Fundamentals of Technical Services

John Sandstrom and Liz Miller

Notable Features of the book: The book is a comprehensive guide to technical services in libraries. It covers topics such as cataloging, circulation, and serials, and provides practical advice and best practices for library staff. The book is written in an accessible style and includes numerous examples and case studies to help readers understand and apply the concepts discussed.
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Introduction

Why This Book?

This book was inspired by several trends and issues that are becoming more apparent in libraries of all types. These include:

- limited resources that result in the reassignment of library staff
- reassessment of what level of staff is needed for various job functions
- increased levels of vendor-provided services and outsourcing of technical services functions
- changing standards for technical services
- changing expectations of technical services departments
- changes in library science education at all levels

For many years, when a library needed additional staff and there was no funding for new positions, staff were reassigned from technical services to other areas of the library. This has resulted in technical services departments that once were staffed with several professionals, and many more paraprofessionals, being cut down to one—or even no—professional staff, and fewer paraprofessionals.

At the same time, the advent of shared catalogs and online resources has made it easier for paraprofessionals and clerical staff to handle the bread-and-butter tasks of the technical services department. The amount of original cataloging being done by most libraries has dropped sharply over the past thirty years, and has shifted to more copy cataloging. In addition, it is getting progressively easier to find high-quality records, which makes even copy cataloging much easier.
Another contributing factor is that vendors are increasingly offering ways to move technical services functions out of the library and into their shops. These run the gamut from Patron Driven Acquisitions/Demand Driven Acquisitions (PDA/DDA), auto-ship programs, and customized cataloging, to fully processed shelf-ready materials delivered to the library’s doorstep. There is a price for these services, but they can free up technical services staff to work in other areas of the library or on special projects.

There has also been a change in what’s expected from technical services departments. As with many other groups, these departments are now required to do more, do it faster, and do it with fewer resources. Acquisitions units have more bibliographic information to work from, but a much smaller window during which to do this work, because titles go out of print more quickly. In cataloging, because more high-quality records are available, quirky local practices are being phased out in many libraries. As with everything else, libraries are faced with, “Do it fast, do it cheap, or do it right: choose two.” Too often the decision is to go with the two measurable outcomes: fast and cheap. This has resulted in lower standards and—if your library has the resources—more time spent fixing things on the back end. Far too often, mistakes are simply ignored.

These factors have all led to changes in the expectations of what technical services departments should accomplish. It used to be that technical services staff needed to be able to research and locate desired titles; purchase them from multiple vendors, often in multiple countries; catalog them correctly for their library; physically process them; and get them on the shelf in a timely fashion. Today, thanks to globalization, market consolidation, shared cataloging, online catalogs, additional vendor services, and changing standards, technical services staff have better tools to achieve the same ends faster. This means that they must also administer online resources, including books, serials, and databases; work with or administer Electronic Resources Management Systems (ERMSs), federated search systems, and discovery systems; handle remote access issues both inside and outside of the library; and execute a host of other added duties that require just as high a level of training as more traditional job duties, all while continuing to perform most of the traditional technical services tasks. We hope that this book can help new technical services staff, whatever their level of responsibility, better understand how to fulfill all these expectations.
The final issue that compelled us to write this book comes from library education. At the graduate level, less time is being spent on technical services, with many programs only offering one required course on information organization or cataloging. This is not surprising, given the amount and variety of information needed by contemporary librarians, but it does make it difficult if you are right out of library school and asked to build a materials budget, or are expected to sit down and start cataloging on your first day as the new original cataloger. There really is no book geared to introduce the nuts and bolts of technical services to an undergraduate student, or a degreed librarian who suddenly finds himself in a technical services unit for the first time in his career.

**Who This Book Is For**

This book is aimed at two audiences: undergraduate students pursuing degrees in library science, and professionals and paraprofessional library staff who are moving to technical services with no prior experience.

For undergraduate students, this book will provide a clear introduction and guide to the various areas of the technical services, and describe how the parts fit together. We hope you will become comfortable with some of the terms and concepts used in technical services.

For practitioners at any level who are transitioning to technical services, we hope to give you an understanding of how technical services fits into the library as a whole, provide an overview of the area, and introduce you to the vocabulary and concepts that you will need to succeed in your new position.

**Resources in This Book**

We have designed this book to be used both as a textbook for use in a class or for independent study, or as a resource guide. When readers have a specific question, they can go directly to the section of the book that will give them the answer. Each chapter includes a list of resources you can consult for more information. We have also included an extensive glossary and index.
The Roadmap

If you have looked at the table of contents, you will note that this book is arranged somewhat like a technical services department’s workflow. There are chapters on management, systems, collection development, acquisitions, cataloging, physical processing, authority control/catalog maintenance, and collection management. As shown in figure I.1, this mirrors the workflow of many technical services departments: materials are selected, ordered, received, cataloged, and finally processed. Authority control/catalog maintenance and collection management fall outside the basic workflow. We hope that by following this logical step-by-step process we will be able to demystify technical services.

What This Book Isn’t

Now that we have talked about what this book is, we want to say a few words about what this book is not. It is not an introduction to the administration of technical services departments. Although we have included a chapter addressing management at a high level, for a more complete introduction we suggest reading *Fundamentals of Technical Services Management* by Sheila Intner with Peggy Johnson.¹

This is also not a guide or textbook for collection development, acquisitions, cataloging, or physical processing. It is only an introduction. Entire books have been written on each of these functional areas. We provide some of those titles in the lists of resources at the end of each chapter.
Finally, this book is not a series of best practices. Libraries have a long and rich history of solving problems using means designed to suit their unique cultures and the requirements placed on them by funding agencies and other stakeholders. A best practice at one library may be completely unrealistic at another.

**Final Thoughts**

As you use this book—either by working through it from front to back or dipping into it for help and guidance when you have a question—we hope that we have contributed to your understanding of a rarely seen but critical part of the library.

**NOTE**

Managing Technical Services

There are many skills needed to manage any organization, and the technical services department requires all of them. These include budgeting, purchasing, human resources management, computer systems, time management, and project management, in addition to all the other skills needed to be a librarian. Technical services is a bit different from other departments of the library, because its customers are primarily internal, although the services it provides also directly affect library users. This chapter gives a high-level overview of some core issues and concerns (see the list of resources at the end of the chapter for publications that address the topic in detail). In addition to discussing the typical organizational structure of technical services departments, this overview covers two critical areas for management: communication and workflow.

This chapter will cover:

- Organization of technical services departments
- Communication
- Workflows
- Trends and issues in managing technical services
Before You Begin

Before you begin, you will need to collect and read the policies regarding your library’s technical services department and its subunits. These documents include information critical to the effective and efficient management of your department. If you aren’t the manager, this will help you to understand where technical services fits into the big picture of the library. Unfortunately, in many cases you may find that these policies either don’t exist, or are so out of date as to be unusable. If this is the case, you may need to start documenting everything you find to contribute to a new policy. At the same time, don’t ignore any procedural documents you find. Procedures are often included in other policy documents, even if these serve different purposes. How a department does something (procedure) can be just as important as why the department does it (policy).

Specialized Terms

*Budget*—The monetary resources available to an institution for the support of their programs. Budgeting is the process of allocating a budget based on those resources.

*Communication*—At its most basic, the sharing of information.

*Computer systems*—Each institution uses a variety of computer systems, ranging from stand-alone personal computers to large networks.

*Human resources management*—Back in the day, this was called *personnel*. This is the unit that is responsible for coordinating the staff resources available to an institution.

*Policy*—A document, or set of documents, that describes the principles, rules, and guidelines formulated by the library to reach its long-term goals.

*Procedure*—A document, or set of documents, that describes how the activities of the library or subunit are carried out.

*Project management*—A specialized set of skills that is used to organize and coordinate complicated projects involving multiple departments.
Purchasing—The process of buying materials and supplies for the institution. The department responsible for this is often called the purchasing unit.

Time management—The conflict between what you need to accomplish and the resources you have available to do it. Allocating and tracking how much time you and your staff spend on each duty is essential.

Workflow—The movement of activities into, through, and out of a series of processes.

**Organization of Technical Services Departments**

One factor that affects both communications and workflow is how the library and the technical services department are organized. The organization dictates how work flows into and out of the technical services department, and with whom the manager of the department works most closely.

The technical services department manager must maintain a dual focus. She must look internally to examine the department to make sure everything is functioning smoothly, and also externally to ensure that other library departments and the general public receives the services they need from technical services. In many libraries, the technical services department manager serves as the backup for all technical services positions, and so must be able to perform any job she supervises.

As with any group, the more people involved, the more complicated the organization becomes. This is particularly true of technical services. In small libraries with minimal staff, everything discussed in this book might be the responsibility of a single person. In large libraries with greater numbers of staff, technical services may be made up of dozens of people.

In general, technical services departments break down into four areas or units: collection development, acquisitions, cataloging, and physical processing. The exact duties of each unit and in what order they are performed will vary by library, but generally tend to be fairly linear, as shown by the organization chart in figure 1.1.
Staffing

The more people employed in the technical services department, the more types of positions there will be. Most departments will have at least one degreed librarian (a person with a master's degree in library science), para-professionals (staff members with higher levels of experience or education, or both), clerks, and assistants. However, small libraries may have a single non-degreed person doing everything, while the largest libraries will have multiple degreed librarians at a variety of levels.

Communication

At its most basic, communication is the sharing of information. Managing communication is therefore managing how information is shared, which can
occur by means ranging from very formal to very informal. Both formal and informal methods play a role when communicating among different parts of the library community, including vendors, staff, and patrons. However, each has its pitfalls, too. These can result because of differing priorities, lack of understanding, and sometimes just plain personality conflicts. As a member of a complicated organization like a library, it is important to be aware of and adept at several types of communication.

**Internal**

There are two types of internal communication for most technical services departments: internal to the department and internal to the library. Each type has specific characteristics, which need to be kept in mind to avoid missteps.

*Internal-to-the-department communication* takes place among the various units that make up the technical services department. Collection development must communicate with acquisitions, acquisitions must communicate with cataloging, cataloging must communicate with physical processing, and so on. Often this communication is informal, consisting of “hallway meetings,” as opposed to more formal types of communication such as written memos or e-mail. Regardless of its level of formality, this communication must be timely, clear, and concise. Communication can be easier in smaller departments because there are fewer people involved, but it is still important. If communication among various units breaks down, it is up to the supervisors of those units to take steps to repair it as quickly as possible, which often requires shifting to more formal means of communication for the short term.

*Internal-to-the-library communication* takes place between technical services and the other departments of the library. Access services and public services departments need to give feedback about patron needs to technical services. Technical services must let library administration know what its needs are, and the administration must let technical services know what is expected of it. This type of communication tends to be formal, perhaps taking place at official meetings, and more hierarchical, with questions and concerns addressed to the department head and answers coming back down the chain. However, there is often an unofficial network that can be just as effective as, and sometimes faster than, the official lines of communication. Unless a library has only one or two employees, there will be an informal network that connects everyone at some level that takes place outside of the
official lines of supervision or communication. It is important to be aware of these, because they are often perceived to be more trustworthy and up-to-date than the official lines of communication. Unfortunately, these “grapevines” can be very inaccurate, and the communication among the various departments of the library must be timely, clear, and concise.

**External**

External communication takes place among technical services and organizations outside of the library. There are two types of external groups with which technical services staff regularly communicate. These are vendors and other organizations for which the library is a customer, for example, book vendors, such as Baker & Taylor or Ingram; periodical vendors, such as Coutts or Harrassowitz; and information aggregators, such as ProQuest or EBSCO. More rarely, technical services staff will be called on to respond to library users or funding agencies, such as city governments, donors, or grant agencies.

Communicating with vendors and other groups with which the library and technical services do business can be very difficult. It is dictated by the relationship you, as the library representative, have with each vendor and its representative. These relationships can range from very formal to informal. It takes time and experience for each relationship to find its own level. One critical thing to remember is that vendors are not your enemies. A vendor may be seen as an adversary because your goal is to serve your patrons, whereas the vendor’s goal is to make money. This dichotomy may cause issues and hard feelings between library staff and a vendor. Vendor representatives must obey the rules set by their company, yet they do not want to lose you as a customer. You, as the library representative, must obey the rules set by your funding agency, yet you do not want to lose access to the vendor’s products and services. Ideally, your vendors will form a partnership that helps you to improve your library’s services while allowing them to make a reasonable profit.

Unfortunately, some vendors lose track of the value of library partnerships, and the relationship can become exploitive. An example of this would be when a publisher has what amounts to a monopoly on a set of journals, and starts increasing prices beyond a reasonable level. In this situation, you must openly communicate your concerns and what the results will be if the exploitation continues; for example, you may reduce the amount of money you spend, or take your business elsewhere. Be assured that if you are having
issues with a particular vendor, other libraries are, too. When enough libraries take their business elsewhere, the vendor will either wake up and change, or go out of business. An exception may be a periodicals vendor who is the sole source for some titles or services. But even in this case, the right comments and actions may get them to change how they treat the library market and individual libraries.

One of the common topics that vendors and libraries communicate about is contracts and licenses. Because these are legal agreements, the rules of your funding organization may require approval at additional levels outside the library. When negotiating a license or contract, the library’s business officer will usually need to be included, as well as staff from the purchasing department of the funding agency. For some contracts and licenses, you may even need to work with lawyers. This can be a challenge, because lawyers typically don’t understand how libraries work, even if they understand what libraries do. The library staff member involved in these negotiations needs to be ready to explain the library’s operations and needs.

Another type of external communication occurs on those occasions when funding agencies or patrons contact technical services directly. This will most often be concerned with collection development and acquisitions, when patrons want to know if certain titles have been ordered or received. It is important to remember that you are representing the library. If the question is not in your area of responsibility, make sure to refer it to the appropriate person or office rather than risk responding in a way that will cause problems for other staff. An example of this would be attempting to respond to a question about serials management when you work with monographic acquisitions.

Always remember that communication is a crucial part of working in any organization, and it becomes more critical the higher you move up the chain of command. In technical services, you must be able to communicate with several different groups in a variety of ways. Communication may be formal or informal, written or verbal, remote or face-to-face, so flexibility is a key skill to develop. The way you communicate with staff in your unit is different from how you communicate with other library staff, vendors, patrons, or representatives from funding agencies. Whether you are a supervisor or working in the trenches, you must adjust your communication style accordingly.

In many cases, communication will take place in meetings. For some hints on running effective meetings, please check out the sidebar.
Ten Tips for Running an Efficient and Effective Meeting

1. **Schedule as far in advance as possible.** Calendars fill up quickly, so the earlier you schedule meetings, the less rearranging participants have to do.

2. **Only invite the people who must be there.** Inviting people who don’t need to be at a meeting wastes your time and theirs.

3. **Have a written agenda.** This allows the person who calls the meeting to define what the meeting is about and to keep it on track.

4. **Don’t try to do too much at one meeting.** One hour is about the limit for a productive meeting. Beyond that, people begin to lose focus and stop paying attention.

5. **Send the agenda out early.** This gives the attendees the opportunity to see what the meeting is about and prepare for it.

6. **Send relevant documents and background information out with the agenda.** If there is information that participants need to review prior to the meeting, make sure it goes out in a timely fashion.

7. **Be organized.** Make sure that you are prepared for the meeting and have all the information you expect to need.

8. **Start the meeting on time.** Those attending have made time to attend the meeting. Don’t waste it by starting late.

9. **Keep it focused.** Make sure to keep the meeting focused on the agenda items. Don’t allow it to be side-railed into other issues that attendees may or may not be prepared to discuss.

10. **End on time.** The participants are as busy people as you. Make sure you end the meeting on time so that everyone can get on with their days.

And here is a bonus!

11. **Follow up.** Send everyone a document that clearly reports what decisions were made, what action items need to be addressed, and who is responsible for each action item.
Workflows

One of the most critical things to understand when managing any type of operation is workflow. Understanding the organization’s workflow allows a manager to plan for the most efficient and effective management of resources, including staff, materials, and time. This understanding can guide reorganizations, personnel planning, needs forecasting, cost-benefit analysis, and budget justification, as well as providing a host of other information that other parts of the library’s operation may need.

This book includes series of very high-level workflows that review what each unit of the technical services department is responsible for and the major steps in the workflow of each area. If and when you need to build a workflow chart for an existing unit, you can include as much detail as you need to. It can be built as a chart, a narrative, or a combination of the two, depending on the audience and how the document is to be used.

There are several ways to build a workflow document, so tailor the methodology to the audience, level of formality, and complexity of the organization. If it is a high-level document, then the unit manager or the manager of technical services can probably build it for herself. This will result in a fairly simple document similar to those shown in this book. If a very detailed workflow is required, each person in the department will need to document the workflow for each of the tasks he or she is involved in. Building this type of detailed workflow requires a huge investment of time and energy, but it gives the manager the information she needs to really understand what is happening in her unit or department.

Charting workflows is especially good for identifying issues in the current workflow of the department or unit. Almost every department has activities that are not really necessary, or that would be handled more efficiently if moved to a different part of the workflow. Detailed charting that goes to the individual staff level will allow those activities to be easily identified, and either shifted or eliminated as appropriate.

Another useful result of workflow charting is that it creates a document that explains exactly what the technical services department does. Unfortunately, in many libraries, technical services is tucked away behind the scenes, and most of the public services staff—and even library administrators—don’t have a clear understanding of what the department does. A detailed and
annotated workflow chart should explain what technical services does in terms that even a person who is not part of the library can understand.

**Trends and Issues in Managing Technical Services**

As with all managers in the library, technical services managers are expected to do more with less. As formats change and the needs of our patrons continue to evolve, the process of managing technical services will also evolve and change. Two major trends have emerged.

The first is flexibility. Management in technical services must be extremely flexible to be able to integrate new workflows or change existing workflows very quickly. New products, services, and opportunities are becoming available almost every day. Flexibility and open-mindedness are critical for taking advantage of them.

The second is the trend towards outsourcing, or contracting with a company outside the library to provide certain services. Although this will be discussed in more depth later in this book, it would be remiss not to mention it here. The decision whether or not to outsource a function in technical services is, at its heart, a management decision. There is no single answer that will apply to all libraries.

**Final Thoughts**

This chapter has reviewed some of the basics of managing the technical services department of a library. These include organization, communication, workflows, and trends and issues. Try to keep the issues discussed here in mind as you work through the rest of this book, because they affect everything that is done in technical services in one way or another. As with all parts of the library, technical services departments are changing very rapidly. The better you understand and document your department’s organization and processes, the easier it will be to change them if necessary.
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