

LIFTING THE CURTAIN ON UNFILLED INTERLENDING REQUESTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Unfilled interlending requests are usually not openly discussed as they reflect negatively on libraries that strive to render a reliable service. Thus it is not strange that there has been little or no published research on this topic. People have speculated on the reasons for unfilled requests, but these thoughts have never been verified. It was time to take an in-depth look at unfilled requests.

1.1 Technology in Southern African Interlending Departments

Advanced technology is influencing life all around us. Even traditional interlending has changed over the years. Southern Africa is a blend of first and third world development. Although dreams to become virtual libraries will soon realize for some advanced libraries, others are still functioning in the paper era.

There are just more than 600 libraries in Southern Africa that have registered at the National Library as interlending libraries. 52 % of these are working online in order to provide a faster and more effective service. These online libraries are placing 98% of all new requests. Currently 7% of the libraries allow their patrons to place unmediated requests. Even though only 13% libraries use Ariel software, they supply more than 90% of all requested articles electronically. A few libraries are already taking the next step by delivering articles electronically to the e-mail addresses of their patrons. The Interlending Fee Management System has almost replaced the coupon based financial process whilst reliable management information can be retrieved from our interlending system, ReQuest. Without the

latter we would have been unable to collect the necessary data to research unfilled requests.

The internet, supported by new technologies, has already changed the method used by South African researchers to obtain information. 85% of researchers first use the internet, whilst 1% still uses the library catalogue first. The result is that fewer documents are requested annually through interlending.

2. RESEARCH PROJECT

This presentation on unfilled requests is based on the outcome of a research project that was initiated by the Gauteng and Environment Library Consortium, (GAELIC for short) which is one of five consortia in South Africa for tertiary institutions. The research was based on management information retrieved from the 39 GAELIC libraries and branch libraries and conducted by five experienced interlending workers

that included Janet and myself. The South African Library and Information Trust funded the project.

The main goals of the research project were to

- investigate the reasons for unfilled requests
- suggest remedial actions to address the problem
- determine the training needs of interlending workers

After the research team had selected a three-month period, we retrieved data regarding

- The number of new requests placed and received as well as the number of filled documents in order to calculate the fill rate
- The reports on reasons for unfilled requests
- Data necessary to calculate the turn-around time

3. IMPACT OF STAFF ON INTERLENDING SERVICES

The research team realized that the interlending process was dependent on human intervention and therefore we first looked at the staff situation in interlending departments. We found that in larger GAELIC libraries, where fulltime specialized staff was responsible for interlending, the performance was substantially better than in most of the smaller libraries where interlending tasks were often not prioritized or were performed by less experienced staff.

An interlending department will excel if attention is given to the following -

- **ATTITUDE:** a library with motivated and committed staff will perform above expectation
- **TRAINING:** A combination of training and experience will have a positive impact on service delivery
- **CAPACITY:** An insufficient number of staff will cause stress and prevent staff from functioning accurately and with dedication

4. INTERLENDING PERFORMANCE AND UNFILLED REQUESTS

Various indicators are generally used to measure the performance of an interlending office. We have focussed on the relationship between unfilled requests and

- productivity or number of requests handled
- fill rate
- turn-around time

5. INTERLENDING FILL RATE

The interlending fill rate represents the percentage of filled requests. It reflects the quality of work and efficiency of staff. A low fill rate implies a high number of unfilled requests.

5.1 Requesting Fill Rate

The fill rate on the requesting side is more important than that on the supplying side, as it assures client satisfaction. The latter is crucial, even if the request has to go to several libraries before it is filled. Requests often become unfilled due to the inability of requesting staff to select the correct supplying libraries.

Analysis of a sample of filled requests, chosen at random and covering requests for books and articles produced an unexpected result: 63% of requests were filled within the first attempt and 84% within the second!

Number of attempts until a request is filled

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

Training and experience will enhance the successful choice of supplying libraries.

5.2 Supplying Fill Rate

The supplying fill rate is usually much lower than the requesting fill rate. The reason for this lies in the fact that supplying libraries strive to fill a request as fast as possible in order to achieve a short turn-around time to the advantage of the requesting client. 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 marks it as unfilled on the interlending system. This procedure allows the request to move immediately to the next library where it might be filled.

Unfortunately this procedure impacts negatively on the fill rate of the supplying library.

6. GROUPING OF LIBRARIES

Our next task was to group libraries according to their productivity, fill rate and turn-around-time in order to determine the influence that unfilled requests have on each grouping.

6.1 Library Productivity or number of requests handled

6.1.1 Requesting point of view

Grouping requesting libraries according to the number of requests handled, we found that the six large libraries placed 53% of all requests and they have had the shortest turn-around time. The 14 medium sized libraries were however more effective as they have had less unfilled requests.

Library Size Number of requests placed	No. of libraries	Unfilled requests
>1000 = Large (Placed 53% of all requests)	6	33%
300-999 = Medium	14	25%
0-299 = Small	19	44%

6.1.2 Supplying point of view

On the supplying side we have added the expired requests as they also represent unfilled requests. The eight large libraries handled 76% of all new requests. They were the most effective as they have had the least unfilled and expired requests as well as the shortest turn-around time.

Library Size Requests received	No. of libraries	Unfilled requests	Average expired
>1000 = Large Received 76% of all requests)	8	43%	6%
300-999 = Med	11	50%	17%
0-299 = Small	20	64%	27%

6.2 Grouping libraries according to fill rate

Grouping requesting and supplying libraries according to fill rate indicated that the top performers with the least unfilled requests were the libraries that handled the most requests. The supplying libraries also had the least expired requests.

6.2 Grouping libraries according to turn-around time

Finally the research team investigated the relationship between unfilled requests and turn-around time from a requesting point of view. We were unable to find a definite correlation. A high percentage of unfilled requests did not necessarily correspond with a slow turn-around time.

7. REASONS FOR UNFILLED REQUESTS

Analysis of a sample of unfilled requests for each GAELIC library on both the requesting and supplying side, revealed few major problems, but smaller mistakes were picked up at most of the libraries, indicating that refreshing training courses or workshops would be beneficial.

It was disturbing to find that some requesting librarians did not even bother to reroute unfilled requests in an effort to get them filled.

ReQuest, our interlending system, provides a choice of 25 possible reasons to be used for unfilled requests. We found that supplying staff often did not understand the meaning of the given reasons and where they should be used. *Not Owned*, for example, was often used in the place of *Lacking*, whilst *Other* was repeatedly used in the place of a variety of suitable reasons.

The most used reasons, *Not Owned*, *Expired*, *In use-On Loan* and *Not on Shelf* were the same for requesting and supplying, except that the order differed slightly.

Reasons most use Requesting point of view		Reasons most used Supplying point of view	
Not owned	19%	In use-On loan	20%
Expired	18%	Not owned	17%
In use-On loan	16%	Not on shelf	13%
Not on shelf	11%	Expired	10%

Due to limited time, I will only discuss the most used reasons for unfilled requests.

7.1 Not owned

Human error is frequently the cause for interlending requests to become unfilled. The reason “*Not Owned*” is often the result of

- Negligence and lack of commitment
- Lack of training and/or experience
- Staff working under pressure

Staff often places unverified requests due to inaccuracies on SACat, our national catalogue, such as -

- Records not found on SACat and other data bases
- Multiple records for one title, thus all holding libraries are not tried
- Incorrect or incomplete information on SACat. This problem is the result of libraries not updating information regarding
 - Lost books
 - Books on order
 - Numbers of volumes never received
 - Cancelled serial subscriptions
 - Journals with only title holdings

7.2 Expired Requests

In 98% of cases where new requests have expired, the problem was caused by supplying librarians who did not attend to new requests within the stipulated time. The reason for this can once more be traced down to human error.

7.3 On Loan

The problem regarding the reason “*In Use-On Loan*” is basically rooted in the financial situation of libraries and refers mostly to books.

- Due to ongoing cuts in budgets, libraries have bought fewer books during the past decades. Library collections have become inadequate as growing numbers of patrons are using the available books. The number of books requested on interlending has escalated and interlending staff found that they had to reroute requests more often before they were filled.
- The late return of books by less disciplined patrons have aggravated the problem.

7.4 Not on Shelf

“*Not on shelf*” is a frustrating situation for supplying staff when searching in vain for a requested document that should be “In” according to the local library system. This can be caused by:

- Books shelved incorrectly.
- Books not being returned to the shelves soon after they have been checked in.
- Lack of experience and searching skills
- Students or other patrons hiding books
- Library staff, keeping books not issued to them, in their offices

8. ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED IN ORDER TO ENHANCE INTERLENDING SERVICES

The research team have listed the following issues to be addressed in order to enhance interlending services

8.1 Service Provider

The **service provider** (Sabinet Online) should

- Revise the list of reasons for unfilled requests in consultation with South African interlending staff.
- Reports for reasons for unfilled requests should be given separately for books and articles
- The elimination of multiple records on SACat would be of great help
- Easy accessible reports for turn-around time should be provided

8.2 Libraries

South African libraries should

- Ensure that their whole stock is reflected on SACat and other catalogues

- Regularly update the loan status of their records, as well as their holdings
- Libraries should encourage their patrons to retrieve as much information as possible from electronic sources and the internet

8.3 Management

Library management should regularly study the interlending management information in order to

- Detect progress or decline
- Evaluate the need of training
- Consider the allocation of staff

8.4 Interlending staff

Interlending staff should be well trained and should attend workshops that focus on

- New developments
- Advanced practices
- General updating
- Common errors

These workshops would also enable staff to network with colleagues from other institutions and to discuss mutual problems.

Interlending staff is ideally placed to alert cataloguing authorities of database inaccuracies.

9. CONCLUSION

In conclusion we can state that the assumptions for unfilled requests that have formerly been speculative have now been proven to be correct.

We have found repeatedly that motivation, commitment, training and experience, as well as a sufficient number of staff, are the keys to success.

It is crucial that libraries regularly update SACat and other shared databases.

Libraries must address the shortage of books.

Stricter ruling regarding overdue books will help to make books more available.

Fast and accurate shelving of returned books must be attended to.

Regular shelf reading is critical and

staff responsible for shelving must be well trained.

It is 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 effectiveness and a fast turn-around time, the outcome will be service excellence!

Thank you.

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