Document! Document! Document! What to do if You Don't Have Policies and Procedures Established and How to Create or Improve Them Going Forward

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Abstract

It is tricky to fill a position that has been vacant for a while and to train someone new. Where do you start when documentation is lacking, and carry-over personnel are not available? This program covered examples of how to piece things together and focus on best practices for creating thorough documentation of policies and procedures for various library workflows. It covered the who, what, when, where, why, and how of documentation, its impact on staff, potential pitfalls, and the unique aspects of technical services-related documentation. The basic principles of this program can be applied beyond technical services departments as well. Attendees learned about assessing and establishing procedures from scratch, as well as creating and maintaining documentation to keep things running smoothly through vacancies, new hires, and every day in between.

Keywords: documentation, policies, procedures, resource management position, workflows

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This program started as separate projects and ended as a combined effort. Rebecca Bearden spoke about creating and maintaining documentation, and Jackie DeLong talked about her experience starting positions that were empty for some time or had been reconfigured, so policies and procedures were lacking or non-existent.

DeLong began by asking attendees to imagine walking into a resource management position on day one as the department head or the only person in the department, making them the department head by default. There is no library-specific onboarding document outside the university protocols, and the position has been vacant for nine months or longer. There is also little to no staffing overlap. What do you do first, second, and third? This is less likely to happen in larger libraries, but it happens at small institutions fairly often.

DeLong is a resource management person with a background in systems. Twice she has moved into positions with limited existing documentation. The first time was at a small private liberal arts college with a very small staff and approximately 1,200 full-time equivalent (FTE) students. She took the position of director of resource management, which had been vacant for nine months. There were three full-time and one part-time staff in that department. The second time was at her current position at Shenandoah University, where she is the resources librarian. When COVID-19 hit, over half the library faculty and staff—including two catalogers, an e-resources librarian, and the director (who had some systems and EZproxy duties)—all retired or left the institution. Essentially, her role combined the work of two librarians and a staff member, as well as the technical side of the director's position. Luckily after DeLong's first year, the library hired another full-time staff person to help.

DeLong presented a poll with the following three scenarios, and the group was asked to prioritize what would need attention first, second, and third.

A. The director asks for the cost of a potential new subscription.

B. A student cannot connect to a periodical your library has a subscription to.
C. A periodical publisher is migrating to a new platform, and the uniform resource locators (URLs) will be changed next month.

See Figure 1 for poll results.

The group's consensus closely matched what DeLong did to tackle these two positions. First, she dealt with access issues, then the director's request since they had a month to deal with the vendor URL changes. DeLong approached both positions by prioritizing access, budget, and ongoing management.

Access was the top priority to be able to put out the "hottest fires" first. At the first institution, it was an incomplete EZproxy migration. Most of the URLs in the library catalog had the old proxy string. This was corrected by a global edit in their Innovative Interfaces integrated library system. At the second institution, the A-Z list of databases contained several bad links. She reconciled the A-Z database list with actual subscriptions and checked and fixed all links in LibGuides, as well as the catalog and OpenURL resolver. This endeavor was time-consuming but considered the top priority.

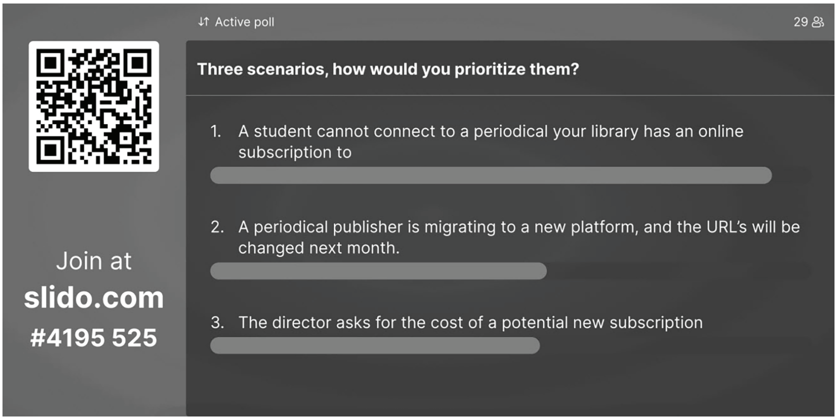

Figure 1.

Checking the EZproxy configurations went hand in hand with having accurate links. Several configurations were also updated. This is not as big of a factor with a hosted system, but initially, Shenandoah University was a self-hosted site. In year two, they migrated to a self-managed hosted system.

At both institutions, everything was inventoried, starting with the online database and periodical subscriptions, then moving on to print periodicals, creating local holdings records along the way. When there has been a lapse in care and feeding of online resources, completing an inventory brings all kinds of issues to the surface. The goal was to establish exactly what the holdings were and what bills to expect. It took a full year to iron out all the subscriptions. An added benefit of completing an inventory is learning the collections, which is also important when starting at a new institution.

The next area of focus was the budget. Luckily, access to the campus accounting system was available at both institutions. This allowed a line-by-line evaluation of the relevant budgets to see what was paid in the previous year, to whom, and how much, although some titling was cryptic. This recreated the previous year's budget. The library's system could not keep track of the subscription budget the same way the business office did, so a spreadsheet was created that would. The spreadsheet reconciled how the business office charged subscriptions as a monthly expense. For example, a subscription running from January to December was charged against two fiscal years, each being charged six months' worth of the subscription. The fiscal year runs July to June. The spreadsheet included a column for the resource's name and payee, the amount charged to the current budget year, and the amount charged to the next budget year as well as the total amount paid, the date it appeared in the campus system, and comments. This allowed for comparison to the campus system at any point of the year, including the amount to be carried forward to the next year's budget. Besides keeping track of subscription expenses, it also makes it easy to track what has yet to be paid and gives a historical view of budgets as the years go by. During the comments and questions after the session, one attendee suggested asking vendors to prorate subscriptions to align with a July start date or the date a library's fiscal year starts, eliminating the need to keep track of prepaids.

After getting a handle on the subscriptions and completing inventories, consider cost savings. Looking for consortia offerings and pulling Counting Online Usage of Networked Electronic Resources (COUNTER) statistics can help make informed recommendations or decisions. After the first year at Shenandoah University, $8,000 in subscription savings were found. The savings came from canceled duplicate, unused, and even a couple phantom subscriptions, where there were no links and no use.

The third area of focus was ongoing maintenance. DeLong recommended keeping a ledger to record decisions made, processed, created, and completed. The ledger can be as simple as a Microsoft (MS) Word document. When a project is started, mark it in the ledger, and when a policy is changed in the system, record it in the ledger. Anything and everything can go into the ledger. If a vendor has a change, mark it in the ledger. It is helpful for end-of-year reports and is a searchable document. A separate ledger was created for EzProxy activities, including software upgrades.

Collect all vendor agreements if they are not already available. Vendors will send copies if the original is not available or findable. Store the agreements in a shared file so they will not be lost. Along the same lines, create a browser tab for vendor administrative pages. Also, put those URLs in a shared document with logins and passwords and create a vendor-representative file. All of these details will be useful for ongoing maintenance.

After thoroughly reviewing the current subscriptions and establishing workflows, it is a good time to formally or informally make suggestions about the department's or library's direction. Coming in with fresh eyes and experience lends a new perspective. At the first library, the director asked for recommendations for the department's future. All the staff members were on the verge of retirement, so a plan was needed. At the second institution, resource management was not the only department that lost staff in the great retirement. Since resource management was combined into one librarian's position successfully, the other librarian position could be redirected to a more public-facing function. The library needed to boost resource usage, and with more programs moving online, an online learning librarian position was created to focus on tutorials and outreach. That position was needed more than a monographic cataloger position since the library acquired relatively few print books and everything else was electronic resources. DeLong explained that her library uses OCLC's Worldshare Management Systems (WMS). They would need more staff if they had a different system. For what they do and the size of their staff, WMS fits their needs and allows them to manage technical services with fewer personnel. DeLong wrapped up with the recommendation to ensure there is documentation, as it is invaluable to a position's successor, especially where there is little to no staffing overlap.

The presentation then shifted gears from how to manage when the library does not have documentation to how to be proactive about it. Bearden's presentation was derived from an American Association of Law Libraries Technical Services Special Interest Section webinar that she had presented with a former colleague, Elisabeth Umpleby, at the University of Connecticut (UCONN) School of Law Library. When they worked together, there had been a departmental directive requiring up-to-date procedures so that if anyone had to be out unexpectedly, others would be able to step in. Rebecca also wanted to leave good documentation when she was out on leave. When UCONN Law Library migrated to Alma in 2016, Rebecca was part of the migration and implementation teams, and it was imperative to reconfigure workflows within the new system and document those procedures while learning them. Then, when Bearden left in 2019 for Boston University, she wanted to leave the person hired to her role of twelve years with comprehensive documentation to facilitate their training. In 2022, Umpleby and Bearden teamed up over Zoom to create a webinar to share their procedure writing successes with others in a webinar titled "Documentation: Downloading Our Brains for the Greater Good of the Library." The purpose of the webinar was creating and maintaining documentation to keep things running smoothly, and Bearden hoped to continue that conversation with this presentation.

When choosing what to document, instructions that represent standard processes or workflows should be prioritized. Less emphasis should be placed on exceptions to the rules, which can quickly get out of hand and make the flow confusing and wordy. Documentation should include step-by-step instructions written in a clear and concise manner and include all tools and skills necessary to perform the task. External links or paths needed should be included in the documentation. The ultimate goal is for someone to replicate the work by reading the documentation. Some workflows and topics, however, are more feasible to complete without help than others.

When deciding where to store documentation, there are many options, including shared network drives. Microsoft solutions like SharePoint and OneDrive are shared, and within them, the appropriate type of file to store the document depends on the nature of the material being documented. GoogleDrive, DropBox, Wikis, and other Web-based sites that can be password/login protected, such as LibGuides and WordPress, can also be good options.

Places that are easy to access, whether you are on/off campus (Web-based), can be more desirable, especially with more people working remotely. Network drives require virtual private network (VPN) logins to access off-site, which can be more cumbersome. However, documents on a network drive can still only be edited by one person at a time, so a desirable aspect of most Web-based solutions is the ability to work in tandem with others.

The ability to communicate within a document with comments or notes, and provide linking or cross-referencing to other documents across document types or in personal or departmental workflow management and to-do lists, can also be helpful. Some examples of tools include KanbanFlow, Confluence, MS Teams, and Trello. Notes within the working systems that are described in the documentation are a good place to contain information related to exceptions to rules. For example, if one title out of one hundred requires special treatment in the integrated library system (ILS), that instruction should live in the ILS rather than taking up a lot of space in the documentation.

Bearden recommended writing documentation while performing the task, when a change happens, or when the task does not work anymore. Have someone else test the instructions and update documentation based on questions or needed clarifications. This strategy removes blind spots the author may have because the work may be second nature to them.

The documentation should be written by the person in the role that performs the task, the supervisor with close consultation with the person in the role that performs the task, or the person doing the training. Consider who should be responsible for updating existing documentation and who can access the documentation, and determine whether it is for one specific work unit or will be used across units. Multiple copies of the same documentation in multiple places should be avoided because one copy might be updated and not the other, so interdepartmental documentation should be commonplace. One other consideration is whether the documents are accessible to all employees, including students or temporary employees.

Documentation is important for several reasons. It allows colleagues to step in and do the work if the person who is responsible cannot or is replaced. It prevents silos. If staff keep their work completely separate and independent from others, it impedes collaboration and creates blind spots. It is imperative to educate our colleagues on our processes to avoid duplicating efforts or workflows that juxtapose others. Documentation avoids a single point of failure, where only one person knows how to do something. Institutional memory is an incredibly valuable asset, and it must be backed up. Our memory can fail us, especially for non-routine tasks. Documentation is very procedural, and sometimes there are just too many details to recall.

Preparation and intent are necessary to generate adequate documentation. Documentation should include an introduction explaining the purpose, scope, and roles. Consistency in titles, formatting, and controlled language is helpful. Steps, bullet points, or checklists rather than narrative format are recommended in most cases. Flow charts, spreadsheet charts, hyperlinks, and screenshots are also extremely useful when appropriate. Providing screenshots and annotating them or adding circles around the required information can help a new user learn and follow along. Including the "who, what, when, where, why, and how" helps provide the full picture for documentation.

The presenters shared sample templates and a documentation checklist along with the presentation materials. The checklist is an aid to use when writing new documentation to ensure it is complete and contains all necessary information. One of the sample templates was formerly stored on a network drive and is now stored on Microsoft Teams/SharePoint; the documentation exists as Microsoft Word documents and Microsoft Excel files, and the documents often contain hyperlinks and cross-references. The other sample documentation template screenshot was from a WordPress intranet site. The template can have its own text, as well as contain links to other pages on the site, or MS Excel, Access, and Word documents on a SharePoint site. Bearden shared that some of their older documents are still on a network drive, that a knowledge management committee just released an information governance document, and an implementation committee will be working with staff to make documentation more consistent in the future.

Fresh perspectives and feedback from new staff or staff from other work areas are helpful. It can also be wise to have a job expectation of keeping documentation up to date. It should not be something extra that only some people choose to do. Succession planning and continuity for easier onboarding and training can save time in the long run. When staff are faced with too many things to document, they should focus on the mission-critical tasks first. Certain departments or work types are more suited for documentation than others. When documentation is used, a library needs to enforce everyone doing their part. In certain scenarios, decision trees or flow charts might work better than traditional documentation depending on the nature of the workflow.

Avoid potential problems when creating documentation. Having too many separate pages that are not linked together cohesively can be overwhelming and messy. When documents are too long or too detailed they can be hard to follow; someone might miss important information if they are only skimming the document. Materials should be kept up to date as workflows or policies change so they do not reflect outdated information. It is also not recommended to store the same information in multiple places since one could get updated and not the other. Avoid having shadow systems that could be forgotten about, or again, might result in the information not being updated in both places. A best practice would be to avoid including something specific in documentation, like if one database out of 200 needs to be handled differently. Instead, put this information only within the record of that database. Learn to discern the black-and-white vs. gray areas when writing documentation so that staff can use their best judgment rather than accounting for every single situation.

Libraries require special documentation. Some library systems are very customizable. If someone is new to a library or moves from another library, things can be done completely differently based on ILS, configurations, and job responsibilities, so vendor documentation for procedures within an ILS or other systems—while a very helpful reference—may not always be the best for final procedures.

Decisions and policies—like collection development policy decisions, binding decisions, and space concerns—are best documented separately from procedures like workflows and how-tos. Also, when documents are cross-departmental and impact the work of others, it is important to consult with the affected teams or notify the entire staff when significant changes have been made to existing documentation or new documentation has been created. Bearden shared that their library has monthly meetings between access services and collection services to iron out cross-departmental print workflows, like withdrawals, replacements, and retention of materials.

Having well-organized documentation sets everyone up for success. Utilizing folders, navigation, categories, and hyperlinks to other documents when necessary helps staff across departments find what they need. Adding a table of contents to long documents or to landing pages for specific content can also help with navigation. Having a single template that all units can utilize helps standardize documentation.

In summary, when library staff have little to no documentation when starting a new position, there are plenty of ways to investigate, test methods, start over, and document while learning one's job. While documenting is a big task to take on, it is also an excellent opportunity. Documenting procedures is not a one-time deal; it is a process. Since everyone has used documents and instructions, it is recommended to think about what has worked best in the past. When training, think about what has worked more effectively when demonstrating to others. The entire library should be included in the documenting process. A directive to create and maintain documentation should come from administrators since it is imperative to create buy-in from all staff.

Contributor Notes

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