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Selected Models of Depository Management

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Introduction

The Public Documents & Patents Department at the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County was established in July, 1997. Located in a new main library addition in downtown Cincinnati, the department centralizes the public library's collection of depository maps, documents, and patent and trademark collections. Staff was assigned from a variety of library branches and departments. Documents are checked in by hand, and the collection is not on the library's OPAC system. This presentation discusses the reasons the library created this new department, goals for its first year of operation, and lessons learned from the experience.

The Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County has been a Federal depository since 1884. The current selection rate is quite high, at 95%. The library is also one of the original 21 Patent & Trademark Depository libraries, receiving its initial designation in 1871. The department's collection is composed solely of depository items, although a small budget is available to purchase commercially produced indexes and standard reference sources.

Staffing levels for the new department are very generous. We have five full-time librarians, three full-time library assistants, two part-time library assistants, one full-time, and four part-time shelvers. Total staff is 15 people, at 12 FTE. Some staff were interviewed and hired for their positions; however, most staff were transferred from various library departments which were losing part of this collection.

Why Did We Do It?

The clear depository trend is scaling back staff, resources, and space allotted to documents. Why did Cincinnati Public buck this trend? Several clear problems gave rise to a closer look at documents operations. The first step was an internal Public Documents Committee composed of public and technical service staff who handle documents on a day-to-day basis. Among the chief problems in our former documents setting were:

- Documents backlog and processing problems mounted. Staff in various library departments were responsible for this large collection.
- Lack of hands-on supervision. Authority for documents collections were removed from any hands-on processing activities.
- Check-in of documents took place in the technical services unit, two floors removed from the collection and public service staff. Public service had no ready access to records of what items were received, and when they were checked in. Access was completely off-limits during nights and weekends.
- Completion of a \$40-million renovation and expansion gave the potential for a newly created department.
- Staff received almost no training in processing documents. Each department established its own procedures.
- Documents were drastically under-used. Almost no usage was recorded outside of specific areas, such as topo maps, census data, or the Patent & Trademark Depository collection.

Management Priorities

Training was a top priority. Most staff had never worked with public documents before starting in the department. Even staff with some experience had not used all parts of the collection. No one had worked with the Patents, for example. This was especially important, since the entire staff was assigned to start in the department the same day it opened. This gave me the odd experience of giving the staff a one-hour tour of our department and their work area, and declaring them fully trained for public service work!

Do sweat the small stuff! As documents librarians know, the routine is composed of many decisions of the most minute nature. To bind or not? How to handle a new item? Do we have the software to work with a new CD-ROM? We had to work very hard to get our house in order. That means undoing many mistakes and processing errors from the past. So sweating the small stuff of hundreds of small decisions has paved the way for a collection that's probably in the best shape it has been for decades. And this process continues, with a large stacks shifting project underway at this moment.

Publicity, Publicity, Publicity. It has been a constant goal to let people know what we have, where we are, and what we can do. This applies not only to the public (our patrons) but our fellow staff as well. (Don't overlook fellow staff; many are unsure what documents are and what we actually do.) We organized daily, then weekly, and now finally monthly tours for the public. We had articles in the library's monthly newsletter. We've also had myself and other librarians speak at inventors' groups to promote our patent collection, and we have done the library's first staff-produced half-day program for inventors. We also pioneered the library's first series of public Internet training sessions, and our departmental Web page is the library's most complete.

Lessons Learned

- Several truths have been discovered so far. Some were expected and confirmed; others have been more of a surprise. First of all, we've learned the notion that separate is definitely not equal. When you're viewed as a special collection, you get placed out of the loop by many fellow staff, patrons, and even the administration. Not having the collection on our OPAC only magnifies this feeling. Promotion, both internal and external, is the key to overcoming this problem. It also helps that my staff, and myself, are involved in many shared library activities, such as giving tours of our new facility.
- Secondly, keep the Administration happy and informed. Documents are a mystery to most non-documents professionals. We were lucky that my immediate boss had been a documents librarian earlier in his career. The mere presence of a new documents department elevates documents to an equal place at the table with other departments--and subjects. Give the Administration information on what you're doing, while trying to create a sense of excitement about the documents collection.
- Also, match their goals with your strengths. Program attendance is important, and we've had over two dozen tours, workshops, and public programs. We organized the library's first-ever patents program for the public, and it drew over 60 registrations. Circulation is also important, and we do allow "special charge," hand-charged items to go out to boost these numbers. Working toward an automated system will help in this regard, too.
- Make the collection accessible. This means either keep it an organic part of subject reference--or have it cataloged in its own right in a free-standing department. Non-organic and non-cataloged is not the way to go.
- Centralized handling and authority for a documents collection is imperative. When you separate the processing of these items from the ability to make decisions, problems result. Centralized authority is not viewed here as a rigid command-and-control scenario. Rather it means the people who see problems or have ideas have the authority to act, decide, and plan.
- Capitalize on your strengths. Our Patent & Trademark Depository collection is among the oldest and most complete in the country. Furthermore, the PTO staff are very receptive to helping with programs and publicity. This has been helpful in our launching of public patent searching programs, the first in the library's history.