

Measuring performance, applying results, improving service

Mary E Jackson

Senior program officer
for access services,
Association of Research
Libraries, Washington DC

In May 1998, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) published the final report of the two-year Interlibrary Loan (ILL) and Document Delivery (DD) performance measures study. *Measuring the performance of interlibrary loan operations in North American research and college libraries* detailed characteristics of high-performing borrowing and lending operations. One of the aims of the study was to help libraries compare their operations to other participants' operations. Both the publication and a series of ARL-sponsored workshops held between 1998 and 2001 facilitated ILL managers making those comparisons and improving their ILL operations.

Many of the more than 400 ILL staff who attended the workshops reported that they are actively incorporating the findings from the study into their borrowing and lending operations. These ILL operations have reduced turnaround time, improved fill rates, and streamlined internal operations. As a result, they have lowered their borrowing and lending unit costs. An unanticipated outcome of the workshops was the empowerment of ILL managers and staff to feel confident to make the changes suggested by the study. Knowing that a technique works well in another ILL operation often gives an ILL manager the 'security' to try it in her local operation. ILL staff may be typical of library staff in not wanting to fail at implementing change. Because of this fear some ILL operations still maintain outdated practices, such as highlighting transaction numbers on paper forms, and policies, such as limiting the number of requests submitted by one user.

The 'best practices' and how they have been implemented in ILL operations are too numerous to detail, but two examples will illustrate the range and depth to which the ARL study has impacted North American ILL operations.

The University of Wisconsin at Madison is the first example of how a library has improved its borrowing as a result of participating in the study and attending the workshop. The borrowing operation now offers several patron-initiated ordering options, has stopped accepting paper request forms, pays lender fees via OCLC ILL Fee Management service, implemented the Clio management software, abolished paper files, and added equipment. Borrowing turnaround time was reduced by twenty-nine per cent from 1996-97 to 2000-01, and their fill rate increased by 101 per cent over that same time frame. They now evaluate lender performance and will delete libraries from their preferred group if the lender's turnaround time worsens. Like other high-performers, they use Ariel soft-

ware to receive articles and are able to deliver articles electronically to patrons via a secure website. [Information from a poster session presented at the American Library Association's Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA, 14-20 June 2001].

The Big Twelve Plus (BTP) [<http://www2.lib.ukans.edu/~public/BTP/>] is a consortium of thirty research libraries in the greater Midwest and Western United States that share common interests in programs related to interlibrary loan, among others. The Big Twelve Plus (which will change its name to the Greater Western Library Alliance as of 1 October 2001) established a Task Force to identify 'best practices' that will improve current ILL practices. Many of the BTP's best practices are based on the findings of the ARL study. BTP members have developed conceptual, structural, and procedural best practices. Examples of procedural best practices based on the ARL study include maximising use of technology by implementing software, using Ariel as borrowers and lenders, using barcode and wand readers, and developing macros or software shortcuts. The BTP also encourages borrowers to track turnaround time of specific lenders and stop sending requests to those lenders if turnaround time slows. This example takes the findings of the ARL study a step further by establishing consortium-wide minimal standards that will result in improved service for all consortium members.

A large number of the findings and ideas that were identified as 'best practices' in the Performance Measures Study have filtered into the common vocabulary. In 1998 when the study was first published the thought of going 'paperless,' or evaluating service for cost/speed rather than purity of process, or even such simple things as using OCLC's custom holdings, OCLC's IFM, were really almost incomprehensible. The publication and workshops provided a series of buzzwords, and eventually, essentials in the ILL lexicon. How many ILL managers used to roll their eyes at the mention of going 'paperless'? How many vendors took ILL seriously enough to devote time to the products that were useful and interoperable? What about the ISO ILL Protocol, web-based request forms, desktop delivery, and user-centered services?

It is extremely satisfying to evaluate how far things have come in the last few years. Now ILL managers are thinking in ways that can provide effective solutions because ILL staff are seeing 'problems/solutions' rather than 'processes/inevitableities.' That may be the biggest contribution that the ARL ILL/DD Performance Measures Study has offered to the North American library community at large, and perhaps even beyond. ■

An unanticipated outcome of the workshops was the empowerment of ILL managers and staff to feel confident to make the changes suggested by the study...