Tyranny of distance: the challenges of coordinating a multinational consortium

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Abstract
Purpose – This study aims to evaluate and report on the challenges faced by a multinational academic library consortium with a heterogeneous membership and widely varying collection resources.
Design/methodology/approach – The author uses a case study approach based on direct experience obtained with coordinating the work of such a consortium, from its nascent stages to its fully functional present-day form.
Findings – Coordinating the work of an academic library consortium that spans the globe presents challenges such as an inability to set a meeting time – and place – that is agreeable to all and copyright laws that vary from one country to the next. Cataloging practices may affect the system’s ability to select an appropriate supplier based on reported journal holdings, but this problem is easily solved by a careful review of local practices and the system’s search algorithms.
Originality/value – This article is of interest to anyone involved in a library consortium, regardless of its geographic boundaries.

Keywords Document delivery, Interlibrary loan, Resource sharing

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Among the many challenges for consortia today, one of the most difficult to overcome is distance – especially when those distances cross national borders and span multiple time zones. When we consider ArticleReach Direct (ARD) as a model multinational consortium, we need to understand the organizational dynamics of this type of consortium: how it came into being, the challenges imposed on it as a consequence of its heterogeneous membership, the vast distances (both physical and cultural) between its members and the legal obligations its members are subject to as a result of divergent and perhaps even conflicting copyright laws and licensing agreements.

ArticleReach

ArticleReach (AR) is Innovative Interfaces Incorporated’s (III) consortial borrowing system based on a physical union catalog that enables and enhances the exchange of articles between libraries. The system compiles its members’ bibliographic holdings into a central catalog and routes article requests to the appropriate potential lenders. Patrons have three options for initiating article requests:
1. from databases using OpenURL which facilitates the direct transfer of bibliographic data;
2. by searching the central catalog and locating the desired item; or
3. going directly to the request form and keying in the data.

Before 2006, III decided to create a patron-initiated/unmediated system for article requests. Named AR, the system was similar in nature to their popular INNReach product. Although the features of the systems are comparable, AR focuses on serials holdings and document delivery while INNReach’s purpose is the processing of loan requests. The two systems can be integrated so all aspects of resource sharing – interlibrary loan and document delivery – can be covered.

In April 2006, the first system of libraries to use AR was NExpress, a collection of academic institutions in northeast US. This consortium consisted of six III libraries already participating in reciprocal resource sharing. Although NExpress used AR for a number of years, they no longer use the system.

ArticleReach Direct

ARD was created in 2007 to serve as a consortium of III libraries using the AR system. The original group of partner libraries in ARD consisted of academic libraries in the USA, including a number of Association of Research Libraries
(ARL) members. In 2008, several libraries from the United Kingdom and Australia joined the consortium. Since 2008, some libraries have left the group for a variety of reasons, whereas other libraries have added ARD to their arsenal of tools to benefit their users. Currently, the membership consists of four US, three UK and seven Australian libraries.

Implementing AR was not difficult. Each library was required to complete a profile that was used by III to set up the structure for retrieving journal titles and holdings. As part of this process, the initial group gathered together at III Headquarters for training. Initial training included hands-on work because III was making changes to the product during the set-up of the system. Today, implementation is handled in a different way, one that does not require travel or central training.

Problems and issues that were encountered during training were addressed at that time or shortly thereafter with a period of testing by the partners before the system went live. The original group made changes to their local library Web sites to reflect the new service and announcements were sent out to the various academic communities.

To demonstrate the reach of AR, the current ARD libraries are listed in Table I with the respective size of their patron body and the holdings for each library (numbers are approximate).

As you can see, the number of possible users who could be served by ARD at each university is substantial – a combined population of more than 400,000 students, faculty and staff members across the consortium – with impressive holdings available to the consortium – nearly 26 million volumes plus an additional 1.1 million e-books, 287,729 journal subscriptions and 171,000 e-journal subscriptions.

In 2013, ARD filled 64,974 requests for the patrons of the member libraries. ARD can automatically cancel requests for items owned or a library can mediate a request; therefore, for this time period, 25,998 requests were cancelled. In addition, 31,618 requests were passed to traditional interlibrary loan because they were not available from consortial members (Table II).

### Agreement and guidelines

Consortia cannot function without a basic agreement and guidelines. This can be determined mutually or by a governing group. In the case of ARD, the library directors established the initial agreement with very basic guidelines. Originally, the library directors agreed that ARD would be comprised of libraries that were members of the ARL. They also resolved that there would be no charges between the members for the fulfillment of the requests. In addition, copyright issues were addressed and a 24-hour fulfillment standard would be observed. Some basic guidelines for scanning were also included in the document.

Since the inception of the original agreement, the guidelines have been reviewed, refined and agreed upon by the members with the latest version accepted and approved in February 2012[1]. The group also developed a set of standards that addresses the turnaround time, cancelling and passing procedures, image quality and resends[2].

### Challenges

As one can imagine, there are unique challenges to conducting the business of an international or multinational consortium or any other international group. Some of these issues are out of the control of the member libraries, while other challenges are more directly controlled by the partners.

The first issue to be addressed for ARD was the vast distance between member libraries. Three different continents are involved in the formation of the group, meaning that travelling to meet in person is not feasible. For the first few years, some members would gather at the American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference and Midwinter Meeting. As members from the UK and Australia were added, however, the ability to meet as a group at these conferences was no longer a viable option. In addition, some member libraries lacked funding to send staff to conferences.

Regular communication between members was crucial. Many options were considered and the most feasible was to institute monthly conference calls. Michigan State University

### Table I Demographic data and library holdings of consortial members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Faculty/staff</th>
<th>Holdings</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alliant International University</td>
<td>3,700</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>140,000 volumes, 16,000 e-journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian National University</td>
<td>16,719</td>
<td>3,986 (1,162 academic)</td>
<td>2.5 million volumes, 55,107 print journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azusa Pacific University</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>240,000 volumes, 46,000 e-journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgetown University</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>2.4 million volumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSU</td>
<td>48,000</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>6.5 million volumes, 75,000 journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murdoch University</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>469,449 volumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Glasgow</td>
<td>23,000</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>2.5 million volumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Liverpool</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>4,700</td>
<td>2 million volumes, 20,000 print journals, 500,000 e-books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Newcastle</td>
<td>22,874</td>
<td>3,479</td>
<td>875,948 volumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Sydney</td>
<td>51,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>5.5 million volumes, 85,000 e-journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Technology, Sydney</td>
<td>36,357</td>
<td>3,068</td>
<td>900,000 volumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Warwick</td>
<td>19,086</td>
<td>4,353</td>
<td>933,317 volumes, 47,622 journals, 69,960 e-books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Wollongong</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>500,000 volumes, 90,000 journals, 100,000 e-books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria University</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>530,000 volumes, 24,000 e-journals, 488,000 e-books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>359,736</strong></td>
<td><strong>50,286</strong></td>
<td><strong>25,988,714 volumes, 287,729 journals, 171,000 e-journals</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(MSU), a founding library of ARD, agreed to host the line for teleconferencing.

Calendar dates and times zones for each member were important elements in establishing working practices and addressing concerns with the vendor. World Clock[3] made it easy to set up meeting times through its meeting planner. Libraries in the UK and USA, while in time zones that were anywhere from 5 to 8 hours apart, were at least on the same calendar date, but the Australian libraries are a calendar day ahead which made it impossible to find a time during normal working hours when all members could participate in a conference call. Therefore, each monthly conference call is actually two calls, one for the UK partners and another for the Australia group. The US libraries can choose to attend either meeting while MSU coordinates and participates in both.

Although all partners had a mutual cultural heritage and language, spoken English varies widely among English-speaking countries. This was most noticeable during the conference calls. In addition, cultural and environmental differences meant that making assumptions was not helpful in the communications between members. Even the weather could present issues that were not shared by all consortium members.

Naturally, it is important to mention the various differences in national laws, including copyright. Laws and interpretation of laws differ from country to country, even though many laws are related or interrelated. It goes without saying that copyright also falls within this realm. Copyright statements for all three countries are, therefore, included on all ARD forms. There will be more about this later.

Some aspects of distance may be more under the control of a member library. This can include licensing, policies and library cataloging. Member libraries may have the ability to negotiate terms for licensing e-resources that can expedite requests in ARD. However, if the resources are purchased through other consortia, the ability to dictate those terms may be severely restricted. Also, it should be noted that the laws of the country may also impact the ability of the institution to determine its ability to share. Library policies are often set by the library, but home institutions may also impinge on the ability to share resources. Finally, cataloging practices and system requirements may determine what items are available for supplying to the group. The AR system looks for particular elements in the record to perform a match for processing. If the data are not represented in a consistent way in records, the program is unable to consistently identify matches in the system. Some of these issues can be addressed by the home library, and, hopefully, the library has reviewed all external impediments to sharing before joining the consortium.

### Communications

Our first line of communication is the listserv that was generously setup and maintained by III. This listserv was originally established to assist with product development and group formation. Later, it was an excellent means for the member libraries to contact each other with questions, concerns, issues and news.

Meetings are held monthly if possible, through teleconference calls. To allow participation by all members, two monthly meetings are held. Since there is a 9-11-hour time difference between the UK and Australia with various time zones in the USA to consider, it is not possible to hold a single meeting every month. The range of times is a result of the changes from Standard Time and Daylight Savings Time for all members. Unfortunately, the teleconference line requires callers outside the USA to pay a fee. This meeting access inequity is being addressed by the search for a VoIP option. Most recently, Adobe Connect has been used for this purpose with hopes that future meetings will be held through this medium.

Holding two monthly meetings has been a critical goal for the group to coordinate processes and make substantive product improvements to III systems. This means that it is extremely important to provide organized agendas and produce succinct minutes for the group – and for members to actually read the minutes. A call for agenda items is usually sent out before the meetings and an agenda a few days before the scheduled meeting. Minutes for each meeting are distributed as soon as they are compiled so that members have the ability to check on the progress of the consortium.

To inform ARD partners about the progress of the group beyond the minutes of the meeting, group statistics are compiled by the co-coordinator and distributed to the group. This set of statistics is based on parameters setup by the NExpress consortium. Each member has access to most of the data but the compilation of information assists with determining the requesting relationships and load balancing in ARD. In ARD, it is possible to setup tiered requesting by region but because articles can be supplied in a timely way without regard to geographic distances, geographic requesting has not been implemented. Tiered requesting by region would, of course, be much more useful for loan requests because those materials require shipping back and forth between libraries.

To make available all of the documents of the consortium, a Google Docs site was established and all members were given access with editing rights. In this Google Site, members find the Guidelines and Standards, Contact Information, Agendas and Minutes, Statistics, Users Surveys, Enhancement (lists) and other Resources. The availability of these documents through a site that is easily accessed has been

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**Table II ARD statistics, 2009-2013**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cancelled (held locally)</td>
<td>25,998</td>
<td>26,192</td>
<td>23,424</td>
<td>28,061</td>
<td>24,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filled</td>
<td>64,974</td>
<td>85,184</td>
<td>90,349</td>
<td>118,288</td>
<td>96,738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass2ILL (not available in ARD)</td>
<td>31,618</td>
<td>39,040</td>
<td>39,985</td>
<td>41,262</td>
<td>33,096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>122,590</td>
<td>150,416</td>
<td>153,758</td>
<td>187,268</td>
<td>154,644</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ARD Web page, [https://sites.google.com/a/msu.edu/articlereach-direct/statistics](https://sites.google.com/a/msu.edu/articlereach-direct/statistics)
extremely helpful in unifying the group and providing a basic background of the consortia to new members.

Again, using tools made available through Google, a Web site was created for the consortium. This site was designed with a view toward prospective members. It includes information about ARD, direct access to the ARD catalog, the guidelines and standards, some basic annual statistics and faculty/student comments culled from surveys[4].

Finally, in an attempt to tap into the latest technological development in communication, a Facebook group was formed. Some members were added initially and others joined later. It was hoped that sharing a social image with other members would improve communications. Because we are unable to meet in person, having a general idea about the other people involved may promote a feeling of familiarity when conversing during the meetings.

Copyright

Because copyright is so critical in a service that delivers articles, it made sense to discuss it as a separate issue. Each country has its own laws and regulations with regard to copyright, as well as international laws and agreements. Understanding copyright issues is a challenge for one’s own institution but become even more of a demand when considering multinational implications.

In ARD, it was necessary to develop a form that contained copyright statements for the USA, the UK and Australia. Each country needed to specify copyright requirements for their patrons at the time of requesting. Because AR uses a single form for all members, it was necessary to include each of these statements.

Successes and failures

While there is always hope in any enterprise that the project or effort will prove to be successful, such is not always the case. Therefore, it has been with ARD. Because it is a group that is unrelated in any other way, there has been a goal to promote a sense of partnership within the group. Finding ways to do that has been exciting and unique.

Successes

First of the successes to be discussed here is the adherence of participants to the agreement. When new members are added, it has been important to share with them the documents of the group and discuss any concerns that they may have about the consortial arrangement. Once libraries accept the precepts of the agreement, most diligently seek ways to implement the changes needed to fulfill those commitments. Some libraries have rearranged processing to fulfill the need to comply with a 24-hour turnaround time. Other libraries have reviewed their cataloging and made significant changes to promote a better match for the titles in the system. All of these adjustments have signified an acceptance of the consortial agreement.

Conference call attendance has proved to be crucial to the success of the group. Most libraries attend the meetings or send a substitute if necessary. If unable to attend, a library often chooses to share a report out to the partner libraries that is then incorporated into the minutes of the meeting. With the ability to use Internet meeting space and sharing desktops, it is hopeful that meetings in the future will be even more productive.

Another success for ARD is the enhancement process developed by group for the product. Initially, ARD members put forth enhancements during the training process when we all met as a group. Because this is no longer possible, conference calls have dedicated time to discussing enhancements that are desired by ARD partners. Once all possible improvements are thoroughly discussed and understood, the group votes on the final document that is then sent to III for consideration. III has another enhancement process for their other products, but AR has not been included in those deliberations. As an example, alternatives to Ariel for supplying articles have been developed. AR now allows the use of Odyssey Standalone and DropBox as ways of sending articles from the lender to the borrowing patron. Once sent, the system automatically updates and notices are sent to the patrons, all based on the receipt of the article in the system. Another example of positive impact is the expansion of the AR copyright tracking capability. The Consortium’s request for this functionality was an influencing factor for III development.

Failures

As with all such endeavors, there have been failures. One of the first efforts to lose ground was the gathering of partners at ALA Conferences. While it was a pleasure to meet other ARD staff at the conferences and be able to discuss issues face to face, continuation of this practice would prove to be detrimental to the consortium because all multinational partners were not involved in the discussions. There is hope, of course, that in the future, AR Conferences may allow members to interact in person rather than through other mediums.

While the initial creation of the Web site seemed like a good idea, it has not produced much interest either due to the lack of promotion of the consortium or other reasons. However, at this point, the site is a disappointment.

The Facebook group was a chance for staff from the various ARD libraries to get to know one another without physically interacting. There has been some activity in the group, but it too has proven to be unsatisfying.

Improvements

One significant improvement has already been implemented – the use of an Internet meeting program that will allow members to use a whiteboard, share a desktop and programs, share documents, chat and use audio/visual components. This will facilitate a better interaction between the members during meetings and promote the use of the various documents and the Web sites established on behalf of the consortium.

To be considered in the future is a more formal organization of the membership. Since its inception, ARD has had only three co-coordinators (one since the beginning). This promotes continuity but may not spread the opportunities around the group. It may be beneficial to elect rotating coordinators who will take charge of the business of the group.

An additional improvement may present itself with a review of the processing that each member library manages for ARD. As processing improvements are realized, it is beneficial to all participants to learn about those improved methods and share the time and cost savings.

Finally, as enhancements are implemented, the software itself will improve. For Australian libraries, an additional method for tracking copyright is needed. The group is hoping to see this
development soon. Currently, those libraries are using a more manual method for data retrieval. Other enhancements will add to the value of the software and are eagerly awaited.

Conclusion

Consortia are created with the idea of sharing resources for improved patron service. A multinational or international consortium presents its own set of challenges for these libraries. Time and distance are factors that make interactions within a multinational consortium more difficult but also very rewarding when cooperation results in success. As stated in the Report of the Task Force on International Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery Practices:

Given the importance of resource sharing to research libraries and to the communities they serve, members of the research library community should continue to participate in international interlibrary loan and document delivery arrangements [. . .] (Neal et al., 2011).

Much has been accomplished in ARD’s first six years. Partner libraries have shared hundreds of thousands of resources in a timely and efficient manner, a reflection of the dedication of individual group members to the goals of the enterprise and demonstrating a successful model of an informal international consortium.

Notes

1 The latest version of the “ArticleReach Direct Council Guidelines” can be found at https://sites.google.com/a/msu.edu/articlereach-direct/policies

2 “ArticleReach Direct Standards” are available online at https://sites.google.com/a/msu.edu/articlereach-direct/ard-standards

3 The World Clock meeting planner can be found at www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/meeting.html

4 See ARD Web site, https://sites.google.com/a/msu.edu/articlereach-direct/

Reference


Further reading


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