

Value & Efficiency in Document Supply Services by Stephanie Keenan

Having recently become a one-person library service again after a few years break for a company unusual in the breadth of its professional interests and with very little income-generating activity I wanted to check how my experiences compared with those of others. Earlier this summer I posted a request to the ICLG membership via Bert Washington, seeking:

"to know from other librarians/information workers in small commercial organisations (preferably with a highly specific scientific area of interest) what document supply services they use and how satisfied they are, since I had already found that obtaining articles electronically from e.g. Science Direct etc., is often cheaper - and quicker - than using BL (at least with the current GBP/USD exchange rate)."

I wanted to know particularly about sourcing specific requests rather than literature searching or the 'just in case' (subscribe) versus 'just in time' (purchase articles on demand) dilemma. From the suggestions for alternative document supply sources received (thanks to everyone who emailed) it was clear that there is a wide range of commercial libraries out there operating with similar user demands and budgetary constraints who share my interest.

The responses are summarised below, followed by other comments received. The data supply options are categorised, broadly, as Corporate Information Providers, Individual Information Providers and British Library.

Corporate Information Providers

The Corporate information provider category refers to companies that are major players, often the online branch of a publishing house, some of whose content will be of interest to most, if not all, librarians.

The table below shows the number of times each of the following options was suggested:

IEOnline	1
Pinpoint	1*
Metapress	1
Springer	2
Blackwell	2
Wiley	2
Emerald	2
Infotrieve	3
Ingenta	3
Science Direct	8

* The Pinpoint website (<http://www.pinpoint.com>) redirects to Motricity, which appears to be a provider of mobile content - inappropriate to my company's information needs.

Although I wanted to find the optimal document supply for named articles there is obviously overlap with other services from these providers - such as content searching, ToC alerts, direct journal subscriptions (expensive but often adding value through access to archives) and single purchase options.

The major drawbacks to the corporate suppliers are that subscriptions are expensive, and certainly for my organisation none would provide a complete solution to our information needs - or so it seemed to me after studying endless subscription details, worldwide

contract pricing and small print in an effort to compare offerings. I really don't want to negotiate and manage ever more multiple subscriptions!

That said there are free services which can be used to advantage - we're cancelling one of our more expensive and increasingly esoteric subscriptions, because I can set up a ToC alert, circulate it and obtain abstracts getting full text only when required. We'll be able to buy a lot of articles with the saved subscription cost.

Science Direct offers a pre-payment scheme giving an advantageous rate for purchasing single articles but this is apparently only available to current subscribers.

Individual information providers

The suggested information providers in the individual category include:

- organisations that publish their own journal(s) e.g. Geological Society, American Medical Association
- affiliation with libraries of professional bodies e.g. Institute of Civil Engineers (and their virtual library)
- special interest organisations which provide DS services e.g. Linda Hall Library of Science, Engineering and Technology and the History Cooperative based in America, operating largely on a *pro bono* basis to cover costs only

It was suggested that from a cost perspective, though perhaps not speed, the second best document supply sources are libraries of affiliated professional bodies and other individual providers. However these serve very specialised subject areas and there is also the cost of a membership subscription (corporate or individual) to take into account.

British Library

Last - and far from least - there is British Library. For most librarians British Library probably remains first choice for document supply because of the extent of its holdings - particularly of esoteric and archive material.

But there are an increasing number of complaints about BL's services: the quirkiness of secure electronic delivery (SED) by contrast with the efficiency of PDF download from corporate information providers, and the speed with which pre-publication and recent content can be obtained (this seems to be due to greater current awareness as users set up their own ToC delivery). BL had always been my first choice and I'd found SED a brilliant improvement on the by-post service, but the restrictive delivery conditions are 'clunky' (our internal network is separate from the internet so I have to email SEDs to a different PC) and other librarians have reported technical difficulties in opening files and problems meeting the 14-day time limit at holiday periods. Where British Library scores particularly highly with librarians is their confidence in the copyright terms conferred.

Discussion

The responses indicate strongly that there is no single way of optimising document delivery that will suit everyone.¹ It is also generally agreed that BL has the best overall collection, certainly for obscure and archive material. However, although I wasn't looking at literature searching *per se* BL Inside is seen as out of step with other ToC search providers - being relatively expensive - and its electronic delivery methods are out of step with current practice (instant PDF downloads are available only at a premium).

¹ I received responses from colleagues working in a commercial environment that provides among other services, information solutions; they also made some useful suggestions for sites as well as the possibility of finding a 'one stop shop'. This would achieve a solution tailored to an individual library's need. If anyone would like to follow this up please get in touch and I'll forward your details.

Copyright

BL is seen as a safe source from a copyright perspective - a subject on the following are variously held to be true:

- 1 It is preferable to buy single articles from BL to be sure that full copyright is obtained, as this is not the case from e.g. Science Direct
- 2 Buying single copies from e.g. Science Direct confers full copyright
- 3 It depends on the individual's use for an article, regardless of the type of organisation
- 4 It depends on the type of organisation, regardless of any other consideration.

Although people seem to believe they fall into one or sometimes more of these categories and that their practices therefore satisfy copyright requirements, there is also a fear of 'getting it wrong'. However, frequently when attempts had been made to contact publishers for clarification of the copyright position, no responses have been received.

Cost

Generally it was felt that libraries of professional organisations to which respondents were affiliated provided better value than BL for full copyright articles (mostly they impose a lower flat rate copyright charge) but these were often slower than BL and could be more expensive AND slower than online providers. Availability and charges vary considerably and affiliation involves the cost of membership.

Subscriptions to corporate information suppliers are expensive but there can be added value from features targeted at librarians - e.g. functions for monitoring usage and access to archives. In addition subscriptions mean that articles downloaded within them are covered by copyright - an element that accounts for such a huge chunk of document supply fees that obtaining best value may be critical to staying within budget.²

Comment was also made that BL's Inside service is increasingly not providing cost effectiveness for the annual subscription charge - 'and you still have to pay for the articles'.

Other

Other general issues that people raised about document supply:

- the headline cost for an article does not take account of payment administration for individual documents from corporate or individual information providers, compared with monthly billing on a BL or other standing account;
- time involved in finding the publisher site, registering/logging on, locating the article, downloading etc;
- electronic ToCs might generate increased user expectation and demand on our finite stretched, budgets.

Most librarians have similar document supply practices. The option of 'shopping around' depends on a number of factors weighed against each other - cost, time, circumstances, nature of business, user group, availability of options, available payment methods.

People report more frequent borrowing of journals - especially if the journal is a 'special issue' - instead of requesting individual articles - and '[users] take notes like the old days'.

² It seems that time must be invested, which is in itself a cost, whether or not any budgetary gain can be made. Before starting to use Science Direct (and other publishers) I compiled a spreadsheet using BL's current periodical copyright fee pricelist, the (flat rate fee + no. of pages * cost per page) calculation for our main affiliated organisation and a \$/£ converter to work out which option would be best for our main non-subscribed journal sources. This took some time and effort!

Internet searching can be rewarding - I have found 'key' articles provided as free content by publishers that would have cost around £25 from BL.

Another suggestion from one of the respondents is 'ask for reprints from authors'. It makes sense - academic authors usually enjoy feedback and to discuss their work with others.

It seems that commercial libraries suffer disadvantage due to their discrete areas of activity compared with, say, NHS or academic librarians who have greater collective power through shared interests and purchasing consortia. The shared resource procurement also obviates the worry about copyright requirements. It is evident that not all commercial organisations are profit making companies - many being involved in knowledge development e.g. conducting research that educates Government committees etc. with only minor income generating activities - and that at the moment librarians are exercising judgment as to whether articles are for personal professional development by colleagues rather than feeding a commercial use. I wonder whether anyone knows any copyright fee tools that might help?

Leaving aside the copyright worry, it seems that single article purchase from a corporate information provider is becoming the first choice of document supply options for many - though not all - librarians.

Finally, I am obviously not the only person who is operating on a fixed budget and trying to get the most out of it. Due to rapid technology advances it is worth re-assessing the whole package of journal subscriptions, alerting services and document supply from time to time, to see whether the balance has tipped in favour of making changes. My fear is that if many users were to move away from BL as their main provider, there would be a risk of damaging their continued ability to support broad and esoteric collections and maintain legacy systems that at some time or another benefit nearly all of us. BL is disadvantaged because it cannot match other providers for competitiveness on recent material - publishers can make content available before anyone else, but can also dictate terms for use and set copyright charges that make BL document supply costs unfavourable. What I would really like is to be confident that using the British Library is the most cost effective source of documents and, given the extent of their subscription lists, I'm surprised that they have been unable to negotiate better deals with corporate information providers to lower the copyright fee and make document supply options less restrictive and more user friendly.

Please feel free to get in touch if you have any comments or questions

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