No Fate But What We Make?
Current trends and challenges in the UK document supply community.

Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to provide a practitioner based review of the broad issues, challenges and opportunities that currently exist within the UK document supply sector.

Design/Methodology/Approach - This article is based on a survey and personal discussions with individuals across the sector, backed up by a literature review and background research.

Findings – Currently, there are a number of areas of particular concern facing UK interlenders. Most Interlenders in the UK are experiencing a reduction in patron requests, and an upswing in direct requests from other libraries. Other challenges include the reduction in funding and subsequent impacts on services, the lending of electronic documents restricted by rights management software and licenses, as well as the opportunities and potential threats offered by open access resources. Finally there seems to be a need to demonstrate effectively to senior management the value of interlending services to patrons.

Originality – Provides an overview of developments in interlending within the UK sector by a current practitioner and service manager.

Keywords - document delivery, interlending, United Kingdom, 2011

Paper type - General Review

Overview

If there was ever going to be a challenging time to be an interlending librarian or team member that time is now (McGrath, 2011). Since the last review of the UK scene appeared in print (Prowse, 2009) it can be considered that there has been an effective sea change in the national interlending landscape due to a variety of mostly external influences. This is an era of ever increasing levels of electronic resources, which further exacerbates the pre-existing right-here-right-now click-through patron culture (Appleyard et al, 2011). For interlenders this means dealing with the increased service demands from vastly raised customer aspirations and expectations.

When these factors are partnered with the reported reduction in the number of user generated interlending requests and placed against the background of the current global financial crisis and subsequent reductions to library budgets it may seem for document supply services that any light at the end of the tunnel may simply be an oncoming train of uncertainty than a hoped for renaissance.

That said, in this article will present a sense of the major fears, expectations and issues that currently permeate the UK interlending sector and demonstrate that while there are significant challenges, the interlending community is facing up to them and seeking to make the most of the opportunities they also offer. This is illustrated by comments from UK sector practitioners and workers.
**Survey of UK Interlenders**

In an effort to gather some broad insight from sector workers an anonymised online web mounted questionnaire was employed (Appendix A; SurveyMonkey, 2011), distributed via mailing lists as well as promoted through various social networks. While specific examples are noted, most of the unattributed opinions and quotes expressed in this article are drawn from this work rather than the author.

In the survey the following questions asked were:

**Table 1: Survey Questions**

1. Sector of respondent
2. Experienced recent ILL patron request levels
3. Experienced recent loan request levels from other libraries
4. Anticipated biggest service challenges for 2011/12
5. Anticipated biggest service opportunities for 2011/12
6. Most significant recent interlending developments
7. Additional comments

Overall 46 respondents generated nearly 250 individual comments.

**Table 2: Respondents Employment Sector**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Sector</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Library</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Governmental</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<td>NHS</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2%</td>
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The majority (77%) of respondents came from the educational sector, and as such a level of bias in the comments must be appreciated. Representatives from Health, Governmental and Public libraries did however make up the remainder of the sample. While this was by no means a comprehensive or rigorous survey, I believe it is broadly representative of the sector’s current experiences given discussions with others in the sector. As well as this paper a further examination of this work was presented at a recent interlending workshop (Johnson, 2011).

**Service Perceptions & Trends**

From the survey it is clear that across the sector there is a moderate but not extreme trend towards a reduction in levels of patron interlibrary loans requests (figure 1). In part this is doubtless due to the increase in freely available quality open access resources, as well as tumbling costs of second hand books via reseller sites including Amazon or eBay. That some respondents are experiencing an increase in the number of patron requests is heartening, although as some commentators noted this may be due to a reduction in acquisition or subscription budgets and subsequent provision of texts within their respective library services.
By contrast for many there appears to have been a moderate or greater increase in the interlending demands made of the libraries by other document supply services recently (figure 2). In part this may well be attributable to the difficulties experienced by the sector caused by the British Library's (BL) asbestos removal and refurbishment programme (British Library Board 2011a).

- “Stock moves at British Library are causing all sorts of challenges at the moment. We are receiving replies saying "temp unavail reapp July 2012", by which time the student would have finished their course. This means that I spend more time checking for lending locations of items which would normally have been supplied by British Library. This means that all libraries have seen quite a dramatic increase in the number of incoming requests”

- “The asbestos problem at BL is having the effect of causing a marked increase in outgoing loans and article supply.”

- “I think the extended curtailment of availability of BLDCS stock will impact ILL and potential for alternative document supply solutions.”

While this was initially anticipated to last for most of 2011 there have been two recent developments. Firstly the BL has prioritised restoring access to heavily in-demand items. Secondly, some respondents have reported receiving notices informing them of the unavailability of materials through to late 2012; far beyond the originally announced year long disruption period. The BL has noted that these are longer term inaccessible materials, such as music scores and some official publications, which are less frequently in demand and hence the de-prioritisation of their availability, but this will still be an issue in supplying some patrons.

- “Funnily enough, the asbestos problem at BL is having the effect of causing a marked increase in outgoing loans and article supply, as it reinforces our strong position in the field of interlending.”

- “Our move to ILLiad has exposed us to many more overseas libraries (through OCLC/WCRS). This is bringing us more income, particularly through scans which really cost us nothing other than our time.”

As a result the use of alternative locations for supply has been a minor boon to interlenders able to potentially offset a larger proportion of their ILL budgets in this way. It has been notable that the mailing lists relating to interlending (e.g. lis-ill@jiscmail.ac.uk) have been swamped in recent months with speculative requests for materials. This is a development that has not been well received by some members of the list, although it perhaps underscores the increase in interlending staffing time otherwise required to identify locations for supply outside of the BL.

With reductions to library funding the number of organisations able or offering to act as an
interlending source library may well diminish over the coming 12 months. This has the potential to cause irreparable damage, not only to the local organisation but also to the ability of the UK sector to source non-locally available material. At particular risk could be specialised local studies collections held in regional libraries to which scholars may well now have to travel considerable distance in order to obtain; let alone those overseas who will not be able to access the resources at all. Many fear that a reduced ability to source interlending materials will reflect adversely on their own services, with a negative longer term impact on their demonstrable viability.

Credit Crunching

The Comprehensive Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010) has had impacts throughout the interlending sector in the UK, with public libraries potentially the single worst hit. This decline in funding is making all organisations carefully scrutinise their services and libraries are often seen as a prime target for spending reductions. For interlenders this is a worrying circumstance as only part of the service that is delivered is directly to patrons of the organisation; much of what makes a good interlending service is the supply activity between libraries.

- “With the general reduction in budgets across all sectors I see ILL departments becoming more marginalised. The service is already, in Public libraries, considered the 'poor relation' and with money being reduced in the book fund there could be less money for the ILL service.”

- “Significant lost expertise following redundancies and early retirement in the public sector - both voluntary and enforced + redeployment to front line services.”

This brings with it the spectre of job losses and reductions to, or even elimination of, services deemed to be not cost-effective. While the interlending sector will not be immune to potential staff cuts, voluntary severance or a recruitment freeze, what is evident is a fear that with the loss of individuals is the loss of experience that goes with them as they depart.

Much of value is built up through years of work in sourcing and supplying materials desired by patrons, knowing the locations to go to time and again or the people to approach. Losing this knowledge can hobble a service far more than might be initially anticipated.

- “Cutbacks in the public sector mean less stock is being purchased in academic and public libraries.”

- “The fact that there is less money for book funds does mean that library members are relying on the ILL service more to obtain the items that their service will no longer buy.”

And yet as acquisitions budgets are squeezed there is a greater need than ever to make use of the distributed collections of libraries around the country, and further afield. Many respondents commented that there is a need to highlight the incredible role that document supply provides in ensuring when collection acquisition is reduced that access to resources can be maintained through their auspices.

- “Lack of money (which has led us to impose stricter restrictions and hike charges in the last & next few months).”

- “Cuts in budget - potential full cost recovery of ILL passed on to borrowers.”
While there are alarming funding trends in the UK interlending sector today, there are rays of hope. For example the offsetting or recouping of costs by acting as a source lender to other organisations is a unique service for many libraries. For many organisations today though they are re-examining other ways to self-finance their document supply service by charging patrons a nominal fee per request. While few if any pass on the real cost of obtaining an item, charges of between £2-5 being the apparent norm in the public sector currently, some are already reconsidering the levels they charge in an effort to make the service increasingly less expensive. In the educational sector as well, library funding reduction is also an issue, although for the most part not to such an alarming degree.

- “Funding to interloan services is being cut which means we must increase our charges effectively creating a barrier to interloans. I expect use to fall for the first time in a number of years.”

While cost-neutrality for the interlending service is a laudable goal it could be regarded by many patrons as a step too far. The impact on the perception of the service by users could make this an unpalatable step for many managers, but when contrasted with a potential removal of the service as an alternative may well be seen as a necessary evil.

The British Library
The British Library has not been immune to the reduction in funding (Brindley, 2010), reflected in their “do more with less” approach outlined in their five year strategy (British Library Board, 2011b).

- “Changes in the British Library procedures and the introduction of the next pricing model could make a significant impact on interlending in the next few years.”

At the time of writing the charges for the coming year have not been formally announced but it has been mentioned at recent events that they are not expected to rise (Appleyard et al, 2011). Indeed there may even be some reduction in charges, which is very heartening. Put alongside the BL’s intention to develop their revenue streams, alongside maximising fiscal efficiencies this is worth of particular note.

- “Potential of the new BLDSC ILL management system due to be unveiled next month.”

In recent months the BL has announced a revision to its online interlibrary loan management system, which hopes to simplify the experience for interlending staff, and thus enhance the experience for their patrons. As this rolls out in later 2011 how much benefit this actually will offer the community remains to be seen.

- “I wait to see how British Library's new library management software will impact on my work. From the snippets I’ve heard so far I anticipate that it should allow me to check the status of requests myself without the need to contact customer services staff so it will allow me to check things directly before sending a formal "chaser" to BL.”

The BL does seek to meet these challenges, exploring new media and new routes for delivery even in era decade of document supply decline. It is likely that as their new modes of delivery or models of service come on stream they will remain the pre-eminent UK source of supply for the foreseeable future. Although the commercial sector will bear watching in the coming months as others,
including publishers themselves, test the market in offering direct delivery of documents to libraries
and eyeing the interlending market with considerable interest.

- “Might be forced to investigate or utilise alternative methods of document delivery, eg: pay-
to-view. At least one supplier allows you to buy credits and you can make these available to
users to buy pay-to-view access - this being cheaper than subscribing to some expensive
packages or titles.”
- “I believe that subsidised pay-as-you-go document supply will become more important as
journal subs are cut.”

**DRM, Restrictions and Digital Documents**

From the survey and other recent community studies (North West Libraries, 2010)\(^1\) one of the
biggest single challenges to effective interlending in the UK is the restrictions placed on the loaning
or supply from electronic journals and books.

- “Overhauling copyright laws for the new digital world is desperately needed to aid ILLs. As
is better electronic delivery, sans DRM.”

Increasingly library collections in both educational and other sectors are purchasing virtual resource
collections, which offer considerable advantages in storage costs and 24/7 accessibility to local and
distance learners alike. A consequence for the interlending sector is that these items are not as
readily loanable as printed materials. Even for the major players like the BL the supply of these
items digitally must be as secure electronic documents, coupled with Digital Rights Management
(DRM) packages to restrict the utility of the item to satisfy the business needs of the publisher, at
the expense of the end user.

- “The documents we provide to patrons electronically are only electronic in their delivery -
because of the strict DRM rules on most of the documents, patrons are unable to work with
them as electronic docs (ie save them, share them, download to mobile devices etc.) We have
to recognise the way researchers and academics work and what they want from document
delivery.”

License for reuse terms set by publishers or individual suppliers are not standard when it comes to
document supply, with considerable variation in what can be provided. Some restrict to supply of
print only, while a handful allow the sharing of electronic resources; provided that a rigorous post-
use deletion regime is in place. However, for the majority of suppliers it was unclear or frustratingly
ambiguous to many respondents as to what the permissions allow in terms of interlending.

- “License agreements preventing access to electronic-only items held by other institutions
[are an obstacle to interlending].”
- “I am lucky in my institution that we have a digital rights management package and
someone has carefully gone through all of our e-journal licences and has made a note of
whether we are permitted to supply articles to other libraries via ILL. A surprising number
of licences do permit supply.”

Unlike the repository community which benefits from the SHERPA/RoMEO tool (SHERPA, 2011)
to clarify publisher policies for open access archiving there is no centrally maintained tool for

\(^1\) Shortly available on the NWLIP and FIL websites, op cit
digital document interlending rights. It seems that while some organisations maintain local lists of permissions or mount the details on an ERM system, the majority of interlending organisations have a policy of not loaning items available virtually. It seems the time or resource needed to maintain a queryable permissions database is deemed to be something these services can ill afford. If this trend continues it will increasingly diminish the stock that can be loaned as digital collections grow. This problem is certainly not unique to the UK community (Pavlovoic & Matutinovic, 2010). This has led to a sense of frustration from some within the community over those organisations that choose, for whatever reason, not to loan.

- “It is extremely frustrating to know that a number of Libraries hold a journal but as they do so electronically they will not supply the article. Many libraries still operate a blanket ban on articles from journals held electronically and will not check their licences.”

However, the feeling from the community is that the DRM problem is one that needs to be addressed at a more strategic than operational level. The belief is that there is a need for clear interlending permissions to be enshrined in the supplier agreements that libraries sign upon purchase or subscription. National organisations like the BL and the Forum for Interlending (FIL) (FIL, 2011), have noted that a relaxation in the currently restrictive licenses and DRM systems would be of significant benefit to the interlending community and library customers without significantly impacting on business stability. It is hoped that other major library advocates will become involved in these efforts.

At the local level there is a need for document supply staff to be involved in discussions relating to so called “big deal” acquisitions, especially as they relate to the ability to inhibit interlending. However, suggesting such an action and actually being in a position to engage with this debate at an organisational level is often not possible.

It is hoped that the current independent review of the UK copyright laws (BBC, 2010; Intellectual Property Office, 2010) will have some beneficial outcomes when it reports. The review is slanted towards business growth but it is to be hoped that the crucial underlying role of education is not ignored; especially the supporting role interlending plays.

Opening to Access
It was notable from the survey respondents that the use of open access materials as a resource for satisfying requests was fairly low, although if this was from a lack of awareness was unclear. The role of the BL pilot EthOS ETD service (Ethos, 2011) was also cited by some as part of the reasoning for a decline in interlending requests. However, some do see this as a route to supply and for satisfying their patron base.

- “Institutional repositories and the BL’s Ethos service provide alternative, often free, access to PhD theses and journal articles. We make use of these where possible to supply our requesters.”

- “EThOS. While not really interlending, EThOS does part of the job ILL librarians used to do in supplying theses. I like the way that theses are now made available to any interested party and think it a great step forward.”

It is unclear from conversations with practitioners if the coming months and years will see repositories and document supply services operate in tandem or in direct competition as sources of
supply; and may well be an area that would merit further study.

The use of open access journal articles (DOAJ, 2011), whether or not they are listed in local or national union catalogues, was not an area the respondents felt important to mention. This is perhaps a concern for the future of services and while doubtless there are some organisations that embrace the searching of these resources as part of their standard workflows or practices it is clearly not widespread. It remains a way in which even the most cash-poor interlending service can offer to retrieve scholarly works.

It should be noted that repository based open access versions of published works are functionally equivalent to the final formally published versions; whereas those published within open access journals are the formally published versions. For the vast majority of users, especially students, these instantly accessible repository versions are more than sufficient to satisfy their scholastic desires. However, there will be a likely smaller group of users who will only be content with the final published work. It is the role of the interlending services to explore with their end user community just how much of their needs can be met with repository archived open access material, and how much must be the formally published variants; this would require another article to discuss.

**Technology**

New technologies usually advance far swifter into the user marketplace than they are adopted into libraries. For many in interlending the desire to introduce electronic signatures to comply with copyright legislation is a yet unmet, but highly desired, dream.

- “Implementation of electronic signatures for copyright declarations [should streamline and speed up the document supply process]”
- “[implement] electronic signatures - if it kills us!”
- “Electronic signatures; secure electronic deliver have both helped to make the service quicker and more efficient.”
- “The introduction of FileOpen at the British Library made it easier for us to introduce electronic delivery to all our users.”

However, increasingly demands from users are for access to digitally delivered materials on a variety of platforms and mobile devices. That some materials supplied with embedded DRM may not open on some of these devices (FileOpen Systems Inc, 2011) is a serious problem for patrons and could be regarded as a serious failing of interlenders and library services to keep pace with customer demands. In contrast to the previous Adobe Digital Editions secure electronic delivery platform many respondents expressed a delight that the FileOpen DRM was far less intrusive and disruptive for the end user experience.

- “SED - trying to implement the positives (speed of delivery) of this service and reduce the negatives (access problems)”
- “SED - not taking advantage yet as DRM technology employed still requires too much technical knowledge that we cannot necessarily support.”

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2 It should noted that the author manages both interlending and open access repository services
“Secure electronic delivery has been an important development - being able to supply documents direct from supplier to reader which speeds up the process and gives a more at your desktop feel to the service - although DRM of the documents does mean this is not as good as it could be.”

While challenging the use of restrictive DRM software was noted as desirable by many, it is not a role to which individual libraries can rise. However, the supply of secure electronic documents to the desktop continues to remain a major satisfier for much of the interlending services’ customer communities. In time it could be hoped that this supply would enlarge to materials supplied not simply by BL, CONARLS or even organisations like the BMA, but between interlending services’ libraries as well. However, as noted above the restrictions of licenses may not allow this to be practicable or even legal for many for the foreseeable future, no matter how desirable it may be.

Forum for interlending & Collaborative Groupings
FIL remains the most active and recognisable national membership body for organisations engaged with document supply in the UK. At the core of FIL’s function is the hosting and running of training and awareness events for interlending staff; often in combination with a visit to one of the British Library’s principle centres (St Pancras, London and Boston Spa’s Document Supply Centre; BLDSC).

“ILL is the only area within the library world where I feel there is a great camaraderie as we have a national and international willingness to help and share resources with our colleagues and are always delighted to assist.”

There have been some suggestions from interlending workers for FIL to take on more of an active representative role with other stakeholders, such as publishers and suppliers. Given that FIL works in close liaison with the British Library, CONARLS and IFLA already, it should be noted that this already happens to some degree. As exponents of best practice in interlending such as reviewing IFLA guidelines, FIL remains a valuable body for reference and education for workers across the UK sector. However, given some comments received, its functionality for some interlenders remains unclear.

Regional groupings of interlending bodies such as the East Midlands (LIEM, 2011) and the North-West Interlending Partnership (NWLIP, 2011) also help to facilitate the work of interlenders, and promote the exchange of resources, experiences and metric based data. Many survey respondents noted the particular value they placed on these groupings in supporting their work as well as providing a rich peer network to call upon.

In particular it was noted that the cross-sectorality of these groups allowed for an exchange of experience and advice from outside the traditional silo-ed sectors (e.g. public, academic, NHS). Alongside reducing costs and, increasing electronic delivery it is this kind of collaborative activity that may well offer the firmest foundation for future interlending activity. At the very least these networks seem essential in providing a conduit of experience and support for those working within the sector. Outside of the UK the supply of items from libraries around the world through the IFLA scheme also remains relevant.

Above and beyond this the technologies, tools and services provided to enable this effective collaboration (e.g. UnityUK) continue to be an area of special benefit to the sector.
• “Use of online ILL management tools such as UnityUk to manage ILLs electronically and facilitate electronic e-applications / responses - this has significantly increased the speed of ILLs.”

• “Availability and use of COPAC & SUNCAT for satisfying requests.”

• “Collective library catalogues such as InforM25 - used for location searches.”

The Road Ahead
As Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor once opined “The future is not set, there is no fate but what we make for ourselves.” (Terminator 2, 1991). She might have been facing down implacable killing machines, but this is a self evident truth for all UK document supply service managers and staff today. It is not a time for temerity it is a time to stand up and proudly demonstrate the metrics of success that underlie their activities and ensure they have sufficient customer feedback to illuminate the very real need for their services. Only through promoting the what interlending offering, the cost savings they deliver and the impact they have for the customer base, can they continue to be an essential part of any serious UK library service infrastructure.

• “Users are under more pressure to provide evidence to support work practices so there are great opportunities for the library to show that we can get just about anything.”

One thing seems certain, interlending in the UK over the next few years is likely to operate in a very different environment. The financial crisis has brought many issues with interlending services to a head, and it is without a doubt a time of challenge and change for everyone. While the public sector struggles with deep cuts to library budgets, education can hardly be said to be isolated from this although experience varies.

However, many interlenders I spoke to in preparation of this article affirmed an opportunistic view of this period. It offers a chance, forced perhaps by necessity, to re-evaluate and re-prioritise the work done by UK interlending staff and services. Their unique ability to rapidly source and deliver the rare, the esoteric and the essential for local patrons is something that should be celebrated and must be advocated to senior decisions makers. Interlending service managers need to be able to demonstrate through robust metrics and genuine customer feedback the value added dimension their services bring in satisfying their customer base and achieving key organisational goals. It may be only through this kind of proactive move that we can ensure that our services will continue to deliver materials into this next decade.

Acknowledgements
With especial thanks to those people working who took the time to comment and discuss issues and matters around this work, respond to this survey or make comments, as well as the journal Editor, for their multifarious inputs in the development of this article.

References


• Johnson, G.J. (2011). You only lend twice (or so it seems), Workshop, Manchester May 13th 2011


Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

1) Please indicate the sector within which your interlending service is based (closest match)
   a) Academic (Higher Education)
   b) Academic (Further Education)
   c) Academic (Other)
   d) Public Library
   e) Governmental
   f) Corporate
   g) Other (specify)

2) What trends in the levels of interlending requests from your readers have you observed in the last 2-3 years?
   a) A significant increase (>+20%)
   b) A moderate increase (+5-20%)
   c) Little to no significant change
   d) A moderate decrease (-5-20%)
   e) A significant decrease (>-20%)

3) What trends in the levels of interlending requests from other libraries (outgoing loans) have you observed in the last 2-3 years?
   a) A significant increase (>+20%)
   b) A moderate increase (+5-20%)
   c) Little to no significant change
   d) A moderate decrease (-5-20%)
   e) A significant decrease (>-20%)

4) What do you see as the biggest challenges or barriers for your interlending service to overcome in the next 12 months?

5) What do you see as the greatest opportunities to enhance your interlending service in the next 12 months?

6) What are the most important recent developments in interlending, and how are you taking advantage of them?

7) Any other comments?