EVA (ErwerbungsVorschlags-Assistent) assists in collection building! Using ILL data for patron-driven acquisition

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe the “ErwerbungsVorschlags-Assistent” (EVA), its underlying concepts and first usage statistics and experiences at the University Library of Duisburg-Essen, and explore its methodology of patron driven acquisition in regard to printed material, specifically interlibrary loan requests.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors use a case study approach, describing the effects of the new system on existing ILL workflows and collection development decision-making.

Findings – EVA has been in production in several German university libraries since October 2011. ILL requests are automatically compared to specific criteria in regard to their suitability as an acquisition, enriched with external data, and presented to the appropriate subject librarian.

Originality/value – This paper was originally presented at the 2012 IFLA World Library and Information Congress in Helsinki, Finland, session 139, “Treating print in an increasingly digital collection: issues, dilemmas, and directions”, 14 August 2012. ILL, collection development, and ILL system developers will find the content useful.

Keywords Germany, Interlibrary loan, Collection development, EVA, North Rhine-Westphalian Library Consortium, University Library of Duisburg-Essen

Paper type Case study

1. Motivation

Interlibrary loans that originate at the local institution can highlight deficits in its holdings.

This seemingly mundane assertion stood at the beginning of our project. Before the automation of interlibrary loan (ILL) processes in Germany this data was collected and put to use. At that time every request was reviewed by a subject librarian, who then made the decision either to buy the requested title or to let the interlibrary loan request go through.

This step was abolished in 2002 during the course of establishing new discovery interfaces which allowed direct unmediated ordering by end users. The new workflow allowed for a dramatic decrease in delivery time and increased the service quality for the patrons. However, the subject librarians were cut off from important data that could aid local collection development.

EVA, or “ErwerbungsVorschlags-Assistent” (Purchasing Recommendations Assistant) is a new tool to aid patron driven acquisition of analogue material without having a negative effect on the high service quality of interlibrary loan.

The aim of this project is to automatically filter interlibrary loan requests by a range of criteria. Requests for titles that might be considered for acquisition are presented to the respective subject librarian and she/he can decide if the request should go through ILL or if a purchase is the better option.

The presented model is integrated in the infrastructure of the North Rhine-Westphalian library system for ILL and is an optional add-on for its participating libraries. However, EVA’s modular build also allows the re-use of certain components in differing infrastructures (currently EVA is being evaluated by the regional library system of Baden-Württemberg, for example).

2. Opportunity

This project started in 2010 in the context of the extra-occupational degree program “Master in Library and Information Science” at the University of Applied Science of Cologne. In this course, a project with a workload of 240 hours is required.

A big opportunity of this setting was the collaboration between different institutions, so the expertise of subject
The following basic concepts were relevant for designing the interlibrary loan systems of the North Rhine-Westphalian Library Service Centre hbz[2] could be applied. At the end of the project a prototype of the proposed EVA-system could be presented which then was transformed into a regular service of the Library Service Centre.

3. Preliminary stages

3.1 State of the art in Germany

The following similar methods have been researched as part of the project.

3.1.1 Subsequent use of interlibrary loan data in acquisitions

In some libraries of the North Rhine-Westphalian library network, ILL data is used subsequently for acquisition purposes. After an order has taken place, the corresponding bibliographic data is sent to the subject librarian at the local libraries via email. The recipient is a mailing list and since no differentiation of subjects is possible, each subject librarian gets notified of all orders (even beyond his/her subject area).

Another subsequent use of ILL data for acquisition purposes is provided centrally by the Bavarian Library Network. Every ILL request is written to a separate database and the data is enriched with additional bibliographical data or the number of multiple ILL requests for the same book. This information can be queried by the Bavarian libraries. Various filters (e.g. subject of title, time frame) aid this analysis. This analysis provides valuable information for purchase decisions.

3.1.2 Purchase request form in the local discovery system

The “Digitale Bibliothek”[3] is a popular discovery interface operated by the hbz and used by over 200 public and academic libraries in Germany and Austria. Since the last release it is possible to integrate a purchase request form for selected views. The form is submitted to the relevant library and, at best, an ILL request is avoided.

In practice, both methods have certain weaknesses. In the first case, ILL data is only analysed after the order has taken place, so the purchase and the ILL request may happen in parallel. In the second case, the patron decides if an ILL order should go through and not the subject librarian.

3.2 Concept and work flows

The following basic concepts were relevant for designing the workflows:

- “Unnecessary” ILL orders should be avoided. Only ILL requests for titles that could form a relevant addition of the local collection and that can be procured within an acceptable time frame should be intercepted.
- Subject librarians should be able to make ILL order decisions fast and conveniently. A web interface should present simple and effective means to deal with potential purchases in order to avoid an unnecessary increase in the duration of request fulfillment.
- The final product should be applicable to other libraries and library systems. The basic concepts were developed in collaboration with the University Library of Duisburg-Essen. However, the resulting project should be generally applicable to the libraries within the hbz network and certain modules should be even reusable in other infrastructures.

In order to satisfy such a general approach, two basic work flows have been developed: on the one hand the “standard work flow”, which includes the option to halt ILL requests for a certain time until a decision is made; on the other hand an “alternative mode”, in which order data is only stored in parallel to the normal ILL work flow. This mode allows also the participation of libraries which do not have procedures for “fast track purchases” in place.

3.2.1 Standard workflow

Figure 1 illustrates the “standard workflow”: A subject classification is stored for every local library view in the discovery system. The subjects are oriented after the faculties at the respective institution/university. For every subject a “waiting period” is defined, which determines if and – where required – for how long a potential ILL order is held for review by the subject librarian.

If an order request meets the general criteria (e.g. ISBN is present and availability in the book trade is given) and institution-specific criteria (e.g. specific language, date of publication > X), the patron is presented with the subjects form in order to classify the title in question. After the order form is submitted the system handles the request in one of two possible ways:

1. The waiting period for the selected subject is 0. In that case the ILL order is placed immediately and the bibliographic data is stored in parallel in the EVA module.
2. The waiting period for the selected subject is greater than 0. If a waiting period is defined, then no ILL order is placed, and only the purchase request is created. The patron is informed about the procedure and is presented a tracking number (with an “EVA:” prefix in order to differentiate from “normal” ILL request numbers, see Figure 2).

The purchase request is then also listed under this number in the patron’s account. The subject librarians can process the incoming requests in a password protected web interface (see also section 4.2).

3.2.2 Alternative mode

Figure 3 illustrates an “alternative mode” to the standard workflow. In this version the regular ILL order flow is not interrupted and patrons may only notice the new system when they are asked — if the criteria are met — to classify their request.

However, in parallel to the ILL work flow the request data is also stored in the EVA system and the subject librarians get notified about new requests that may be useful for collection development.

Even if no ILL orders are directly converted into purchase requests, this method still offers considerable improvement over the simple mail notifications mentioned in 3.1.1, since subject librarians are only notified about relevant titles (e.g. available in the book trade) in their respective subjects.

4. Results

The result of the original project was a working prototype that included three modules:

1. automatic analysis of ILL requests with regard to their suitability as purchase request;
2. a web interface for subject librarians in order to process requests; and
3. a tracking module for patrons.
4.1 Automatic analysis of ILL requests

Orders, which may be suitable as purchase requests are filtered out from the pool of ILL requests. During the first step mainly formal criteria are checked. For example, availability in the book trade is such an important criterion. This requires the existence of an ISBN which is used for querying the appropriate API (in this case an Amazon web service).

Another important criterion is the date of publication, since only recent literature should be acquired. Each institution can either define a specific cut-off date or a “moving wall”.

Figure 1 Standard workflow

Figure 2 Result page after a successful order. At the bottom the patron is informed that his request is being processed by the Library in order to decide if the title in question may be purchased.
A recently added criterion is the language of the titles, as determined by the group identifier of the ISBN. This allows the participating library amongst others to only consider titles in their local language, which may be procured faster than foreign literature.

4.2 Web interface for subject librarians

Each subject librarian should be able to process their respective orders easily and to speedily make the decision between a purchase or the continuation of the ILL order. Figure 4 shows the web interface for subject librarians. Requests can be exported via email or CSV-file or forwarded to the ILL system. Librarians are also able to check back with the patrons if they have further questions. In addition, various options for customisation exist, e.g. for assigning substitute librarians, changing notification options, email addresses, etc.

4.3 Tracking module

Depending on its configuration, EVA changes the way patrons perceive the ordering of non-local material. In that case it is highly important to keep the patron informed about the current status of his/her request.

Therefore a tracking module was developed which is integrated in the patron’s ILL account.

5. EVA in practice

On 30 September 2011 EVA went into production. As of May 2013, 24 libraries use this system, e.g. the University Libraries...
of Duisburg-Essen and Bielefeld, or the libraries of the Universities of Applied Science of Münster and Aachen.

In general, approximately 30 per cent of ILL requests meet the criteria and get routed into the EVA module. This rate is obviously highly dependent on the selected value for the minimum date of publication, e.g. one institution selected a minimum year of 1982 which led to 64 per cent conversion rate, another institution selected 2009 and got a figure of 17 per cent.

Of the 24 participating libraries, 13 use the “alternative mode”, i.e. EVA purchase suggestions are only created in parallel to the normal ILL work flow and used only afterwards for collection development. In most cases this decision was made because of the absence of “fast track purchase” procedures. Without such procedures in place, the purchase and processing of titles would take longer than standard ILL requests.

For libraries the most important motivation for the deployment of EVA relies on the general tendency to reduce ILL requests because of personnel costs. EVA is seen as an instrument to avoid unnecessary ILL requests and as a tool which creates useful acquisition recommendations via consideration of patron needs.

Additionally, a deeper integration between ILL and acquisition processes emerged: in some cases titles that could not – in the end – be procured via ILL had already been purchased as an EVA suggestion. Since the acquisition notice is displayed within the ILL system to the librarian, she or he can then inform the patron of the local holdings.

So it is important to note that acquisitions and interlibrary loan are not seen as competitors, but as two tools towards the common goal of providing information to our patrons.

5.1 Statistical evaluation at the University Library of Duisburg-Essen

The University Library of Duisburg-Essen evaluated the usage of EVA for the year 2012, in order to examine the influence on the purchasing process as a whole.

During 2012, a total of 33,925 ILL requests were made by library patrons. The institutional criteria were set to a publication date of 2000. This threshold resulted in 13,321 EVA proposals, which amounts to 39.3 per cent of all ILL requests. The distribution across subjects – as chosen by the patrons – is shown in Table I. The subject list corresponds to the distributions of the faculties at the University of Duisburg-Essen and subsequently to the subject librarians.

Of the 13,321 EVA proposals a total of 1,975 requests of book titles were purchased, altogether 2,167 items. Of the 1,975 purchased requests, 614 were in a later step converted back to an ILL request because the library acquisition department expected long delivery times (e.g. in the case of foreign literature).

That means, that in total 1,361 EVA-only purchases were carried out and a decrease of ILL numbers.

Additionally, 370 ILL requests were cancelled using the EVA Web Interface, especially due to ILL regulations (low-priced literature is excluded from ILL, as well as literature not for scholarly research).

This means that in total 1,731 ILL requests were avoided using EVA.

The usage of the purchased items was also evaluated: 1,226 titles of the total 2,167 were on loan repeatedly by February 2013.

5.2 Summary and future prospects

After the first weeks it was noted by subject librarians of the major subjects (i.e. Economics), that EVA could also operate as an instrument to avoid undesired (e.g. non-scientific) ILL requests. As a result, the possibility to cancel ILL requests within the web interface has been added.

The reactions of the patrons were restrained and only a few mail enquires were received asking about unfamiliar status texts in their ILL accounts. It seems that very few patrons noticed a change in the procedure and in the case of a purchase they were positively surprised.

Subject classification of requests done by the patrons worked surprisingly well, as previously this was one of the greatest uncertainties among subject librarians.
At Duisburg-Essen, the use of EVA for collection development by the subject librarians was not mandated and no quotas for reducing ILL requests were set. The use of EVA was completely voluntary and therefore the intensity of usage varied wildly between subject librarians.

Other factors also contributed to the seemingly low percentage of EVA requests that had been processed by the subject librarians; e.g. closure times on weekends and holidays that exceeded the waiting period.

It’s important to notice that the road to success at the University Library of Duisburg-Essen results especially from the good collaboration between the acquisition and the ILL department within the library. The goal is to provide the patrons with the wanted literature and, in the case of a purchase decision, to do so without imposing long waiting periods. This is the reason why the library decided to reactivate in parallel ILL requests in the cases where long delivery times (from the book trade market) were expected.

As seen by the numbers, EVA does not replace the expertise of subject librarians or other instruments of collection development. But nonetheless it can be a significant additional tool for patron driven acquisition by harnessing the existing data about our patrons’ needs that comes to light via their ILL requests.

Notes

1 The web site of the University Library of Duisburg-Essen can be found at: www.uni-due.de/ub (German) or www.uni-due.de/ub/en/eindex.shtml (English).
2 More information about the North Rhine-Westphalian Library Service Centre hbz, or Hochschulbibliothekszentrum, can be found at: www.hbz-nrw.de (in German).
3 The Digitale Bibliothek, or DigiBib, web site is at: www.digibib.net (German) or www.digibib.net/session/genlogin?LOCATION=EXTERN&LANGUAGE=en (English).

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