Andrew Shuping

The modern interlibrary loan office
Channeling Holmes, MacGyver, and Neo

What do you think of when you think of interlibrary loan (ILL)? The office located in the basement and buried under massive stacks of paper? Or someone who functions like a combination of Sherlock Holmes, MacGyver, and Neo? It may surprise you to learn that these days the latter description is more accurate. The world of ILL has changed drastically in the last several years.

Just a few years ago, ILL offices used to be common across the library landscape. Almost every library had one, because how could a library survive without one? Libraries cannot own everything or even subscribe to everything, so ILL was the saving grace of many a harried student or faculty member trying to complete his or her research.

ILL staff often had backgrounds in cataloging because it allowed them to search the OCLC system, faster and better than anyone else, to find the right record to request from. And the office? The office was often covered in paperwork and filing cabinets. Paper was needed to keep track of what was out, what was in and still waiting on arriving, and copyright files were often written on postcards to keep track of what needed to be paid for.

Today, though, the ILL landscape is drastically different. Like many places in the library, the ILL office has to do more with less. Where just a few years ago there

used to be one person dedicated to just ILL (and sometimes two), there is now one person split among two or sometimes three different areas. Student assistants are more prevalent and do more of the day-to-day work to get things in, out, and processed quickly. The skill set has changed to one where technological and managerial skills are more helpful than cataloging experience, as searching OCLC has gotten easier. The only thing that has stayed the same? Needing the skills of Sherlock Holmes to find materials, although he has now also been joined by MacGyver and Neo.

I think Sherlock Holmes would be impressed with the deduction skills of many ILL staff. Who else can track down a citation of a book when all you know is that it was French, published between 1825 and 1925, talked about Chaucer, and the cover might have been blue . . .or green, depending upon the light?

While all librarians have tracking skills, ILL staff take this to the next level to ensure that they get the precise edition of an item for a patron. Not only do they have to search databases to find these citations, they also have to be able to track down the hidden clues on the web, use old dusty

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tomes, and even resort to pulling out the "bat signal" in the hopes that someone will recognize the clues—all to help fulfill their patron's needs.

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The skills of MacGyver come in handy when treading the treacherous world of copyright. While copyright continues to grow and change (hopefully for the better), ILL still has to operate on standards that were set in the 1970s. ILL workers typically follow the Rule of Five: you can request five articles from the same journal published within the last five years, and then after that you have to pay copyright on it. So like MacGyver, many ILL folks try to put different pieces and bits and bolts together to make things work so they can get what they need for their patrons, without having to cross the dreaded Rule of Five. There are tricks of the trade that are passed down from generation to generation, with new ideas being generated as time passes till that day when copyright payments don't burden an ILL worker ever again.

The skills of Neo are needed to also help manage the technology in the ILL office, ranging from scanners to cloud-based databases to just making sure the computer functions on a daily basis. This is becoming more important as ILL operations are moving to the cloud and require some careful maneuvering to make sure the department stays running.

The modern ILL office may be running an ILL management system, such as ILLiad or Clio, to help with the processing of requests and keeping statistics. While these systems are a great deal of help in the daily workflow, they often require updating, tweaking, and coding to make sure that everything is maintained and operating the right way. While IT could help do these things, ILL staff often know exactly what they want. (It is much easier to do it yourself than to try to describe it to someone else.)

ILL staff also have to juggle budgeting and collection development skills to get the job done. With the "do more with less" phenomenon becoming more prominent, ILL staff have to bear a burden of knowing just how long to spend on looking for an item (time is money, after all), when to pay for an item, or when to just buy the material for the collection. It is a complicated set of skills to juggle on a daily basis.

The biggest talent of all for the ILL world is communication skills. It is true that ILL staff work with citations all day, but they also have to be able to communicate effectively with other libraries in the search for obscure clues or even to tease clues out of their own patrons. Modern ILL staff have to deal with bill collectors, both in house and with other libraries. They have to be able to communicate effectively with vendors and tech support to help maintain the software and equipment used in running the department. Hopefully you will get a good vendor that will work with you and be honest.

It is taking a new breed of librarian to transform and grow the world of ILL for the next generation of library users. Sherlock, Neo, and MacGyver would be proud of the skills that ILL staff have to make things happen in this modern world. And they would be excited to see what comes next.

Acknowledgement