

1990 Study Grant Award report

As the recipient of the 1990 ALIA Study Grant Award, I was able to do a study on the use of a consolidation service by European libraries.

The aim of the study was to examine a major subscription agent's provision of a journal supply chain, from the publishers to the library shelves, using a well-established consolidation service. I was particularly keen to look at the benefits in terms of saving library staff time; the increased accessibility of serials by the user; the possible benefits to the research of faster serials processing; library access to information maintained by the subscription agent, and the role of the agent as consultant.

Consolidation services are offered by a number of subscription agents worldwide, and most follow a similar pattern. The publishers send journal issues to the agent. The agent accessions each issue onto an automated database, prepares the issues for shelving, and packs and despatches them to the library on a regular basis. Library staff unpack the journals, check them against a packing slip, perhaps accession them on their own in-house system, and shelve them. Claims are handled by the agent, who also produces regular reports on the library's subscriptions. Most agents also offer clients free online access to the agent's database.

I began the study by visiting Swets, one of the major subscription agents in Europe providing a consolidation service. I followed this by visiting four of Swets' client libraries; the Medical Library at Erasmus University in Rotterdam; the European Parliamentary Library in Luxembourg; the Library of the Medical Faculty at the University of Liege, Liege; and the British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC), which is testing the service.

At Swets' Head Office in Lisse, Holland, I saw how the consolidation service worked. Swets process 1 000 000 issues a year, which represents 120 000 subscriptions, and 20 per cent of all their customers. The service relies on a highly sophisticated, transparent database. It is available to clients as Data Swets.

At each library I visited, I spoke with serials staff about consolidation; why their library used it; what advantages and disadvantages it had; and how they made use of it.

Three libraries had wanted a reliable claiming service which also offered regular, secure deliveries. The BLDSC wanted a service which would reduce the time it takes for an issue to get from the



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publisher to the library shelves. Two libraries were also looking for savings in staff time.

The automatic claiming system was one of the most popular features of the consolidation service, with all libraries commenting that it saved library staff time. Staff in all libraries were pleased with the regularity and security of deliveries, and with the accuracy of the reports produced by Swets. The BLDSC said half their titles came faster, half slower, through consolidation. The European Parliamentary Library staff want to use machine readable packing slips as soon as their auditor agrees; they are sure this will save library staff time.

I found it surprising that only two libraries used Data Swets, and then to verify order information, not to check subscription details. In fact, all four libraries duplicated work done for them by Swets, by accessioning all in-coming journals, regardless of their origin, on their in-house files. These libraries were not looking for a system to replace their own accession registers, or, in all cases, to achieve savings in library staff time. However, these things can be realised with a consolidation service.

The study showed that consolidation can provide considerable savings in library staff time. There was evidence to suggest that, due to faster processing, serials were more accessible to the user; this could have benefits for researchers. Swets provide ready access to all information maintained by them on behalf of their users, although only limited use was made of this. Swets said that although they do play a role as consultants, libraries using consolidation are not more likely to use this service. To sum up, consolidation satisfied the requirements of the libraries I visited, but none of them used the service to its full potential.

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