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# Secure electronic delivery: 'get the world's knowledge with less waiting'

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Napier University Learning Information Services' (NULIS) move from the conventional mode of document delivery to Secure Electronic Delivery (SED) was prompted by a letter in March 2005 from the British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC) offering access to the 'world's knowledge' delivered to the desktop within 24 hours. The British Library acknowledged that the number of document supply requests has reduced significantly, due in part to the growth of e-resources available via the 'big deals.' The move to electronic delivery would enable them to make efficiencies and keep costs down for libraries; we couldn't resist.

Fifteen months on and the system has bedded down enough to enable us to reflect on our experience and draw some conclusions on the efficacy of it from both a user and a library perspective. Given the number of requests involved, the consensus was that we should face the challenge head on and process all requests electronically rather than trial the service with a selected user group<sup>1</sup>. However, this approach raised a concern that a particular user group might be disadvantaged and it was difficult, in the abstract, to predict who this would be or where this difficulty would occur. Therefore, in order to protect both the user and the library, we issued SED instructions to students and staff with a caveat: the new method of document delivery was our 'preferred' default option, but if any user experienced difficulty, we could revert to the old system of requesting the BLDSC to print and post articles directly to the user. In practice, if a problem occurs the solution is often a hybrid of both: the member of staff opens the electronic document and if necessary prints it out. One obvious change is that users now incur

the cost of printing and not the library. We have found, as in many other areas of learning information services, user experience and expectation is changing and printing out the document has not hitherto proved to be a problem.

As acknowledged in a recent article, 'ILL staff do not have the expertise to solve IT-related problems' and we did indeed encounter technical difficulties during set up of the new system<sup>2</sup>. We were assured by our IT department that all student PCs were compatible and complied with the British Library request that they have Adobe reader version 6.0 or above. However, we were not aware that in order to activate the Digital Rights Management function automatically and to ensure the seamless loading of the document (after the obligatory test document is run) it is necessary not only to have 6.01, but to have the enhanced version of 6.01 – we now know there is one! As predicted, for the majority of our users it was indeed seamless but since students are not permitted to download software, the group using student PCs without the correct version of Adobe encountered difficulties opening their documents. A programme of re-imaging last summer ensured that all computers complied with Adobe Reader version 7 which has now resolved any technical difficulties in that area. On reflection there is an argument for the BLDSC to deal with institutional IT departments direct when libraries encounter purely technical problems.

Whilst conceding that staff may be challenged by IT related matters, they have on the other hand had to master a new and quite different set of skills from those required to operate the traditional service. If the document fails to open, staff troubleshoot to identify the problem, and then decide whether it can be resolved by the department or referred to another party, and to whom: is the problem at the BLDSC end or is it local to the university? Staff must then take on the role of intermediary between the BLDSC and the institutional IT department whilst all the time offering reassurance to the end user.

Many of our readers are delighted with the speed and efficiency of the service and it is of particular benefit to distance learners. We do nevertheless acknowledge that some readers experience unexpected and inexplicable failures, even after having encountered no previous problems. It is of little comfort to the one user unable to access his or her document that 98% work with no difficulty. It is our view that crucial to the success or failure of SED is an element of human intervention as

standard practice. At worst, staff involvement means identifying problems, talking the user through it and if necessary contacting IT. At best, it involves keeping a wary eye on the process and only intervening if necessary. There is anecdotal evidence that reader confidence in SED can be fragile so, in addition, staff offer reassurance that the system works and ensure that users feel comfortable enough with it to continue. In a large institution with few dedicated staff we acknowledge that it may not be possible to resource this level of support, but we at Napier University feel that our approach helps maintain a high quality of service. In addition, users are reminded of their responsibilities in the process: to always check their university email; to be aware of the 14 day time period; to clear out their folders and files; and not to order a document before going off on holiday. Staff monitor 'out of office' messages and if necessary intervene so in effect we offer a customised service. Taking the long view, there may come a time when SED becomes the norm and we will be able to be more hands-off.

In conclusion we are confident that it was right and timely to accept the BLDSC's challenge but acknowledge that the number of requests we process and being a medium size organisation are contributory to NULIS' successful implementation of SED. Our next challenge is to operate the whole of the document supply service through the Aleph library management system. We recommend any library thinking of implementing SED to go ahead but be prepared for interesting times.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Total of 1166 of which 852 were delivered via SED for the period April 2005 to May 2006 (one member of staff assigned to ILL duties)
- 2 Lobban, Marjory, 'ILL, a dying breed or a brand new? The experience of Edinburgh University' *Interlending & document supply*, 2006, 34, p15-20