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LIFTING THE CURTAIN ON UNFILLED INTERLIBRARY LOAN REQUESTS

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ABSTRACT

There has been little or no published research into unfilled interlending requests over the last decade. Unfilled requests have a negative influence on reliable document delivery. This study is an attempt to determine the reasons for unfilled requests within the Gaelic library consortium in South Africa.

The results of this study enable interlending staff to take remedial actions within their institutions. Supplying and requesting fill rates differ. In practice, the request fill rate is the more important. Librarians looking to improve client satisfaction and expectations should focus on this hidden aspect of interlending.

Methodology used: management information retrieved from the request interlending system for the participating libraries formed the base point of the research. Data included the number of requests placed and filled, and reasons for unfilled requests. This data was analysed, and fill rates calculated. In depth research into the unfilled requests was done, which resulted in being able to offer suggestions for remedial measures for different unfilled reasons. Indicators to measure library performance are identified.

Conclusions drawn from the study: previously reasons for unfilled requests have been mainly speculative; research however confirmed that the hypothesis proved to be correct. The fill rate of requests are determined by the quality of work, the quantity of items requested, and effectiveness of staff within service units, along with sufficient staff capacity and their levels of experience.

1 INTRODUCTION

Unfilled interlending requests are a topic that is not discussed openly. One should rather sweep them under the carpet and forget about them. They reflect negatively on libraries that strive to render a reliable document delivery service to their own users as well as to other libraries. Thus it is not strange that there has been little or no published research into unfilled interlending requests.

Librarians from leading libraries in first world countries may question this almost outdated topic. The interlending world stands on the verge of a completely new era in document supply, based on the internet and supported by new technology and initiatives. Changes in the near future will be just as drastic as that of moving from a paper-based system in the early 90's to an electronic system.

1.1 TECHNOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICAN LIBRARIES AND INTERLENDING DEPARTMENTS

The larger academic institutions in South Africa are already taking the first shaky steps on this new road. The race to be part of this hi-tech era is picking up in South Africa. Electronic databases and knowledge of the internet has already changed the method used by South African researchers to obtain information. 85% of researchers first use the internet, whilst only 1% consults the library catalogue first. (Baker: 2007)

Libraries currently invest in large numbers of e-journals and e-books. Digitization of library material is another step in the direction of becoming virtual libraries. Even in interlending we are moving forward. Clients can place unmediated requests. Ariel software is used to ship articles, and on receipt, requesting libraries e-mail the articles to their clients. Some libraries are currently supplying URL's to other libraries to access theses that have been digitized. Payments for interlending documents are handled through an electronic IFM (Interlending Fee Management System) and management information is retrieved from the electronic interlending system.

South Africa is a blend of first and third world development. Less than 10% of South Africans have access to the internet. (Baker: 2007) Although South Africa was able to get a communication satellite up into the sky, we still have libraries that are functioning exclusively in the paper era. Although we will soon have a few smart virtual libraries, the majority of South African libraries will still use the current interlending system for the foreseeable future. Thus in the South African context, it is still a relevant matter to discuss unfilled requests.

2 UNFILLED INTERLENDING REQUESTS – RESEARCH PROJECT

The South African Library and Information Trust (SALIT) funded a research project that focused on the reasons for unfilled requests. This was a research project identified by GAELIC consortium, (GAUTENG and Environment Libraries), one of five consortia in South Africa for the tertiary institutions. This initiative was in response to concerns about fill rates within the Gaelic consortium. In the past there have been speculations on the reasons for low fill rates, but they have not been verified.

The goal of the research project on unfilled interlending requests was to
- investigate the reasons for the non-supply of documents
- determine the accuracy of statistical data on the ReQuest system used for interlending in South Africa
- suggest remedial actions to address the problems identified
- determine the training needs of interlending workers
- organize a workshop where problems could be addressed

2.1 METHODOLOGY

A research team of experienced interlending workers was appointed. Permission was obtained from the 39 libraries and branch libraries within the GAELIC consortium to get access to their interlending data. A three month period, including peak months, was identified. Management information was retrieved and analysed. Different sources of data were used. These consisted of:

- Manually held statistics (supplied by the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus) was compared with the system statistics in order to determine the accuracy of the system statistics. The system statistics proved to be trustworthy and valid.
- ReQuest: the South African interlending system, was used to retrieve data regarding
  - The number of requests placed and received. These were used to calculate the fill rate
  - Reports on reasons for unfilled requests

2.2 INDICATORS TO MEASURE THE PERFORMANCE OF AN INTERLENDING SECTION.

Various indicators are generally used to measure the performance of an interlending office. These include -

- productivity (quantity of requests handled)
- fill rate (quality and efficiency of staff)
- turn-around time
- cost effectiveness

3 IMPACT OF STAFF

The research team found that in larger GAELIC libraries, where interlending sections are manned by fulltime staff, the performance is substantially better. In most of the smaller libraries this was not the case. Interlending tasks at smaller libraries are often not prioritized and are performed by less experienced staff.

The following have an impact on service delivery:

- ATTITUDE: Motivated and committed staff using their initiative will ensure peak performance.
- TRAINING: Structured and in-house training are imperative and combined with experience will have a positive impact on service delivery.
- CAPACITY: Stressed and overworked staff does not work as accurately and as dedicatedly as expected. High levels of service are difficult to maintain with insufficient staff numbers during peak periods.

4 INTERLENDING FILL RATE

The fill rate represents the percentage of filled requests and by default it implies the effect that the number of unfilled requests has on the quality of work done both on the requesting and supplying side.

4.1.1 Requesting Fill Rate

The fill rate on the requesting side is the most important, as it assures client satisfaction. The latter is crucial, even if the request has to go to several libraries before it is filled. A high requesting fill rate reflects positively on the work of efficient requesting staff and implies a low number of unfilled requests.

4.1.2 Success in selecting supplying libraries

One of the research findings that really excited and surprised us, was the result of a probe to measure the success in selecting supplying libraries. Requests often become unfilled due to

the inability of librarians to select the correct supplying libraries. These should be fast, efficient and accurate as well as cost effective.

Analysis of a sample of filled requests, chosen at random and covering requests for books and articles, gave the following results on the number of tries to fill a request –

Number of tries until a request is filled

1	2	3	4	5	<5	Total analysed
63%	21%	9%	3%	2%	2%	438

84% of the requests were filled within two tries! Training and experience on the requesting side enhance the successful choice of supplying libraries.

4.2.1 Supplying Fill Rate –
The supplying fill rate is usually much lower than the requesting fill rate. In order to achieve a short turn-around time to the advantage of the requesting client, supplying libraries should strive to fill a request promptly. If a requested document is not found on the shelves at the first attempt, or can't be supplied right away for a number of reasons, the supplying library should mark it immediately as unfilled on the interlending system. This procedure allows the request to move immediately and automatically to the next library where it might be filled, but at the same time, it will impact negatively on the supplying library's fill rate. Research has shown that only a limited number of documents are found on further searches in cases where requests were retained for a few days

5 GROUPING OF LIBRARIES AND UNFILLED REQUESTS
The question was raised if there was a relationship between library size and the number of unfilled requests.

In order to benchmark libraries and to reach conclusions, libraries were grouped according to the number of requests they handled during the 3 month period.

5.1 Library Size
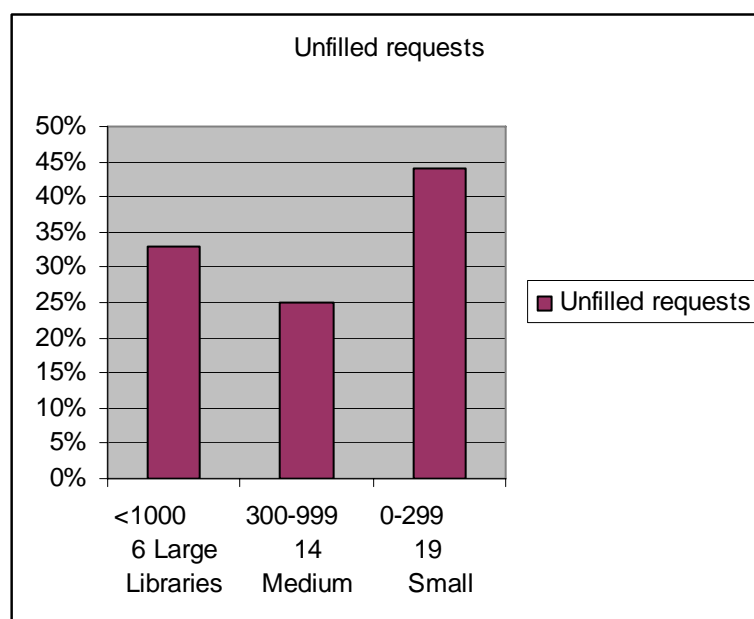
5.1.1 Requesting Libraries

Figure 1: Unfilled requests - Requesting point of view

The six large libraries requesting more than 1000 documents each during the research period were responsible for 53% of all the requests placed. Although this category did have more unfilled requests than medium sized libraries, they did have the shortest turn-around time.

5.1.2 Supplying Libraries

On the supplying side the requests that have expired before they were attended to were added as they also represented unfilled requests.
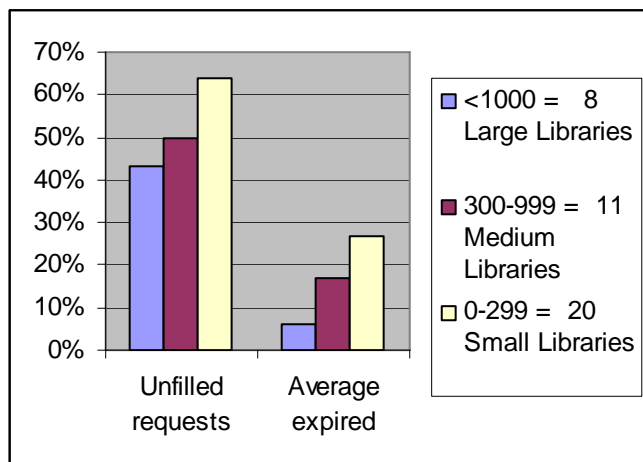

Figure: 2 Unfilled requests: Library Size - Supplying Point of View

The 8 large libraries received 76% of all requests during the research period. On average these libraries had the least unfilled requests and the best turn-around time.

6 Fill Rate

Grouping libraries according to the number of unfilled requests did not produce a definite pattern.
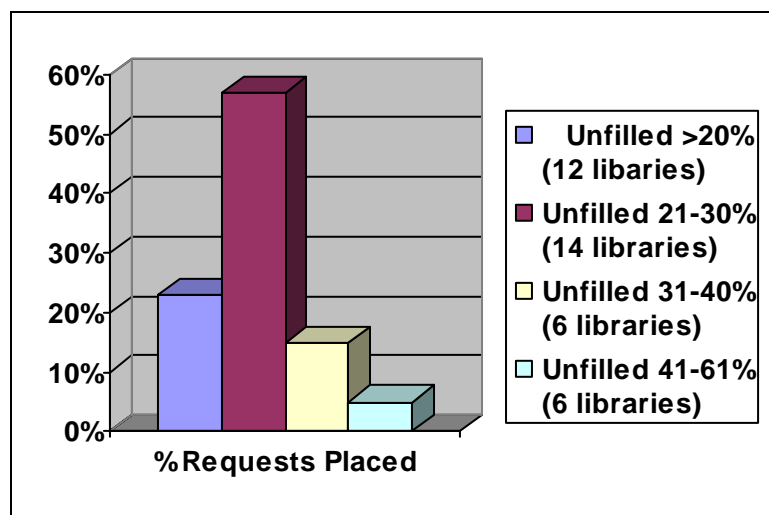
6.1.1 Requesting Point of View

Figure3: Requesting point of view - unfilled requests - Percentage of requests placed

It was encouraging to note that 67% of the libraries that were investigated had less than 30% unfilled requests. These 26 Libraries with less than 30% unfilled requests placed 80% of all the new requests in the 3 month period. Some of the smaller branch libraries were among the better performing libraries.
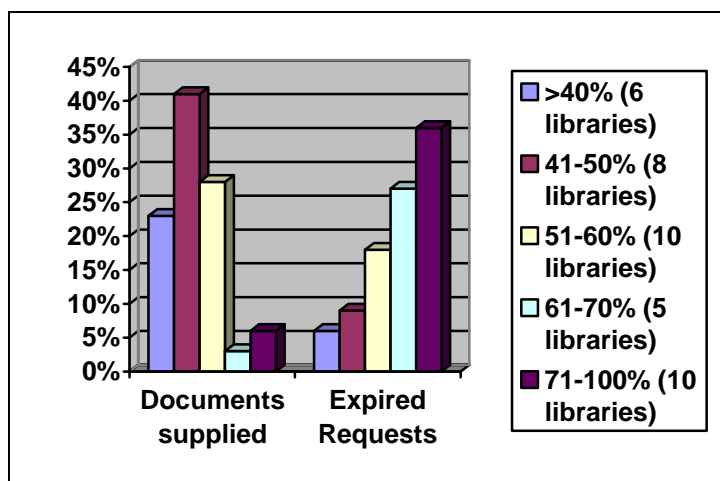
6.1.2 Supplying Point of View

Figure 4 Grouping Libraries According to Unfilled Requests: Supplying point of view

The 14 better performing libraries, having less than 50% unfilled requests, and which supplied 64% of all documents have had the least expired requests.

6.2 Unfilled Requests

Data retrieved from the ReQuest system gives us a break down of the reasons for unfilled requests on both the requesting and supplying sides. The project team analysed a sample of unfilled requests of each GAELIC library in order to detect problems that need to be addressed. The research team identified a few major problems, but smaller mistakes were picked up at most of the libraries, indicating that refresher training courses or workshops would be beneficial.

Currently supplying libraries have a choice of 23 possible reasons on the ReQuest system for unfilled requests. These reasons are in line with the international list of reasons, but the research team determined that South African interlending staff often did not understand the meaning of the given reasons and where it should be used. The research team found that the wrong reason was often chosen, such as using "Not Owned" where the reason should have been "Lacking". Supplying staff also used "Other" in cases where there were suitable and more correct reasons to choose from. Some reasons are never used. It is recommended to adapt the list of reasons to South African needs.

The following four reasons were used in 64% of the analyzed transactions.

REQUESTING Point of View			SUPPLYING Point of View	
Not owned	19%		Not owned	17%
Expired	18%		Expired	10%
In use	16%		In use	20%
Not on shelf	11%		Not on shelf	13%

6.2.1 Not Owned

Possible reasons for Requesting interlending staff to send unverified requests to libraries are –
- o Requesting staff in error due to
  - Negligence and lack of commitment
  - Working under pressure due to an insufficient number of IL staff
  - Lack of experience, commitment and/or training
- o Documents not found on our national database SACat, or other data bases
- o Incorrect information on SACat due to libraries not updating information regarding
  - Lost books

- Books on order but not received
- Numbers of volumes never received
- Cancelled serial subscriptions
- Incomplete holding information with regard to journals where only title holdings are indicated
  - o Multiple records for one document on SACat results in the record with the most holding libraries not always being chosen, thus all possible holding libraries are not tried before cancelling a request.
  - o Unverified requests are often sent to libraries – many of these are often (ironically) filled!

Remedial Action
- *All libraries should update their holding on SACat/WorldCat to ensure that their whole collection is included*
- *Lost items should be removed*
- *Numbers of volumes that have not been received should also be reflected on SACat/WorldCat*
- *Staff and end users should be trained to check all records on the catalogue for a specific item and ensure that the record with the most holdings are chosen*

6.2.2 Expired Requests

98% of all expired requests are due to requests not being attended to at supplying libraries within the stipulated time.

Remedial action:
- *Training:*
- *Supplying staff must check incoming requests on a daily basis*
- *All requests not filled on day one, must either be filled or marked as "Will Supply" or "Unfilled" during the second day*
- *Supplying staff must ensure that documents are "shipped" timely and correctly on the interlending system, and requesting staff should receive them promptly.*

6.2.3 In Use
- As a result of an ongoing cut in budgets, libraries buy fewer titles and less copies of one title. Due to the greater usage of available books, requesting libraries are requesting more books on interlending and have to reroute requests more often.
- More books are returned late because clients are less disciplined than before.

Remedial action:
- *Stricter ruling regarding the late return of books, will make books more available*
- *Libraries must try to be self sufficient with regard to books for undergraduate students*
- *Reservations may be requested if the due date of a book on loan is less than three weeks, in stead of cancelling the request*

6.2.4 Not on Shelf

The local library system often indicates that books are "In" but they are not found on the shelves. This can be caused by:
- Books shelved incorrectly
- Books not being returned to the shelves soon after they have been checked in.
- Students/clients hiding books
- Library staff, keeping books not issued to them, in their offices

Remedial action
- *Infrastructure should be in place to ensure that returned books are back on the shelves promptly.*
- *Regular shelf reading to trace books that have been shelved incorrectly*
- *Developing searching skills to look wider for books on the shelves – they are often found nearby.*

- *Regular training is essential for shelving and interlending staff.*

6.2.5 Non-Circulating
- Requesting staff do not always check if the loan status of the book will allow an interlibrary loan, (R = Restricted; X= not for loan).
- Requests for non-circulating books are often sent at random to libraries.
- IL staff, handling unmediated requests placed by end users, usually does not verify the request again on SACat. The loan statuses do not appear on the request screen along with the holdings of a document, as a result they are sent unverified.

Remedial Action
- *IL staff must be trained to recognize the loan status of documents on SACat*
- *Libraries must ensure that the loan status on SACat regarding short loan and reference books are reliable to prevent requests being sent at random*
- *The service provider must be requested to consider adding the loan status of documents on the request forms*

6.2.6 Not Found as Cited
- IL staff or end-users occasionally copy the bibliographic information incorrectly when placing requests
- The bibliographic information in references is often incorrect and cause time delays for both the requesting and supplying staff

Remedial Action
End-user and IL staff must ensure that bibliographic information, copied for interlending purposes, is correct

6.2.7 Other

This reason is selected if none of the given reasons fit a specific unfilled request. Analysis of unfilled requests has shown that "Other" is often used in the place of a suitable listed reason.

Remedial Action
- *Training to use the correct reasons*
- *To revise the list of reasons for unfilled IL requests to be adapted to South African needs.*

7 Comments and observations
- Training, commitment and motivation of library staff will lead to service excellence
- Regular analysis of unfilled requests will give an indication of inexperience and training needs
- IL staff is ideally placed to do quality control on SACat and their in-house systems, alerting cataloguing authorities of database inaccuracies
- The importance of accurate shelving must be stressed, as it has an impact on library services as a whole
- Libraries should empower their users to retrieve as much information as possible from the internet and e-publications.

8 UNFILLED REQUESTS AND TURN-AROUND TIME

It was necessary to investigate the relationship between unfilled requests and turn around time. Surprisingly the research team was unable to find a definite correlation.

Requesting point of view

A high percentage of unfilled requests do not necessarily correspond with a long turn-around time. A large number of unfilled requests will eventually have a negative effect on the available time left to handle other requests

Average unfilled requests	Average turn-around time for books	Average turn-around time for articles
13% 9 library sites	10.1. days	5.6 days
23% 16 library sites	9.3 days	5.3 days
34% 7 library sites	11.1 days	6.1 days
49% 6 library sites	9.7 days	5.7 days

9 ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED IN ORDER TO ENHANCE INTERLENDING SERVICES

9.1 Service Provider
- Revise the list of reasons for unfilled requests. Rename and/or delete them to fit the needs of South African libraries
- Management information with regard to unfilled requests should be given separately for books and articles
- Loan status of records should be visible on the request form
- The elimination of multiple records on SACat

9.2 Libraries
- Libraries should ensure that their whole stock is reflected on the national catalogue
- Holdings should be updated with regard to lost items and the loan status of their records

The reality is that time and cost implications for most libraries prevent the regular updating of holdings on SACat.

9.3 Management and Interlending Management Information

Library management should regularly study the interlending management information in order to detect progress or decline, evaluate the need of training as well as the allocation of staff and to act appropriately.

9.4 Training
It is imperative that interlending staff should be well trained and should attend workshops that focus on common errors, general updating, and advanced practices. These workshops would also enable staff to network with colleagues from other institutions and discuss mutual problems.

10 CONCLUSION

The reasons for unfilled requests have mainly been speculative, but research confirmed that the assumptions proved to be correct. Training, motivation, commitment and experience are the keys to service excellence.

It is crucial that libraries regularly update SACat, and other shared catalogues such as WorldCat. Library management must address the shortage of books. Stricter ruling regarding overdue books will make books more available.

Accurate and efficient shelving of returned books must be attended to, as well as regular shelf reading and training of Shelvers.

Although the percentage of unfilled requests on the supplying side is important and must be addressed, it is more important to look at a library's fill rate on the requesting side. Libraries should try to enhance this percentage and if it can be combined with cost effective document delivery and a fast turn-around time, this will reflect an excellent and outstanding performance.

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