High performance: effective document delivery

S killed staff and automation are critical for maximising the performance of interlibrary loan/document delivery (ILL/DD) operations according to a new report released by the National Resource Sharing Working Group.

Users of ILL/DD services will benefit greatly from the implementation of the five key strategies identified in the study (see below).

'The most efficient libraries streamlined their workflows, introduced automated systems, had well-trained staff, added and maintained up-to-date holdings information about their collection on a union catalogue, and utilised co-operative agreements with their main ILL/DD partners,' explained Dr Toby Burrows, chair of the working group.

'There is great potential for libraries to improve and expand ILL/DD services to their patrons without increasing the cost to their organisations.'

The report is the result of nearly two years work by the working group with the assistance of more than ninety participating libraries from around Australia. National, state, university, special and public libraries provided detailed information about their ILL/DD operations as part of the largest study of ILL/DD undertaken in Australia.

The results of the study will be used to develop training and seminars on ILL/DD issues.

'Libraries can also use the performance data included in the report to benchmark the performance of their own ILL/DD operations'.

The *Interlibrary loan/document delivery benchmarking study* can be downloaded from the National Library of Australia's web site at: http://www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/nrswg/benchmarking.html.

Key results and recommendations

The factors that maximise performance are listed in Section 5 of the main report. There are five recommendations based on these factors:

Examine workflows to ensure there are as few steps as possible

The most efficient libraries had the least number of steps involved in obtaining an item. This may involve patrons creating their own requests electronically, and aiming to obtain over ninety per cent of items from the first library approached.

Implement an automation package

Automation was a decisive factor in every performance criterion, literally saving days in turnaround time and reducing unit costs. Automating any part of ILL/DD operations was influential in increasing efficiency and effectiveness, from having the patron create the request to delivering electronic copies to their desktop. Automation is a marginal cost compared to staff costs. Large gains can be made for a relatively small investment particularly when automation is combined with the streamlining of processes.

Ensure ILL/DD staff are well-trained in resources and systems

Staff are the major contributor to unit costs. Maximising their competency and efficiency has the potential to create the greatest savings. Investment in training to produce expert searchers who are knowledgeable about key resources contributes to a faster and more effective service. It may also provide opportunities to offer new services without increasing costs.

Add and maintain holdings on union catalogues

Libraries are more efficient suppliers when requests for items they do not hold are minimsed, and are more effective requestors with access to up-to-date information about other libraries' collections. Both are achieved when libraries add accurate and up-to-date holdings information to major union catalogues. A commitment by libraries and encourgement by the library community to contribute in this way is required.

Investigate co-operative agreements with key libraries

Well-regulated co-operative agreements assist the efficient delivery of an effective service where:

* there are no fees;

* holdings are easily and electronically available and other collections are well known to members;

* a single electronic system is used to enter and track requests;

* a majority of requests are filled within the agreement;

* transactions are reasonably high and fairly distributed; and

* members co-operate to ensure the system works smoothly.

Benefits include reductions in administrative costs and a greater availability of material for patrons where there are more liberal lending policies in place between libraries. ∎