Using Technology to Facilitate Pre-Acquisition Workflows for Electronic Resources

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INTRODUCTION
Investigation of new electronic resources for purchase or addition is the first stage of e-resources life cycle. At the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) Libraries, activities in this pre-acquisition stage start with liaison librarians submitting purchase requests, followed by technical services staff going through a checklist to gather and research key information about the requested resource, and finally the Assistant Dean (AD) for Collections to review and make a selection decision. Depending on the requested resources, the AD may solicit input from a 5-member collection council or the whole group of 23 liaison librarians before making a final selection decision.

Back in 2008-2009, we had a one-page paper form for liaisons to submit new e-resource requests. However, it was not used widely because liaisons preferred simply sending requests by email. It was a huge challenge for us to manage this workflow by email, where we needed to make sure that all the library stakeholders who had roles or tasks in this workflow were informed at the right steps with the needed information. After examining the e-resource management tools, funds, technology, and staffing resources available (or not available) to us, we decided to use InfoPath and SharePoint to develop a home-grown solution that would address this challenge.

THE CHALLENGE
• Email requests could get buried in email boxes, causing workflow bottlenecks.
• Gathered information about a requested resource could be stored in several staff members’ email boxes, making it hard to share widely for review purposes.
• Manual email notifications at “handoff” points may not always include all involved stakeholders who needed to be included, causing missed communication or delays.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM
The UNR Libraries approached this challenge by creating a dynamic online form, with the following goals in mind:
• The form must be brief and easy for liaisons to use.
• The form must have a backend database.
• The form must have backend, staff-only parts for recording pre-acquisition investigation results, input from the AD for Collections, votes from the 5-member collection council, and a final decision by the AD.
• The form must have a function to move and control workflows from submissions to staff review, AD review, collection council review, and final decisions.
• The form must be able to generate automated email notices to stakeholders at every major “handoff” point throughout the process.
• The form must serve as a central place for all gathered information, input, and decisions.

THE SOLUTION
A new journal and e-resource purchase request form was created, with its front end originated in InfoPath and its backend database and workflows controlled in SharePoint. It consists of six parts representing six groups of activities in the pre-acquisition process.

Figure 1: Part 1 - Request Form
The first part (“view”) is the request form for liaison librarians to fill out. To make it really simple for liaisons, only three of the fields on the form are required: purchase request title, reason for request, and college with interest.

Figure 2: Part 2 - KAMS Checklist
Submission of the request form creates an entry in the backend database on SharePoint and triggers the second “view” for technical services staff to review the information in part 1 and to perform the checklist in part 2. The E-Resources & Acquisition Services (ERAS) Head adds comments and makes sure that both part 1 and part 2 are completed.

Figure 3: Part 3 - AD Routing Decision
Once the second “view” is completed, the form triggers the third “view” for the AD to review the information in parts 1-2 and to mark his decision in part 3 on whom the request should be routed to: the AD, the collection council, or the liaisons.

• If the AD is selected, the form triggers the fifth “view” for the AD to make a final selection decision. (See Figure 5.)
• If the council is selected, the form triggers the fourth “view” for the council to provide input. (See Figure 4.)
• If the liaison group is selected, the form triggers the fifth “view” for the AD to make a final selection decision after he finishes consulting with the liaisons.

Figure 4: Part 4 - Council Review
In part 4, the collection council reviews the information in parts 1-3, makes comments, and casts their votes (purchase, set up a trial, wish list, or rejected). Once the fourth “view” is completed, the form triggers the fifth “view” for the AD to make a final selection decision.

Figure 5: Part 5 - AD Final Decision
In part 5, the AD reviews the information in parts 1-4 (and input from liaisons when solicited) and makes a final selection decision: purchase, set up a trial, wish list, or rejected.

Figure 6: Part 6 - Admin Update
Once the AD marks his final decision in part 5, the form triggers the sixth “view” for administrative use.

Figure 7: Backend database in SharePoint
The backend database holding all the data on the forms makes it easy to do reporting.

Completing the current “view” triggers the next “view” and simultaneously creates an automated email alert to inform the stakeholders of the next “view.”

Every form, with its 6 parts, serves as a central place to store all gathered information, input, and decisions about a specific requested resource.

RESULTS

• Since the form was launched in July 2015, 87 requests have been submitted in a 15-month period.
• 73 of the 87 requests have been processed completely and received final selection decisions. There were 61 purchases, 9 on the wish list, and 3 rejected. 12 database trials were conducted before final decisions were made.
• The time needed for a request to complete this workflow varied from less than a day to several months. The resources that required trials took longer.
• The automated email alerts at each “handoff” point have helped eliminating possible workflow bottlenecks.
• The liaisons are pleased with the ease of use of the form and the real-time email notices about the selection decisions on their e-resource requests.
• Technical services staff is able to maintain consistency in performing the internal checklist for every requested resource and to record their findings in a central place.
• The council now has a virtual space to provide input and to vote on requests, facilitating a smooth workflow.
• The Assistant Dean for Collections has access to all the gathered information about a specific request in one central place to aid his selection decision making.
• Tracking the status of a specific request in the workflow has become easy.
• The backend database has enabled easy reporting on new purchases activities.

CONCLUSION
• The form meets our goals. It has become an important tool for us to manage new e-resource requests and wish lists.
• E-resource trials management is still a separate workflow.
• Our collaboration with IT colleagues to create and maintain this form is successful.
• We will continue to monitor new developments of e-resource management tools, commercial and open-source. We still need an elegant solution that can manage the complete e-resources life cycle.

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