13. What in-house activities would a library retain if the library does decide to outsource some tasks?

Suggesting future research in outsourcing is hard to do, but the preceding list of questions, and the article summaries that follow, may suggest some areas for future researchers to explore.

The outsourcing decisions of Wright State University’s Library are widely known. The School contracts with OCLCs TechPro service for all of its cataloging, original and copy, in all formats. Authority control is provided through a contract with Blackwell North America. The pre-outsourcing Wright State staff of thirteen has been replaced by 1.5 FTEs and a head of bibliographic control. The TechPro contract has quality as well as quantity specifications. By outsourcing its cataloging, the library at Wright State saved over $250,000 per year, funds retained by the library and invested in public services. University Librarian Arnold Hirshon and others, have consistently emphasized that Wright State’s decision is not for all Libraries (Miller 1995).

A pilot project was conducted at the Ohio State Universities Libraries to contract out the cataloging of Slavic-language books.

“Contracting Cataloging is a viable means of obtaining catalog records for specific materials, in the case of this pilot project, Slavic language books. First, we found that the quality of cataloging was acceptable with the two exceptions, and these were specific cases in which we believe the quality can be brought up to an acceptable level through specific instruction to OCLC TechPro. And secondly it is clear from the
cost analysis that OCLC TechPro costs less than hiring a Slavic original cataloger” (El-Sherbini 1995, 57–73).

"Catalog outsourcing has added another policy option to technical service operations by promising cheaper cataloging than accomplished by in-house cataloging staff... The cataloging manager handling the outsource contracting inevitably will end up looking at bids that offer pistachio, rocky road, and bubble gum when the library only wants vanilla. ... As catalog outsourcers become more sophisticated, outside contracting is likely to increase” (Holt 1995, 34).

"Outsourcing has engendered substantial controversy with critics who claim it affects the quality of bibliographic control in overt and subtle ways. First, critics charge that the cataloging done by contractors is inferior. The lower costs for contract cataloging are obtainable only through the use of inadequately trained personnel with the consequent sacrifice in quality. Specifically, they are concerned that contract catalogers bring an inadequate understanding of subject analysis and class of descriptive cataloging, with a resulting loss of precision and the introduction of inconsistencies in the OPACs. Taken to its logical conclusion, these deficiencies will mean false retrievals or missed searches or failure to provide catalog users with optimum search and retrieval conditions. Equally threatening is the loss to the organization of skills of catalogers in the library environment. Although contracting out is often a reaction against inefficiencies in cataloging departments and exasperation with the cost and length of time cataloging takes, frequently administrators overlook the many services performed by an in-house cataloging staff. In addition to cataloging, they contribute their organizational expertise to committees, studies, and other initiatives. In-house catalogers may be paid higher salaries than contractors. The overall value of the cataloger to the library must be taken into consideration when deciding to outsource and reduce technical staff. Not only the quality of the cataloging must be assessed but also the needs of the total library environment” (Thomas 1996, 491–505).

"The authors conducted a survey on outsourcing of cataloging in academic libraries to determine the extent of such projects and their overall success. The survey instrument included questions about what factors influence the decision to outsource, what reasons libraries had for outsourcing or not outsourcing, what was being outsourced, and how vendors were chosen. Libraries also were asked to evaluate the success of outsourcing projects. The results show that outsourcing of cataloging is not a strong trend in academic libraries but that libraries which outsourced were generally pleased with results. There also seems to be a correlation between size of collection and number of new titles cataloged annually, and the decision to outsource” (Libby and Caudle 1997, 550–60).

"Catalogers in academic libraries who belong to ALA's Technical Services Division were surveyed to determine if and how their job functions have changed over the past ten years. The 271 respondents indicated a change from print to electronic formats, involvement of nonprofessionals in higher levels of cataloging, a trend toward outsourcing (particularly, copy cataloging and foreign-language materials), and more cataloging of specialized items, audiovisual materials, and digital documents by professional librarians. The latter now use their expertise to edit problematic records, engage in Web page design, and use HTML. More and more catalogers are involved in activities formerly in the domain of systems librarians (selecting and implementing catalog products, database maintenance, etc.)." (Buttlar and Garcha 1998, 311–21).

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