In a world of Amazon, is it time to rethink ILL?

CJ de Jong
University of Alberta Libraries, Edmonton, Canada, and
Heidi Nance
University of Washington Libraries, Seattle, Washington, USA

Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to evaluate the use of alternative methods compared to traditional interlibrary loan (ILL) processes.
Design/methodology/approach – ILL departments around the world were surveyed about their policies and procedures for obtaining materials for their users.
Findings – The survey results indicated that alternative methods are predominantly a fringe activity, while most materials are still obtained through traditional ILL processes. There continues to be a great deal of room for exploration of purchasing, renting and the use of free resources to fill ILL requests.
Originality/value – This article shows that there continues to be a great deal of room for exploration of purchasing, renting and the use of free resources to fill ILL requests.

Keywords Libraries, Interlibrary loans, Interlibrary loan processes

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Online retail has changed the way we can obtain books, articles, conference proceedings and multimedia items. Faster and cheaper access is enabled by vendors like Amazon, AbeBooks and Alibris with sites in many different countries, publishers providing a myriad of online options for purchasing of articles and many societies/conferences making their publications available online. These changes in improved access invite a response from interlibrary loan (ILL) departments to take advantage. Traditional ILL processes focus on resource-sharing between libraries, while ILL systems are designed around these long-established workflows. The focus of this study is to provide insight into the state of current practices that respond to the myriad of options to fill requests.

The ILL literature has a number of case studies that focus on ILL purchase programs to fill ILL requests. These studies present individual programs and provide some assessment of their success. In examining some of the more recent literature and case studies on Purchase ILL programs, we discovered that such programs have commonalities, including similar goals, criteria, workflows and largely positive results. We looked specifically at case studies presented by the University of Hong Kong Libraries (Chan, 2004), University of Minnesota Law Library (Zopfi-Jordan, 2008), Washoe County Library System (Campbell, 2006), Brigham Young University Library (Van Dyk, 2011), University of Wisconsin-Madison and Purdue University (Ward et al., 2003).

• Goals: Most case studies began their Purchase ILL programs experimentally, with one or more of the following goals:
  – to save money (Chan, 2004; Campbell, 2006; Van Dyk, 2011; Ward et al., 2003; Zopfi-Jordan, 2008);
  – to build or fill gaps in the collection (Chan, 2004; Ward et al., 2003; Zopfi-Jordan, 2008);
  – to fill requests that would otherwise go unfilled (Ward et al., 2003); and/or
  – to provide more rapid turnaround time and delivery (Chan, 2004; Van Dyk, 2011; Ward et al., 2003; Zopfi-Jordan, 2008).

• Criteria: Similar criteria were mostly used when selecting items for purchase, and focused on aspects of the item requested:
  – How easy was it to borrow? (Campbell, 2006; Chan, 2004).
  – How much did it cost? Was it a recent publication? (Campbell, 2006).
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− Was it readily available from a regular library vendor and/or already in the library’s purchasing scope? (Campbell, 2006; Zopfi-Jordan, 2008; Ward et al., 2003).
− Was it a repeat order by the same or different library patrons? (Zopfi-Jordan, 2008; Campbell, 2006).

• Workflows: In all cases, it was ILL staff who initially identified an item as a potential purchase candidate based on a set of predefined criteria hinges on the answers to the above questions. ILL staff would forward the request to Acquisitions, who would do the actual purchasing (Campbell, 2006; Van Dyk, 2011; Ward et al., 2003). In Zopfi-Jordan’s case, ILL staff were authorized to purchase some items below a designated cost threshold.

• Outcomes: All of these case studies demonstrated success. Delivery was usually faster (except for Chan at the University of Hong Kong), purchased ILL items had a high circulation rate (Van Dyk, 2011) and items purchased did fit the local collection (Chan, 2004; Campbell, 2006). Van Dyk (2011) points out that Purchase ILL is not always cheaper than borrowing – especially when you factor in the additional staff time of circulation and acquisitions staff. He believes that:

[. . . ](t)he library and information science profession is committed to being highly service-oriented so ILL POD [Purchased On Demand] has held an elevated place in library literature over the past decade (Van Dyk, 2011, p. 88).

When considering cost for purchasing over borrowing, it is important to recognize all costs, including staff overhead for adding the item to the collection, which might result in higher costs for purchasing than borrowing.

The case studies on a variety of ILL purchase programs provide guidance to other institutions for implementing alternative processes to borrowing items requested through ILL, but it is unclear from the literature whether the ILL community has embraced these new methods of filling ILL requests. The authors of this study seek out to identify trends in this realm of ILL services by gathering data from a large group of ILL departments from various institutions across the world. The following trends are of specific interest and will be assessed through this study:

• There is a strong trend of ILL departments developing purchasing programs among their services, rather than just borrowing.
• There is a strong trend for purchasing decisions to be motivated by cost savings.
• Acquisitions staff continue to be mainly responsible for purchasing.
• The volume of ILL purchases remains low due to complex processes and insufficient budgets.
• Alternative methods for filling ILL requests are still predominantly fringe activities for ILL departments.

Methods

To gather data on the policies and procedures related to ILL practices at institutions across the world, the authors used a standard survey method. The survey (Appendix 1) consisted of 20 questions. Six questions focused on demographics, including country location, type of institution, size of institution and number of professional librarians assigned to the ILL department. Nine questions concentrated on policies and procedures in regard to purchasing materials to fill ILL requests. Four questions focused on practices around the use of alternative and free sources to fill ILL requests. The last question was an open-ended question that allowed participants to share anything that they felt was important for this survey. All questions were optional. Depending on the responses to certain questions, participants invoked logic that would automatically skip related questions.

It would have been possible to use mailing lists (e.g. ILL-L) that are dedicated to ILL topics; however, the authors decided against this for several reasons. Using these conventional mailing lists creates uncertainty about who you are reaching out to. Mailing lists are generally targeted to geographical locations and for a survey that requires global participation, the authors believed listservs would be too limiting. Further, survey distribution through mailing lists could promote self-selection that could skew results. The authors believed that their own contact lists would have sufficient contacts for ILL departments inside and outside of Canada and the USA, would reduce the chance of self-selection and would allow for the calculation of a meaningful response rate. The breakdown of countries for the final list consisted of Canada at 1,350 (37.9 per cent), USA at 1,036 (29.1 per cent) and Other (70 countries) at 1,174 (33.0 per cent).

The top ten countries in the category “Other” consisted of Germany (181), France (111), Australia (98), Italy (98), United Kingdom (89), Japan (61), Sweden (52), The Netherlands (49), Spain (49) and Switzerland (39).

The survey was distributed to an e-mail list constructed from the contact lists of borrowing libraries from the University of Alberta and the University of Washington. Each institution extracted e-mail contacts from their ILL system and the lists were merged, de-duplicated and reviewed for erroneous data that were removed if not in the format of a valid e-mail address. The final list consisted of 3,560 e-mail addresses, which was imported to a Mailman list hosted at the University of Alberta. It was determined that a Mailman list would be the most effective way of sending e-mail to a large number of e-mail addresses. An e-mail (Appendix 2) was sent to the Mailman list that invited ILL managers to complete the survey. The survey was closed after 19 days.

Results

Participant descriptors

A total of 498 participants responded to the survey, a response rate of 14.0 per cent. Responses were not required for each question, and some questions were automatically skipped based on responses to other questions. The number of responses to each question varied from a high of 484 to a low of 71.

A total of 484 participants identified themselves as belonging to 1 of 35 countries. As expected, the majority of participants came from Canada and the USA, 198 (40.9 per cent) and 172 (35.5 per cent), respectively. The number of participants from the remaining 33 countries was 114 (23.6 per cent). The top ten responding countries from the remaining 33 included Germany (15, 3.1 per cent), Australia (13, 2.7 per cent), United Kingdom (11, 2.3 per cent),
Switzerland (8, 1.7 per cent), Sweden (7, 1.4 per cent), Spain (6, 1.2 per cent), Norway (6, 1.2 per cent), France (5, 1.0 per cent), Italy (5, 1.0 per cent) and The Netherlands (4, 0.8 per cent).

Participants were asked to identify the type of library they worked in and 477 participants responded, see Figure 1. Approximately half of the respondents were Academic Libraries, while the remaining half was almost evenly split between Government, Hospital, Public and Special Libraries. The response numbers from School Libraries were negligible.

To gain a sense of the professional oversight of ILL departments, participants were asked to identify the number of professional librarians assigned to their ILL department and 484 participants responded, see Figure 2. Most common responses were one professional librarian assigned (203) and no professional librarians assigned (181).

To gain a sense of the size of libraries we were receiving responses from, participants were asked to indicate the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff that worked in their library and 479 participants responded, see Figure 3. Most respondents come from small libraries, as determined through their low staff numbers.

Participants who had selected Academic as their type of library were directed to answer two additional questions. There were 237 participants who responded when asked to identify the highest level of education at their institution, see Figure 4. As more than 80 per cent of the participants indicated to provide at least a masters-level education and almost 60 per cent a doctoral or medical degree, responses from academic libraries to the survey are weighted heavily toward institutions of higher-level education.

The second question for Academic Libraries asked to indicate the size of their institution through the number of FTE students and 238 participants responded, see Figure 5. Each category is represented; however, there is a large representation from institutions with up to 5,000 FTE at 40.8 per cent.

**Findings**

Support was found for the following trends:

- There is a strong trend of ILL departments developing purchasing programs among their services, rather than just borrowing.
- Only 22.5 per cent of participants indicated that they did not purchase any items requested through ILL, while the other participants indicated a variety of items (e.g. books, dissertations, articles, etc.) purchased to fill ILL requests (Figure 6). The indications that sets of criteria for items to be purchased are in place, that there are cost considerations and that purchasing is a possibility as a last resort for some suggest that consideration is being given to the option of purchasing as part of a service program.

- Alternative methods for filling ILL requests are still predominantly fringe activities for ILL departments.

This was indicated by the low volume of items purchased (Figures 9, 10), low budgets for purchasing (Figure 11), a

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perceived lack of need to expand the service (Figure 12), a large response to not renting/purchasing short-term access to e-articles or e-books (Figure 13) and low volume of requests filled through alternative/free sources (Figure 17).

Mixed results were found for the following trends:

Acquisitions staff continue to be mainly responsible for purchasing.

The majority of participants indicated that Acquisitions staff are responsible for purchasing ILL items, but participants also indicated that ILL staff have this responsibility (Figure 7). Participants provided comments that indicated that ILL in small libraries is often carried out by staff who have multiple roles and cannot necessarily be distinguished:

The volume of ILL purchases remains low due to complex processes and insufficient budgets.

The majority of participants indicated that they do not need to expand the service of purchasing requested items (Figure 12). However, the two highest-rated impediments were still considered to be a lack of additional funds and difficulties incorporating purchasing into traditional ILL workflow (Figure 12).

No support was found for the following trend:

There is a strong trend for purchasing decisions to be motivated by cost savings.

The data indicated that there are various decision factors that our participants consider when making purchasing decisions, and while cost savings is one of them, it is not the only one, nor does it jump out from the others (Figure 8).

Participants were asked to indicate the item types they would be willing to purchase to fill an ILL request and 448 participants responded, see Figure 6. Of all participants, 22.5 per cent indicated that they don’t purchase any items requested through ILL. Books were the most preferred item type for purchasing at 67.6 per cent, while articles and various media were indicated each by approximately 45 per cent of the respondents. Dissertations were indicated to be purchased by 31 per cent of respondents.

Participants who did not indicate that they did not purchase any items requested through ILL were asked eight additional questions. The first question for this section asked participants to indicate how they decided whether to buy versus borrow from another library, and 285 participants responded. A specific set of criteria that the item would need to meet was indicated as the primary factor in decision-making, as indicated by 50.9 per cent of respondents. Cost was the second highest indicated factor, as indicated by 40.4 per cent of respondents.

Participants were also asked which staff is responsible for the purchasing of ILL items, and 263 participants responded. Acquisitions staff (65.4 per cent) and ILL staff (55.9 per cent) were primarily indicated as being responsible for purchasing. Many participants indicated more than one category, as indicated by a greater than 100 per cent count. A number of respondents commented that they were the only person working in their library and therefore would have had many different responsibilities as the sole employee.

We received 312 responses to the question of how many ILL-requested books are purchased on average per year, see Figure 9. A large majority of respondents (80.4 per cent) indicated either of the two lowest categories, either zero (9.6 per cent) or 1-50 (70.8 per cent) books purchased.

We received 317 responses to the question of how many ILL-requested articles are purchased on average per year, see Figure 10. In comparison to the previous question, we see a larger number of respondents (25 per cent) indicating zero

Figure 7 Staff responsible for purchasing materials requested through ILL

Figure 9 Volume of ILL materials purchased each year

Figure 8 Criteria used to determine buying versus borrowing
books purchased. With 46 per cent of participants responding that they purchase 1-50 books on average per year, 50 or less covers the majority of participants.

We asked participants to indicate how large their allocated budget was for purchasing items requested through ILL, and 310 responses were received, see Figure 11. More than half (56.5 per cent) indicated that no budget was allocated. In the cases that a budget was allocated, the majority fell below $5,000 (30.4 per cent) and a small proportion was greater than $5,000 (13.2 per cent).

We also asked participants to indicate impediments to expanding the service of purchasing requested items, and 296 participants responded, see Figure 12. More than half of the participants (55.1 per cent) indicated that they did not need to expand this service. The lack of additional funds was indicated as the highest impediment (34.1 per cent) to expanding the service, next to difficulties incorporating purchasing into traditional ILL workflow (15.2 per cent).

In addition, we asked participants to indicate whether they rent/purchase short-term access to fill ILL requests, and 309 responses were received, see Figure 13. The vast majority of participants indicated that they don’t rent/purchase short-term access to e-articles or e-books. Only 19.7 per cent indicated that they rent/purchase short-term access to e-articles, while even fewer (6.8 per cent) indicated that they rent/purchase short-term access to e-books.

The last question participants were asked in this section addressed whether ILL request forms had an option to indicate that the item should be purchased, and 313 participants responded, see Figure 14. The vast majority indicated no (83.4 per cent), their ILL form had no option to indicate that the item should be purchased and added to the collection.

The last section focused on other methods than borrowing or purchasing to fill requests. We asked participants to indicate what they do with requests when they have the material in their collections, and 389 participants responded, see Figure 15. The results show that participants use a variety of methods to handle requests for items held in their collections, although most participants (63.2 per cent) indicate that they cancel the request, and provide directions to the patron on how to obtain the item from the collection.

We further asked about specific alternative or free sources participants used to fill ILL requests and 362 responded, see Figure 16. The vast majority fill requests through alternative and free sources, for example General Google Search/Discovery (75.1 per cent).

In addition, participants were asked to indicate their volume of requests filled from alternative/free sources on average per year and 392 responded, see Figure 17. More than half (60.2 per cent) of the participants indicated 50 or
fewer requests filled from alternative/free sources, while only 18.9 per cent indicated more than 150 requests filled from these sources.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate the competency level of staff to utilize alternative/free online source to fill ILL requests and 392 participants responded, see Figure 18. Most participants rated staff as either competent (35.2 per cent) or highly competent (45.2 per cent), while only 3.6 per cent of participants indicated that staff do not necessarily have the skills to be competent, and 16.1 per cent indicated mixed levels of competency among their staff.

Discussion

It is clear that alternative methods of filling ILL requests have become relatively mainstream in ILL operations among even very different libraries. Academic, public and special libraries of all sizes regularly supplement their ILL activity by filling book and article requests using free, open-access, purchased and rented materials, some more so than others. Most libraries decide to purchase based on a predefined set of criteria such as subject matter, delivery speed or cost. Most libraries forward their requests to their local acquisitions department for actual purchase. In addition – perhaps most importantly – this purchase ILL activity remains a small proportion of their overall ILL operations. At best, it supplements traditional ILL. At the least, it remains a largely “fringe” or experimental activity.

Even though this activity is commonplace, the potential for growth is clearly present. Libraries could be doing more. Here are a few immediately obvious ways that libraries could expand their purchase ILL programs, based on our survey results:

- Adding the ability for patrons to indicate “the library should purchase this item” to the ILL request form. Most libraries offer patrons the ability to recommend books for purchase and addition to the local collection. Perhaps suggestions will be different between a purchase request form and a “purchase this” option on the ILL form. Further study is needed to look into the validity of these purchase suggestions for collection building purposes.
- Having a dedicated purchase ILL library budget. Fifty-four per cent of respondents indicated they do not have a dedicated Purchase ILL budget. More research is needed to assess why this may be, and whether having a dedicated budget leads to additional purchasing.
- Purchasing more e-books or e-articles. Nearly 80 per cent of respondents said they do not purchase short-term access to e-books or e-articles. Further research is needed to determine, fully, why this is the case, but the authors speculate that this is mostly because rented items cannot be added to the local collection. If a main goal of your alternative/purchase ILL program is to fill gaps in the local collection, e-book or e-article rental would be counterproductive. If, on the other hand, the main goal is to save costs and increase turnaround time, rental becomes a much more viable option.
- Discuss a purchase ILL program at your institution. As the literature and survey data have shown, Purchase ILL programs can have multiple goals. They can help fill gaps in the collection through targeted criteria, they can provide better service through obtaining items more quickly or without restrictions on the loan, save costs by identifying those items that are cheap to purchase or simply provide an alternate option when there is no...
opportunity to borrow the item. Have a discussion at your institution about what goals are appropriate to work toward and the resources needed to get there. Implementing a program with clear goals will allow you to assess it, indicate success and provide guidance for growth and directing resources.

Purchasing and renting are ways to fill ILL requests through alternative resources, but there are also many free resources on the Internet. The continuing development of open-access journals and institutional repositories allows us to gain access to items without paywalls. The survey data showed confidence that ILL staff are competent in locating these resources. However, the data also indicated a low volume of requests are filled this way, difficulty changing traditional ILL workflows and continuing to cancel requests for these resources and only provide directions on how to obtain them. Service philosophies may affect decisions on how we go about incorporating freely available resources as an extension of our collections. If our patrons are unable to discover these resources on their own and ask us to find them for them, should we not just fill their request? Again, the difficulty with growing our ability to fill requests from free online resources may stem from the lack of infrastructure that can easily tap into these resources. If it takes longer to find free resources than to build a routing table, it seems logical that we continue to rely on traditional borrowing. Further research needs to be done to develop workflows that can more easily take advantage of free online resources.

**Conclusion**

As the scholarly publication market evolves, and library budgets are constrained, libraries will continue to seek ways to meet their users’ information needs and build their collections while staying within their tight financial constraints. Our literature review and survey results show that while traditional ILL remains the norm, alternative methods of request delivery are prevalent. ILL departments engaging in alternative activities to borrowing are often motivated by collection building, cost savings and service factors. Further, ILL departments are tapping into free online resources available to us, but balancing traditional workflows and free resources to save money and time is still an art, an art that is in early development. There is great potential for exploration in the area of alternative methods to fill ILL requests that could help move this area forward.

**References**


**Appendix 1**

**Survey questions**

1. Select the country your library is located in from the drop-down list: (Survey Monkey list of world countries.)

2. Indicate below the number of full-time equivalent staff that work in your library:
   - 1-5
   - 6-10
   - 11-25
   - 26-100
   - 100+

3. Select the number of professional librarians assigned to your interlibrary loan department from the drop-down list below: (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10+)

4. Select your type of library from the drop-down list below:
   - Academic.
   - Government.
   - Hospital.
   - Public.
   - School.
   - Special.
   - Other (please specify).

5. Indicate below the highest level of education provided at your institutions:
   - Two-year diploma/degree.
   - Four-year degree.
   - Master’s degree.
   - Doctoral/Medical degree.
   - Other (please specify).

6. Indicate the size of your institution in terms of full-time equivalent (FTE) number of students:
   - Up to 5,000 FTE.
   - 5,000-10,000 FTE.
   - 10,000-20,000 FTE.
   - Greater than 20,000 FTE.

7. Check all types of requested items you may fill through purchasing, rather than borrowing the item from another library:
   - Books.
   - Dissertations.
   - Articles (pay-per-view or document provider).
   - DVDs, CDs, other media.
   - We don’t purchase any items requested through ILL.
   - Other (please specify).

8. Check all methods below that resemble how you decide what to buy versus what to borrow from another library:
   - We have a set of criteria (such as language, year published, content, available from a certain vendor, etc.)
We determine which method is cheaper and go with the cheaper method.
We determine which method is faster and go with the faster method.
We will purchase the item if the only alternative is to cancel the request.
Other (please specify).

9 Check all staff responsible for purchasing your items requested as an interlibrary loan request:
Acquisitions staff.
Collections staff.
ILL staff.
Reference staff.
Other (please specify).

10 Indicate below the number of ILL-requested books you purchase on average per year:
• 0
• 1-50
• 51-100
• 101-150
• 150+

11 Indicate below the number of ILL-requested articles you purchase (e.g. pay-per-view, document provider, etc.) on average, per year:
• 0
• 1-50
• 51-100
• 101-150
• 150+

12 Indicate below how large your current budget is for purchasing items requested through interlibrary loan:
No budget is allocated.
Less than $1,000.
$1,000-$2,500.
$2,501-$5,000.
More than $5,000.

13 Select all impediments to expanding your service of purchasing requested items:
We do not need to expand this service.
Lack of additional funds.
Copyright fees.
Purchasing is slower.
Purchasing requires too much staff time.
Difficulties incorporating purchasing into traditional ILL workflow.
Other (please specify).

14 Select the statement(s) below that indicate whether you fill interlibrary loan requests through renting/purchasing short-term access:
We rent/purchase short-term access to e-articles.
We rent/purchase short-term access to e-books.
We don’t rent/purchase short-term access to e-articles or e-books.

15 Does your interlibrary loan request form provide an option for your patrons to indicate whether the item should be purchased and added to your collection?

16 Select below all statements that apply in terms of filling interlibrary loan requests from your own patrons when you own the material:
We cancel the request, and provide directions to the patron on how to obtain the item from the collection.
We place a hold on the item in our local collection for the patron.
We deliver a chapter or article scanned from a print copy in our local collection directly to our patron.
We deliver an article from our licensed databases directly to our patron.
Other (please specify).

17 Indicate below which alternative/free sources you use to fill ILL requests:
We don’t fill requests from freely available online resources.
General Google Search/Discovery.
Internet Archive.
Hathi Trust.
Digital Public Library of America.
Other (please specify).

18 Indicate below how many ILL-requested articles you provide using these methods on average per year:
• 0
• 1-50
• 51-100
• 101-150
• 150+

19 Indicate below how you would rate the competency level of your staff to utilize alternative and free online sources to fill interlibrary loan requests:
Highly competent.
Competent.
Not having the necessary skills to be competent.
Staff have a mixture of competency levels in this area.

20 If there is anything that you would like to share that we haven’t asked about, please feel free to share your comments in the box below.

Appendix 2. Email soliciting participants
This survey is intended to be filled out by the interlibrary loan manager of your library. Please forward this survey to the correct individual, if you are not the manager for your interlibrary loan operations.
We invite you to participate in our research on interlibrary loan practices by completing the following linked survey: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/DeJongNanceSurvey
The survey consists of a maximum of 20 questions and it will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete the survey. We kindly ask that you complete the survey by July 31, 2013.
This survey is being carried out by CJ de Jong (University of Alberta) and Heidi Nance (University of Washington). The purpose of this international survey is to gather information on current practices in interlibrary loan departments from a wide range of libraries to inform the library community on how the interlibrary loan landscape is changing. Please contact us with any questions or comments about the survey.

Many thanks in advance for your time to complete the survey.

— CJ de Jong & Heidi Nance

**Corresponding author**

CJ de Jong can be contacted at: cj.dejong@ualberta.ca

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