Technical Services Management Problems in Small and Medium-Sized Academic Libraries in North Carolina

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Management problems affecting technical service operations in small and medium-sized academic libraries (hereafter referred to as small and medium academic libraries) relate to the implementation of automation plans in an internal .and external environment plagued with extreme economic uncertainty and difficulties.

Background

Automation of some standard library functions or operations has become a common trend in large academic and research libraries, particularly in the technical services areas of acquisitions and cataloging. Directors and staffs of small and medium academic libraries with less than 300,000 bibliographic items have recognized the advantages that automation of certain technical service operations could have on their efforts to provide services to their users. These directors and their staffs have met with difficulty in implementing their automation plans and maintaining current automated technical service operations in their respective libraries.[1] Administrators using computer-based networks such as OCLC have been coping with implementation problems such as communicating to their own library staffs and to university personnel resulting organizational changes. These administrators and their staffs have even dealt with the technical problems of down time, response time, and terminal malfunctions.[2] But, will these individuals develop effective strategies for dealing with problems associated with capital outlay and continued inflation?[3]

The automation efforts in these academic libraries have come at a time when most of their parent organizations have been experiencing what have been described by academic planning officials as TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES. Small colleges are already experiencing declines in student enrollments which will result in reduced income. As this condition continues to become tougher, libraries will take their share of the inevitable cuts in budgets.[4]

Libraries have difficulty building capital to support computer-based networking activities because they are seriously underfinanced.[5] While small and medium academic libraries have been served well by shared computer-based networking of technical services operations, these systems usually carry a high price tag. Many of these libraries are finding it hard to pay for these services in the face of stringent budget pressures.[6]

Inflation is another problem that has made automation of technical service operations in the small and medium academic libraries difficult, especially when project implementation includes use of regional library networks such as SOLINET and bibliographical utilities such as OCLC. Costs for the services of these library automation suppliers have increased so rapidly that financial planning in the technical services areas of these libraries has been very difficult.[7]

Survey Results

Are directors and staffs of small and medium academic libraries in North Carolina having problems in implementing automation plans and in maintaining automated operations in technical services areas? A survey of twelve small and medium academic libraries in North Carolina was conducted by telephone to see if their administrators were having problems in managing the technical services departments. The book volumes of these libraries ranged in size from about 60,000 to 290,000 and represented many geographical locations within the state. These libraries are located in colleges and universities that offer instructional programs leading to bachelor's and master's degrees.

The responding individuals in the libraries surveyed were asked if they would identify any pressing management problems that they were confronting in operating the technical services departments of their respective libraries. While four, or 33 percent of library directors, indicated that they had no major management problems, two of these individuals indicated that they were watching student enrollment and inflation trends for future financial planning activities. Eight, or 67 percent, of the library directors indicated that they were having management problems. In most instances, lack of sufficient capital and inflation were mentioned as their major problems. All of the responding administrators recognized that automation of certain technical services functions might relieve the strain on the current budgets allocated for technical services; however, they do not have the capital to plan and make the initial investment in computer hardware and software. The libraries, usually in the medium-sized category, that had been able to make initial investments in automating technical services functions are now experiencing difficulty in maintaining these operations because of increasing cost. The cost increases for computer-based cataloging networks (OCLC/SOLINET) have been so frequent that financial planning by administrators of these libraries has been almost impossible.

The problems affecting the management of technical services departments mentioned most frequently by library directors are presented in Table 1 and a graphic representation of their responses are presented in Figure 1. The problems mentioned most frequently were prohibitive charges for use of computer-based cataloging networks (OCLC/SOLINET) and lack of capital to initiate the implementation of other automation plans.

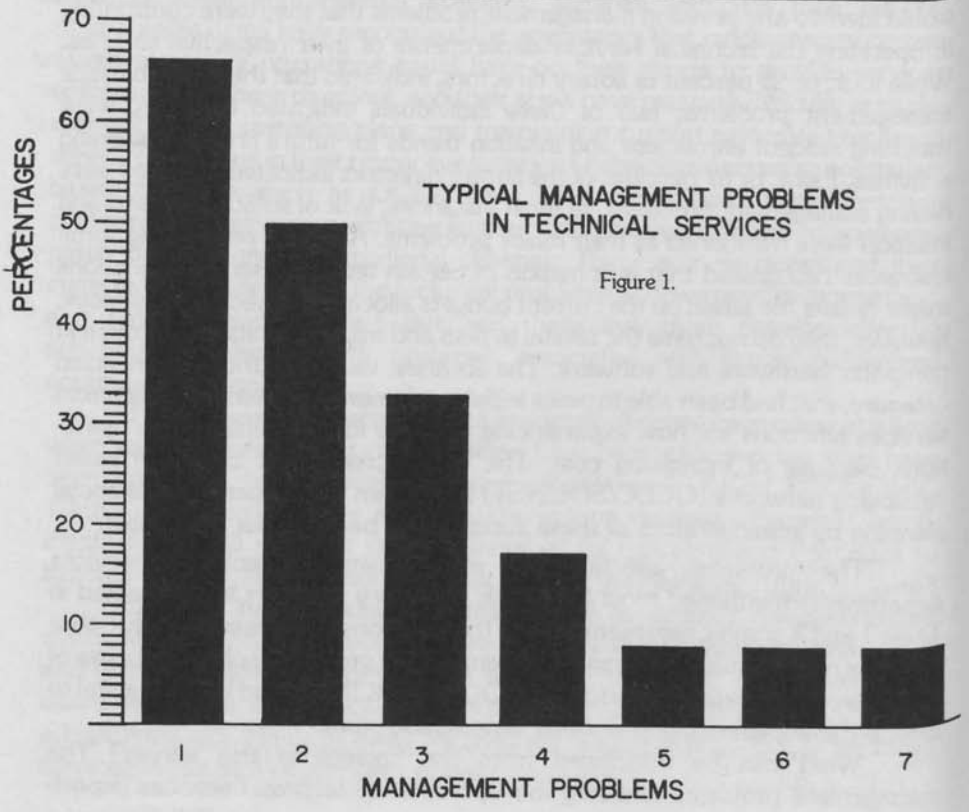
What can be concluded from the findings of this survey? The management problems affecting the operation of technical services depart-

ments in the typical small and medium sized academic library in North Carolina appear to be identical to those concerns of most organizations of similar sizes nationally.

Table 1

Typical Management Problems in Technical Services

Management Problems	Academic Libraries N=12
1. Prohibitive Charges for OCLC/SOLINET	67%
2. Lack of Capital	50%
3. Financial Planning (Inflation)	33%
4. Low Budget Priority on Campus	17%
5. Low Central Computer Center Priority on Campus	8%
6. Student Employee Turnover	8%
7. Student Employee's Work Quality	8%



TYPICAL MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS IN TECHNICAL SERVICES

Figure 1.

Alternatives

What can the administrators of these library organizations do about these problems? The following alternatives/strategies are suggested:[8]

1. Initiate planning projects that will insure that all current operations are absolutely necessary.

2. Conduct a systematic analysis of all current operations to increase efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

3. Conduct an analysis of all existing positions in the technical services departments, including student assistants, to insure that duties and levels of difficulty are defined adequately before assignments are made.[9]

4. Initiate an internal zero-base budgeting project to establish planning and implementation priorities and alternatives. This activity could help, materially, to bring better fiscal management to the technical services departments as it would to other units of the parent organization.[10]

5. Dare to be different; do not rule out the possibility of using small (micro) computers as potential tools in implementing some automation projects on a modular basis. With careful selection or development of software, the transportability of these operations to larger computers may be possible in the future.[11] A network of microcomputers could be ideal for some library applications in small or medium academic libraries, although this alternative will require some very careful planning.[12]

6. Do not underestimate the ancillary support costs of computing. The annual cost for maintenance of software may equal its initial development price.

7. When planning for the purchase of a computer, ask the question: Could we afford to maintain this computer system if it were given to us?[13]

Cooperate with North Carolina Schools of Library and Information Science in conducting library automation research and development projects.[14] Administrators in small and medium academic libraries can not usually withstand the economic and political risk involved in experimenting with innovative automation projects in technical service departments on an individual basis.[15]

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