HAM: A HYBRID ACQUISITIONS MODEL FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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DEFINING ACQUISITIONS

Acquisitions can mean so many things, and there are various ways to do it. Public libraries range in size and budget; therefore their concepts of acquisitions vary as well. When asked what it means to them, a librarian from a one-branch public library serving a small town of fewer than 20,000 people said, “when it comes to public libraries I think of [acquisitions] more as a collaborative process than an individual person. The receipt and processing of the material are handled by a mixture of professional and paraprofessional folk.”

A director of a four-branch system defines it as “the process of selecting, purchasing, and processing various materials and content to make available to the public.” Finally, the head of technical services at a 22-branch system says that to her, acquisitions is “the complex, behind-the-scenes, migration of library material that begins as a thought in a public librarian’s head through the placement of an order, to the eventual delivery of that material to the shelf.”

There are also many formal definitions of acquisitions. In 1942, Tomlinson described an acquisitions department as “the part of a library which selects, orders, and accessions a book,” with “accessioning” being “the act of recording a book in the accession book and of assigning the accession number to the book” (Tomlinson 1942, 7). A more modern, yet nebulous, definition is “the processes of obtaining books and other items for a library, documentation center or archive” (Prytherch 2000, 7). For some, though, acquisitions encompasses more. The Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science defines it as “the process of selecting, ordering, and receiving materials for library or archival collection by purchase, exchange, or gift, which may include budgeting and negotiating with outside agencies, such as publishers,
dealers, and vendors, to obtain resources to meet the needs of the institution’s clientele in the most economical and expeditious manner” (Reitz 2013).

For the purposes of this chapter, we will operationalize this last definition of acquisitions to include selection of materials, and exclude collection analysis for deselection. In discussion of various models of acquisitions, the process will encompass budgeting, working with vendors, selection, ordering, receiving, processing, and overall administration of the process. This is represented in Figure 9.1.

**ACQUISITIONS MODELS**

In order to provide current, relevant, and desired items (whether in print or electronic versions) to our constituencies, public libraries need to have an acquisitions system in place. Multiple models of acquisitions systems are available to public libraries. Depending on the size, staffing, and budget of the library, one model may work better than another. The four models are centralized, decentralized, outsourcing, and hybrid.

*Centralized* acquisitions can exist in all types of libraries, but is often seen as the method used in small public libraries with just one physical location.
and limited staff. In centralized acquisitions, all decisions and actions in the acquisitions cycle are made in one location, sometimes by just one or two people. The same person or department that selects materials also places the orders, handles the budget, and processes the accessioned items.

Decentralized, or local, acquisitions exists in two or more connected public libraries that are members of the same system, consortia, or county system comprising multiple, disparate locations. Decentralized acquisitions can also exist in a large public library with multiple departments, such as business, genealogy, and reference departments in a multilevel central library. When a library uses a decentralized acquisitions model, each component of the process is handled completely separately from each of the other branches, libraries, or departments within the system. In a decentralized model, there is no collaborative purchasing, consolidated budgeting, or unified processing.

Outsourcing for libraries means enlisting for-profit entities outside the physical library to do library-related functions rather than having in-house staff complete them. Common outsourced activities for libraries include janitorial work, security, and foreign-language cataloging, but for acquisitions most aspects of the process can be outsourced. Outsourcing acquisitions means having a vendor, or multiple vendors, take responsibility for the duties involved in the process. Essentially, you are centralizing your acquisitions but in a business outside of your public library. We can use vendors to create approval plans for selection, consolidate orders, choose opening-day collections for new branches, and process items to make them shelf-ready. It is possible that very small libraries could ostensibly have all of their selection, purchasing, and processing done by vendors. Just tell the vendor your budget, clientele, and processing needs and then let them take care of the process.

According to Wilkinson and Lewis (2003), outsourcing became more popular for libraries in the late 20th century, and the most popular outsourced acquisitions tasks are selection and processing. Outsourcing allows libraries to determine what could be done by an outside party, and thus refocus staff efforts on other core library operations. Its benefits may be outweighed, however, by negative implications on staff morale, and has been cited in the literature as a “sort of punishment when the management and the library staff encounter on-going friction in their personal relationships” (Alvin 1999, 263).

HYBRID ACQUISITIONS MODELS

An arrangement that works for many public libraries is to have a hybrid acquisitions model (HAM). In this case, the library system incorporates aspects of centralized, decentralized, and outsourcing models to fulfill its acquisitions needs efficiently and economically. Certain parts of the process are done centrally, some are handled by individual locations, and parts may be outsourced. Table 9.1 shows which functions in a hybrid acquisitions process are centralized, decentralized, outsourced, or integrated into some combination therein.
Budgeting is done both centrally and locally. A designated department or person in a main location or administrative unit would have the responsibility of setting an overall materials budget, allocating money to various branches, locations, departments in a central library and other specialized collections funds. Even with a central materials budget, however, each designated location receiving funding would have some control over their designated monies in order to decide how much to spend on specialized materials. Designing budgets for materials selection is usually done by librarians and not outside vendors.

Vendor relations integrate how libraries locate, negotiate, communicate, and handle technical issues with the various companies and individuals who provide information resources and services to public libraries. In a HAM, most of this would be handled centrally. Again, a designated department or person in a main location or administrative unit would be the main contact for all vendors. This streamlines the communication channel for evaluation of the vendor’s resources, ensuring correct description of technology requirements, and discussion of billing issues. On occasion, a public library in a consortia or county system may have the need for an individual relation with a vendor in order to procure a specialized resource or service. Also, in some periodicals systems, such as EBSCO Subscription Services or WT Cox Information Services, a public library can outsource those vendor relations, and have that vendor talk to multiple periodicals providers on the library’s behalf.

Selection of materials would be handled centrally, locally, by outsourcing, or an amalgamation of the three. Centralized selection involves a few designated staff making group purchasing decisions for books, periodicals, and electronic resources on behalf of all branches or departments. Assuming most public libraries would want to have certain materials, such as best sellers, a general research database, or an updated World Book Encyclopedia, a central acquisitions department can identify these materials for ordering and do it in one place for multiple locations in a singular instance. On a local level, individual libraries or departments would need to order the items unique to their constituencies, such as foreign-language materials, a preponderance of

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Aspect of Acquisitions</th>
<th>Centralized</th>
<th>Decentralized</th>
<th>Outsourced</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Budgeting</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vendor relations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ordering</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Receiving</td>
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<td>Processing</td>
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children’s or young adult materials, or genealogical resources. Selection can be outsourced by giving vendors a profile of what the library generally would like for their collections, and letting the vendors choose new materials without further library input.

In a HAM, the ordering of materials is either done by a centralized acquisitions staff or done by the vendors through approval plans and standing orders. Centrally, staff would receive all unique orders from various library locations and place them in addition to the general common selections mentioned in the previous paragraph. By placing all orders through a centralized model, larger orders can be processed at one time, thus giving the possibility of larger discounts, and increased efficiency in the tracking of orders and handling of issues. Outsourcing orders to vendors, in periodicals for example, frees up library staff to concentrate on other orders or functions such as reference or programming.

Receiving of materials involves the physical receipt of deliveries or the virtual receipt of electronic materials. Packages need to be opened, items need to be checked against invoices, and materials need to be checked against original orders. Receiving in a hybrid model would occur centrally, and involve the same benefits mentioned earlier—increased efficiency and handling of issues. Inputting materials data into an integrated library system in bulk is more efficient than having multiple locations do it, and reduces the potential for error. If there are errors in an order, such as missing items, damaged materials, or incorrect coverage in a database, vendors would prefer to hear from one location, rather than field the same issues from multiple staff. For a good list of receiving errors, see Chapman (2004).

The last part of the acquisitions cycle is getting materials ready for the public, or processing. After items have been received, they will be put through a series of steps to become ready for public library shelves. Processing varies according to library preference, and could therefore be done centrally, locally, or by vendors in a HAM. Initially, vendors can provide general processing tasks, such as affixing a barcode to each item, or putting a property stamp in a prescribed location. Centrally, the public library can expand on these general vendor-provided services to apply protective covers or applicable security devices. At each specific public library location, a special location sticker might be necessary, such as a designation for a new book shelf, or the library might wish to remove supplemental materials like CD-ROMs or workbooks for placement in a secured area. All of these functions are dependent on the decisions of the staff of the individual libraries.

**CONSIDERATIONS FOR A HYBRID MODEL**

Beyond the general overall facets of the acquisitions process, there are more things for public libraries to consider in a hybrid acquisitions model. There are aspects of selection, administration, reporting, assessment, procedure, and more that were discussed earlier.
Selection Considerations

In selecting materials, public libraries that work together in acquisitions, whether in the same system or not, need to determine how selection will work and coordinate related activities. Common ground needs to be established and communicated on many issues, such as the following:

- What subject areas overlap?
- Which can be handled by approval plans?
- What selection will be handled by centralized selectors?
- What librarians will have control over selection at their individual locations?
- What expert librarians at individual locations might be recruited to order centrally for certain collections, such as music CDs, foreign-language materials, or children’s picture books?
- How will patron requests be handled? Will they be sent to a central ordering location for consideration by other selectors?
- How will interlibrary loan requests be incorporated into the selection process? Are they to be handled the same as general patron requests?

Gifts are another portion of selection for consideration. Individual libraries often received donations of materials from their customers and local entities. HAM libraries will need to decide the following:

- Can these be offered to other libraries for their potential selection? Are there other viable methods of gift disposition?
- If you dispose of gifts through an out-of-print dealer, how will earned funds be allocated?
- Do you want to send gifts to a vendor for processing?
- Does each library offer thank-you notes to donors? If so, do you want to handle these centrally?

Procedural Considerations

Many procedural pieces of the acquisitions process require deliberation, including types of orders, how electronic materials will be considered, and more. Some questions to keep in mind for a HAM include the following:

- Will rush orders of immediately needed materials be handled in a centralized or decentralized fashion?
- What processing needs of each library could be eliminated in order to have a vendor make everything completely shelf-ready?
- Are all involved library branches or departments utilizing the same formats of audiovisual materials? How can consolidation of these varying
formats be leveraged in order to negotiate the best discounts with vendors?

- Which location(s) or staff will be responsible for determining deadlines for order placement and budget encumbrance?
- Who will be responsible for coordination of the technology requirements of each location in order to provide electronic access to information?
- How do you want to handle trials of electronic resources?
- Can a central department manage all standing orders?
- Who has the authority to enter into contracts on behalf of all HAM entities?

Periodicals require special consideration, as multiple publishers and individual issues of each magazine can become burdensome and complex.

- Is there a print periodicals subscription vendor that will meet your multifaceted needs?
- Will all periodicals be delivered to and processed at one location, and then distributed to branches and departments? Or, can a vendor handle multiple destinations?
- Where will periodicals problems, like missed issues, be handled?
- Will you have an electronic preference for your periodicals? How will those be acquired? Centrally or locally?
- How will specialized magazines not available through a subscription vendor be ordered? Locally or centrally?
- Will a subscription vendor’s service charge for subscription services be split evenly among branches and/or departments, or split based on number of subscriptions?
- Will selection of open access materials be done by individual departments or branches?
- What renewal cycle do you want?

**Administrative Considerations**

Two budgeting issues could arise for those adopting a HAM. The first is whether the allocations of funding will be done centrally, locally, or in a combined fashion. A completely centralized budget would be rigid and steadfast, with the central acquisitions staff designating exactly how much can be spent in each branch or department on each type of material. Giving local library departments or branches the authority to decide how to spend some of the funds may provide for a better collection development strategy overall.

The second area of budgeting to consider is who will administer, review, and report on the budget. Municipalities, city councils, mayors, and auditors have strict requirements and regulations surrounding fiscal activities. It may be hard to justify allocating control of funding to an outside vendor, and letting that vendor make purchasing decisions for the library. When materials
budgets are decentralized in any form, an audit trail may be more difficult to document, and reconciling encumbered monies against expended monies becomes more difficult. A centralized budget allows for closer scrutiny and ease of monitoring. Finally, budget reporting done by multiple locations can be less efficient than that done by a centralized acquisitions staff.

Another large aspect of administering a HAM is personnel. Who, where, when, how—all involved parties must decide various things about staffing. Acquisitions tasks are done by librarians, paraprofessionals, part-time employees, and others (Evans, Intner, and Weihs 2011), and those employees can sometimes feel threatened by the idea of sharing their job duties with other libraries or vendors (Agee 2007). Public library staff must also be prepared to endure and get behind the changes that come along with implementation of a HAM (German 1999). Considerations for personnel include the following:

- What level of training or education or experience is necessary for each step in the acquisitions process? Can paraprofessionals handle them?
- Who will be assigned to which tasks?
- Who are the backups for these staff?
- Do all portions of the acquisitions process need to be physically centralized? Or, can ordering be done at one location, and receiving at another?
- What communication requirements are expected?
- From where will training be coordinated?
- Can volunteers be used for any parts of the acquisitions process? Central, locally, or both?

Administration of a HAM could include the use of an interagency agreement or a memorandum of understanding that states what each library branch or department is accountable for, and increase collaboration between them. It will delineate what libraries or staff are involved, exactly what the responsibilities of each are, the time period for the agreements, what payments may be involved, and who has the ultimate authority for relevant tasks.

**Assessment Considerations**

Public libraries assess all manner of their services. Librarians solicit feedback from their customers about satisfaction with summer reading clubs, customer service, and staff capabilities, and the adequacy of the library’s collections. Also worthy of assessment are the internal processes and workflows. There will be a need at some point after the implementation of a hybrid acquisitions model to assess the effectiveness of the system thus far, and gauge the worth of continuing the acquisitions process in this manner. While materials budgets in public libraries are monitored constantly, the overall materials budget should
be reviewed annually for appropriate allocation to participating libraries and departments in accordance with whatever protocol the library has in place. Some libraries utilize algorithms involving the average cost of materials and circulation statistics. Others may use enhancement programs to allocate money to special funds on a rotating basis.

Relationships with vendors also require evaluation. In a HAM, interactions with vendors are generally handled centrally in order to streamline the interactions, accurately report issues, and ensure that the correct information is relayed back and forth. HAM users will need to review vendor choices and gauge satisfaction levels of the vendor’s customer service. Public libraries generally will be required to initiate a bidding process, or Request for Proposal, on a prescribed basis to update contracts and verify that money is being spent on the best available vendor option. Commonly assessed features of vendor services are delivery time of materials, comparison of discounts, accuracy in invoicing, and reliability in processing.

Selection procedures should be analyzed as collection development policies are reviewed. Selectors in a HAM must ensure they are working in accordance with prescribed policy. New staff with differing collection strengths may be available. A periodic assessment of selection procedures and selectors themselves will ensure that libraries utilizing a HAM are being as efficient as possible.

Ordering, receiving, and processing workflows certainly warrant regular assessment to maintain the efficiencies of each. It may benefit all involved parties to determine whether certain portions of these workflows are still necessary pending new vendor offerings and technological changes, and on the individual needs of each library.

CONCLUSION

There are various positive and negative aspects of each model described earlier. These are represented in Table 9.2. The HAM incorporates the pros and cons of each model, but also presents some of their own.

Acquisitions needs in public libraries have shifted rapidly over the past century (Agee 2007). We have moved from print to microform to audio to electronic content, and from traditional book and periodicals purchases to more complex offerings to our constituencies, such as video games, MP3 players, and storytime kits. As the materials used in public libraries become more diverse, new acquisitions models will emerge. The hybrid model will evolve to encompass multifaceted formats, changing librarian abilities, and vendor options. There may be a more concentrated effort to share collections among groups of libraries, distribute selection, and have special public libraries with extremely focused collections, thus affecting budgeting priorities.
### Table 9.2 Pros and Cons of Acquisitions Models

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<tr>
<th>Acquisitions Models</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decentralized</td>
<td>Works well for specialized collections or libraries</td>
<td>Can be inefficient</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Keeps staff in more direct contact with their specific constituencies</td>
<td>Harder to handle issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Can be inefficient</td>
<td>Lose subject area expertise of staff in other public libraries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centralized</td>
<td>Efficient workflows</td>
<td>Can ignore specific branch needs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reduces need for training of staff at multiple branches</td>
<td>Might necessitate a transit system for delivery of physical materials</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reallocate staff or free up staff time for other duties; reduce staffing costs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keeps budget issues to a minimum and allows payments from one place</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Easier to work with vendors to resolve issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent application of policy and procedures</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Outsourcing</td>
<td>Utilize vendor-provided automatic ordering profiles</td>
<td>May lose control over selection for specialized collections</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ostensibly more cost-efficient</td>
<td>Vendors can change costs at any time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reallocate staff or free up staff time for other duties; reduce staffing costs</td>
<td>Can reduce staff morale</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Improve turnaround time, increase efficiency</td>
<td>Perceived as belittling professionalism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Supplement deficiencies in staff, such as foreign language selection</td>
<td>Requires a lot of oversight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>All of the above</td>
<td>All of the above</td>
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In this vein, vendors will evolve as well. They will modify their offerings to libraries in order to increase outsourcing options. Ordering and receiving may become even more automated as integrated library systems become more intuitive and advanced. It is prudent for those public libraries utilizing a hybrid acquisitions model to keep their eye on acquisitions trends, especially those regarding vendors. Contingency arrangements are necessary for when vendors close or are merged with other vendors. It is essential that HAM libraries be nimble, communicative, and as forward-thinking as possible. Then we can keep acquiring and providing what our customers want as economically and efficiently as possible.
REFERENCES


