

Managing without a subscription agent: the experience of doing it yourself

In October 2015 Stockholm University Library (SUB) decided to no longer use the services of a subscription agent for managing individual journal subscriptions. Instead, SUB has taken a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to subscriptions management and now renews and orders new journals directly from each publisher. In the light of two years of experience, this article discusses the key findings of this new way of working with subscriptions, the differences between the first and second year of renewing directly with publishers and the pros and cons of not using an agent. The article ends with a few recommendations and things for other libraries to consider before making the decision to do without a subscription agent and explains why SUB has decided to continue with the DIY approach.

Based on a breakout session presented at the 40th UKSG Annual Conference, Harrogate, April 2017

Introduction

Stockholm University Library (SUB) serves the needs of more than 64,000 students, 1,700 doctoral students and 5,000 staff active in the disciplines of science, humanities and social sciences. SUB has a patron-driven acquisition (PDA) policy, where the speedy provision of requested resources is vital.¹

The portfolio of individual journal subscriptions is flexible. New journals are continuously added when suggested by SUB's patrons and during the renewal period journals with low usage are cancelled. On average, about 70 new subscriptions (electronic and print) are ordered each year and at the end of the year there are about 350 subscriptions to consider for renewal. The majority of journals are e-journals. Money spent on individual journal subscriptions usually accounts for about 4% of the total media budget or just over €200,000 per year. In addition to this, SUB administrates the renewals of the Department of Mathematics' 140 print subscriptions.

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Quick access to requested journals

By ordering journals directly from publishers, SUB has significantly shortened the time between suggested purchase and online access. Data from 86 new e-journals ordered directly from publishers show that the average number of days between ordering and confirmed access is 25, where the median number is 21 days. In a few cases, access was activated only hours after ordering. The corresponding number of days when ordering new e-journals formerly through the agent was an average of 76 days, a median of 48 days, with the shortest time being ten days. These data are based on 109 e-journals ordered through



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63 the agent. Considering SUB's PDA policy with its explicit goal of providing requested resources as quickly as possible, these findings are of vital importance.

The number of days from ordering until access on the platform is illustrated in Figure 1.

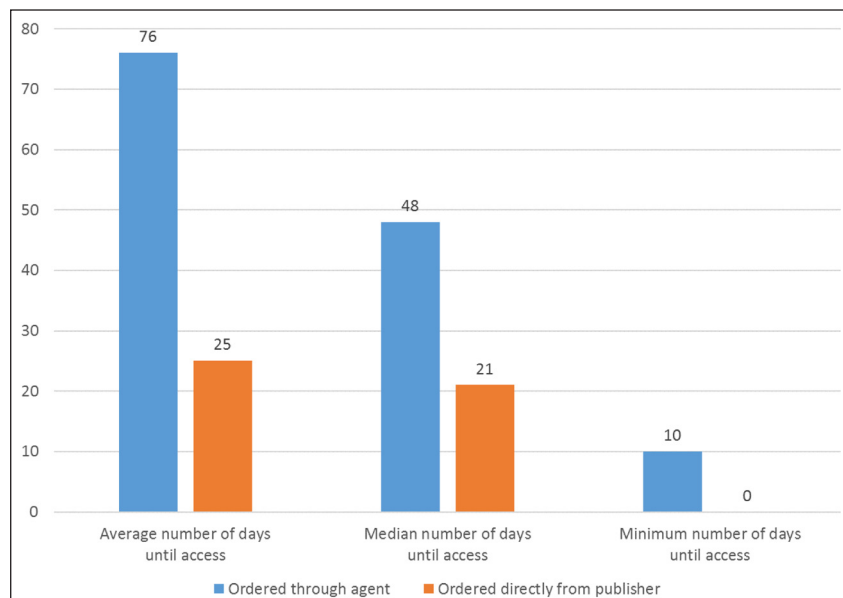


Figure 1. Comparison of the time taken (number of days from ordering until access on the platform at SUB) when ordered through the agent and directly from the publisher

Administrative tools

At SUB the main administrative tool for managing the subscriptions is Excel. All necessary information about current subscriptions and publishers is kept in one main spreadsheet, shared in the cloud. The spreadsheet is continuously updated, especially during the renewal season, with information like subscription rates, dates for when renewal requests or reminders have been sent, when invoices have been received, invoice numbers and notes regarding individual titles or publishers. For the first quarter of the year, usage statistics from the previous calendar year are collected, downloads per title are registered and cost per download calculated for each title. Newly ordered journals are monitored in a separate spreadsheet before being added to the main file, when invoices are paid and access on the platform is confirmed.

In addition to Excel, SUB's shared case management system (OTRS/Ticket) is used for contacting publishers and keeping track of each subscription or 'case'. This is to make the process more transparent and less dependent on individuals. Templates have been made to streamline the process of contacting publishers regarding renewals and new subscriptions.

Prices and cost savings

In the first year without an agent, a subscription price comparison between the former agent's prices and the individual publishers' prices was made. Comparable price data were available for 282 of the 321 journals that were to be renewed: subscription prices through the agent from 2015, the agent's estimated prices for 2016 and the respective publishers' prices for 2016. SUB's former agent used local currency, Swedish kronor (SEK), when invoicing. Therefore the price comparison was done in SEK, when final payments to publishers for 2016 had been made.

The value of local currency and exchange rates have an impact on the amount paid and should be considered when making price comparisons between different years. Prices are also dependent on the pricing conditions of the agreement between the agent and the library. Without revealing the specifics of the expired agreement with SUB's former

64 subscription agent, the publishers' list prices were all to be discounted and no handling charges were to be applied. The comparison shows that in 2016 SUB paid 8% less than in 2015 for the same 282 journals by renewing them directly with the publishers. Considering that the overall effective publisher price increases for 2016 (before currency impact) were projected to be in the range of 4 to 6%,² a total price decrease of 8% is a rather good outcome. If SUB had continued to use the former agent's service, the total estimated amount would have been 6% higher than in 2015.

'in 2016 SUB paid 8% less than in 2015 for the same 282 journals by renewing them directly'

Paying 8% less compared to paying 6% more than the year before and for the same journals is a notable difference and cannot be explained due to currency impact alone, making the final amount in SEK significantly higher in 2015. Considering the agent's discounted prices, the difference between 2015 and 2016 is even more remarkable. In local currency this equals 280,000 SEK (approximately €30,000) saved by renewing directly instead of through the agent in 2016. Additionally one can reflect upon the different outcome between the agent doing the currency conversion before invoicing and the University's bank doing the currency conversion when making payments, as with the case of publishers' invoices in their original currency.

Figure 2 illustrates the changes in the cost of the 282 subscriptions with and without using the services of the agent.

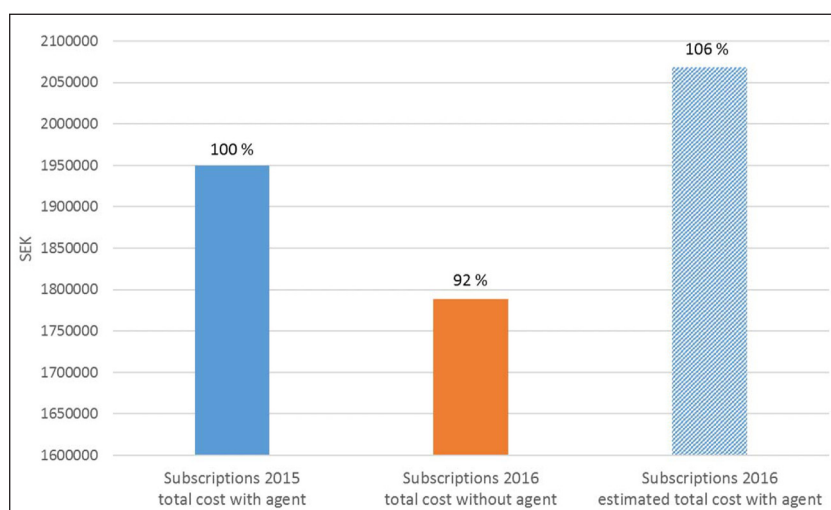


Figure 2. Changes in cost of 282 subscriptions at SUB with and without using the services of the agent

However, the 280,000 SEK saved needs to be set against the extra working hours spent on subscriptions management.

Additional workload

The first year of renewing and ordering directly from publishers meant a quite heavy workload compared to using an agent. During the renewal period of 22 weeks between October 2015 and March 2016, five members of staff (three acquisition librarians and two finance officers) together spent 444 working hours on subscriptions management. Compared to an estimate of 90 working hours (divided between by three members of staff) during the same period the year before, this equals an increase of nearly five times the hours spent. A breakdown of the additional work will be discussed later. However, in the second year of renewing without an agent, the number of working hours dropped to 154 hours. The comparative workloads are illustrated in Figure 3.

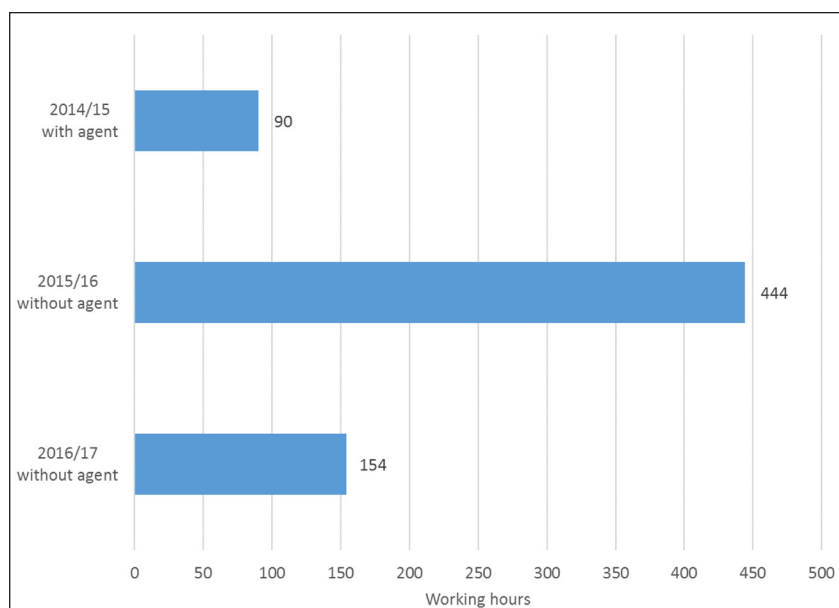


Figure 3. Working hours during the renewal period (22 weeks) at SUB with and without the services of an agent

Taking costs for working hours into account, the total amount saved drops to 175,000 SEK (approximately €20,000). Although time-consuming, DIY subscriptions management proved to be cost-effective. It has not been possible to make a similar price comparison for the second year of renewing directly with publishers as there are no data on the agent's prices to compare with.

The first year of renewing directly with publishers

It was to be expected that renewing by contacting all current publishers instead of using the 'one-stop shop' of an agent's subscription management tool would be time-consuming overall. To compile an Excel spreadsheet of current subscriptions by downloading the data from the agent's tool was fairly quickly done. Gathering contact information and sending e-mails with renewal requests to just over 200 publishers, however, was not. Early in the process it was obvious that the renewals could not be the responsibility of one staff member only. In the Department of Media Acquisition, a working group of three members of staff was formed to manage the subscriptions, one of them leading the group. All publishers were divided between the three members of the working group, with each one responsible for renewing the journals published by their designated publishers.

'Although time-consuming, DIY subscriptions management proved to be cost-effective'

Although many publishers sent an invoice together with payment details within a few weeks, in several cases SUB needed to send a couple of reminders before receiving an invoice. For correct details of the invoice or to obtain information like a publisher's IBAN and bank account number, further e-mails were also sometimes necessary. The frequent use of pro forma invoices, not accepted by the University's finance office, was another complication generating even more e-mails asking the publisher to change to a tax invoice.

Besides sending reminders and requesting additional information or updated invoices, most of the difficulties SUB encountered had to do with making payments. According to the University's regulations, as many as possible of the University's purchases should be invoiced and paid by bank transfer. Quite a few publishers prefer payment by cheque or credit card and in those cases SUB had to ask specifically about making a bank transfer. Since this was not always possible, the number of credit card payments grew and the credit limit had to be increased. In a few cases, the publisher needed the credit card payment to be accompanied by a fax order. Without the means to fax orders, SUB had to complete and print a form with credit card details, signed by the Library Director, and send it to the publisher by regular mail.

66 As for bank transfer payments, due to misunderstandings or lack of information, the small wire fee added to the bank transfer was occasionally not included with payment. This meant an additional invoice had to be generated before the total amount was paid. Finally, publishers have a habit of sending payment notices (reminders), and a number of times a proof of payment had to be obtained from the University's finance office and be sent to the publisher before the payment was acknowledged.

As a consequence of renewing directly with publishers, the workload increased for the staff at SUB's finance unit as well. Besides handling the increased number of payments within the University's finance system, a time-consuming task was to make sure that all the publishers were listed in the system. Nearly 100 new records of publishers not previously available were made and over 200 print invoices and credit card payments were processed. This needs to be compared to the previous year when a few summary invoices from one vendor, the agent, were delivered electronically into the finance system.

Second time around

In the second year of DIY subscriptions management the working hours spent during the renewal period decreased significantly, as mentioned. By then the new way of working with subscriptions had been established, contact information collected, e-mail templates made, all publishers registered in the finance system, there were fewer reminders and long e-mail conversations needed in order to get all the necessary information and details correct, payment methods were known and exceptions like publishers only accepting credit cards and when to add a transfer fee with wire payments had been noted.

'In the second year of DIY subscriptions management the working hours ...decreased significantly'

For the second renewal period, the library staff had also learnt that it was not necessary to do all the renewals as early as possible in the autumn, as they had been used to doing with the agent. Most publishers are eager to maintain their customers, and renewals can be made even as late as February. Subscribing mainly to e-journals, one can benefit from the grace periods, where publishers extend the customer's access two or three months into the next year, giving plenty of time to renew. Even though SUB did send renewal requests to a majority of the current publishers in the second year, by waiting a little longer there was less need for follow-up e-mails with reminders. A lot of renewal requests were received from the publishers instead, and quite a few reminders as well.

There were still about 180 individual invoices and credit card payments to process from nearly as many publishers but, without most of the complications from the previous period, fewer working hours were spent on the task.

Pros and cons of not using a subscription agent

There have proved to be many advantages to the DIY approach. An important aspect for SUB is that ordering new journals directly from publishers shortens the time between order and access on the platform. Less money is spent on individual journal subscriptions, compared to managing the subscriptions through an agent. (At least, this has been the case for SUB.) After managing without an agent through two renewal periods, the staff involved now have better control and overview of the subscriptions and have improved their knowledge regarding subscriptions management, who the publishers are and how they operate, when to renew, the different methods of payment, when to expect to get access when ordering new subscriptions, and more.

Subscription options and yearly list prices are usually available on the publisher's website, or otherwise provided when contacting the publisher. This has led to comparatively greater transparency over costs. SUB pays the institutional list prices with no additional handling charges. Currency conversions are made by the University's bank when making payments, meaning that exchange rates are accurate and not in the hands of the agent, leaving no room for non-contractual exchange rates and unnecessary double currency conversions.

67 When subscribing directly from publishers, there are no benefits of eventual overall price discounts like those sometimes stipulated in an agreement with a subscription agent, but there is the chance to discuss prices directly with the publisher. Subscribing to one or just a few journals may not leave room for negotiation, but with a big deal (or consortia agreement for e-journals) in place there is more leeway to discuss deep discounting for individual print subscriptions. For example, by request, SUB managed to obtain discounted prices for the Department of Mathematics' print subscriptions, where previously they had been paying full list prices through the agent. This process has been successful with all the big publishers concerned, with the exception of Elsevier.

Another aspect of being in direct contact with publishers is that the communication regarding individual subscriptions improves. Issues raised can be solved more quickly and more efficiently when there is no intermediary involved. Getting access to journals that have been ordered is the most illustrative and common example. In SUB's experience, the reason for not having access to a newly ordered journal is often due to the fact that the publisher has not received or acknowledged the payment. When claiming the missing access with the publisher, this is quickly discovered, and SUB's finance officers can check the payment and send a proof of payment directly to the publisher within a day. Or, in the event of an error, make a new, correct payment. When the agent paid the publisher on behalf of the customer, SUB had no control over the payment procedure.

'Issues raised can be solved quicker and more efficiently when there is no intermediary involved'

Of course, there are also disadvantages when not using the services provided by a subscription agent. To sum these up, first and foremost it is a time-consuming task to renew hundreds of journals directly with the publishers, especially in the first year of implementation, as has been shown. Working hours spent on journal subscriptions management increase significantly, not only for the acquisitions librarians, but also for the staff at the finance unit. Renewing and ordering is also much easier with the access of an agent's subscription management tool. With the online tool one can easily mark journals to renew or search for new journals to order and in a few clicks send the order. The tool provides an overview of current, cancelled and newly ordered subscriptions as well as individual records with details for each journal title. Once the yearly renewals are done there is no need to closely monitor the process at the individual publisher or journal level. Finally, invoices can be delivered electronically to the University's finance system and there is a possible choice to receive one or just a few summary invoices instead of hundreds of print invoices in different formats from different publishers, not forgetting the additional payment methods like credit card payments and fax orders.

Why DIY subscriptions management?

There were several interconnected reasons behind SUB's decision to manage without a subscription agent. In October 2015 the agreement with SUB's former agent had expired, and there was no national framework agreement in place. Without an agreement SUB had two options, either to manage without an agent or engage in a time-consuming procurement process for a new agent.

There was little or no hesitation, though. Internally, there had been ongoing discussions about the actual need for a subscription agent. The former agent's level of service and questionable pricing had been a source of dissatisfaction for a long time. Despite having access to a subscription management tool and the agent's customer service, staff responsible for individual subscriptions still needed to monitor the activation of access to e-journals themselves, at times contact publishers, check prices and subscription options and constantly remind the agent about outstanding issues. The Library Director favoured the DIY idea and the staff involved were ready to make the move. Working with the acquisition of e-resources at a big university library, they had the experience of dealing with publishers directly.

'The Library Director favoured the DIY idea and the staff involved were ready to make the move'

68 Recommendations for other libraries considering DIY subscriptions management are to:

- make sure you have the time and the staff for the task, especially during the implementation period as this is the most intense and time-consuming
- involve your colleagues in finance early in the process in order for them to make the necessary preparations for handling all the new vendors, the increased inflow of invoices and dealing with different payment methods
- have the company's credit card ready and, at least during the renewal period, increase the credit limit
- share documents and use existing support systems like the library's ERM or a case management system to facilitate the work and make the subscriptions management transparent and less dependent on individuals.

Having the Library Director on board is of course crucial, and in-house experience of dealing with publishers can ease the transition to DIY subscriptions management, but it is also good to have the support of a legal counsellor in order to facilitate eventual discussions with the University's procurement office. At SUB there is a legal counsellor on the staff.

Conclusion

The intention at SUB is to continue to manage individual journal subscriptions without a subscription agent, the main argument for this being the speed of access when ordering directly from publishers. This was also the primary reason behind the decision to try the DIY approach. Two years later it is obvious that this way of working with subscriptions better fulfils SUB's commitment to the provision of resources as quickly as possible. Adding to the case the decreased working hours spent during year two, better control and overview, transparent prices and lower total costs compared to using an agent, the DIY approach is considered as the most effective way of managing subscriptions at SUB.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing interests

The authors have declared no competing interests.

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