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Outsourcing – measuring the status quo

This article summarizes the results of a short survey completed by 94 publishers, librarians and suppliers within the international scholarly publishing community in early 2017. From a selection of 13 categories included as a multi-choice pick-list, each with additional sub-categories – a total of 57 options – the participants identified the functions they are currently outsourcing and provided a forecast of those they are considering outsourcing in the future. The survey found the top sub-category function currently outsourced across all three stakeholder groups to be 'Content hosting/technology platform' (one of seven sub-categories associated under the parent category 6: 'IT – Hosting/content'), which was selected by a total of 18 survey respondents. The survey provided new insights into the issue of outsourcing in the scholarly communications field, and the author invites further participation to build on these initial findings.

This article highlights the different functions that publishers, librarians, suppliers and other intermediaries across scholarly publishing are currently outsourcing, based on the results of a survey conducted at the beginning of 2017.[1]

Outsourcing in this context involves the contracting out of a business process, operation and/or non-core functions (e.g. library management systems, copy-editing, peer-review system, payroll preparation, information technology [IT] services, technology management, etc.). The term outsourcing should not be confused with the term offshoring, which refers to outsourcing a function to a supplier who is based in a distant country, the opposite term being nearshoring, meaning to transfer the outsourcing of a function to a supplier who is based locally to your organization or within a nearby region or country. You may for example outsource your proofreading to a supplier based in India and outsource your cataloguing to a supplier based in your own country. The survey undertaken did not seek to identify the outsource suppliers used or their location.

'Outsourcing – Measuring the Status Quo' was the name given to the survey, created using a basic version of the web-based survey tool, SurveyMonkey, and later updated to a standard plan in order to be able to export the results in various formats. The standard plan allowed for the results for each independent stakeholder group to be downloaded separately in addition to the combined results of all respondents. The five question summaries and data trends for the survey are available for view.[2] The open-ended question responses and individual responses are not included here as the former includes personal e-mail addresses in response to question five and the latter includes the respondents' IP addresses. The survey undertaken was anonymous, and permission has not been granted to enable sharing of this additional data.

In addition to highlighting the status quo of outsourcing, the survey has been used to forecast which functions organizations are currently considering outsourcing. Social media (LinkedIn and Twitter) and an e-mail invitation sent to the members of the UKSG lis-e-resources group were the media of choice used to promote the survey to contacts within the international scholarly publishing community.
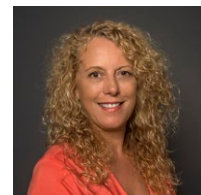
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'the survey has been used to forecast which functions organizations are currently considering outsourcing'

The topic of outsourcing is one that the author has been discussing with the scholarly publishing community for several months through publisher interviews and speaker opportunities at industry events. The survey came about as a result of a lack of current information being available about the key functions outsourced across the community. When preparing for a recent workshop held during the Researcher to Reader (R2R) 2017 Conference in London, the answer to a basic question 'What is the status quo of outsourcing across the scholarly publishing community?' could not be found. Whilst searching for an answer to this question, a comprehensive survey report containing outsourcing-related statistics, Deloitte's 2016 Global Outsourcing Survey, was identified.[3] The Deloitte survey was completed in January 2016 and was composed of 70+ questions covering the entirety of the outsourcing lifecycle and market trends. This is a comprehensive survey in comparison to the brief survey discussed here, but it is not specific to scholarly publishing and did not answer the question sought. However, reading the Deloitte survey report led to an assumption that once the status quo of outsourcing had been measured, some of the questions asked in the Deloitte survey report could be considered for inclusion in a further comprehensive survey designed for completion by the scholarly publishing community, and its findings could be used as a valuable and credible bench-mark when comparing responses. This assumption is the main reason for the inclusion of question 5 of the survey discussed in this article, which invites participation in a future survey. The intention is to work with a representative group of key stakeholders within the international scholarly publishing community to help develop and promote this planned additional survey.

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One of the findings of Deloitte's report[4] resonated with the feedback received during the R2R 2017 Conference 'outsourcing challenges' workshop.[5] The discussion took place around the key risk associated with the request for proposal (RFP) process:

'The lack of potential for innovation and lack of knowledge about other processes. A possible alternative to the RFP process is the "design thinking" approach to ensure better outcomes, cost savings and to help differentiate between suppliers. The aim is to create beneficial outcomes by focusing on the customer journey. It requires logic, systematic reasoning and intuition to explore the possibilities.'

Deloitte's Doug Plotkin states, 'Outsourcing is reinventing itself. Respondents increasingly see outsourcing as a vital way to drive innovation into the enterprise. In other words, it is increasingly a means of potentially attaining, and maintaining competitive advantage – and not just a way to cut costs.'

Survey respondents

The five survey questions were:

1. In which country do you work?

2. To which stakeholder group in the publishing community do you belong?

3. Which functions do you currently outsource?

4. Which functions are you considering outsourcing?

5. If you would like to participate in a future survey please provide your email details below.

Q1. In which country do you work?

The majority of responses – 55.3% (52) – came from those working in the UK, followed by 14.9% (14) in the US and Canada, 14.9% (14) in Europe, 13.9% (13) in Asia Pacific and 1% (1) in South Africa. Having removed any incomplete responses, the total number of individuals completing the survey totalled 94.

Q2. To which stakeholder group in the publishing community do you belong?

The majority of responses came from publishers, closely followed by librarians and then suppliers, with these three groups making up 87 of the total respondents. The additional seven participants who selected 'Other' identified themselves using the following descriptions: Technology & Consultancy Provider, Typesetter, Consulting Group, Technology Firm and Investor, University Major, Not-For-Profit Tech Start-Up and Editor. All, apart from the University Major, could have selected the 'supplier' option. However, no edits have been made to the results of the survey to reflect this fact. (See Figure 1.)

Outsourcing

In order to measure the status quo of outsourcing, 13 categories were added as a multi-choice pick-list, each with additional relevant sub-categories to choose from: a combined total of 57 options. The same day that the survey was sent out to lis-e-resources a few additional sub-categories were quickly added as suggested by a couple of helpful librarians. The total number of sub-categories is shown in brackets in the category summary. (See Table 1.)
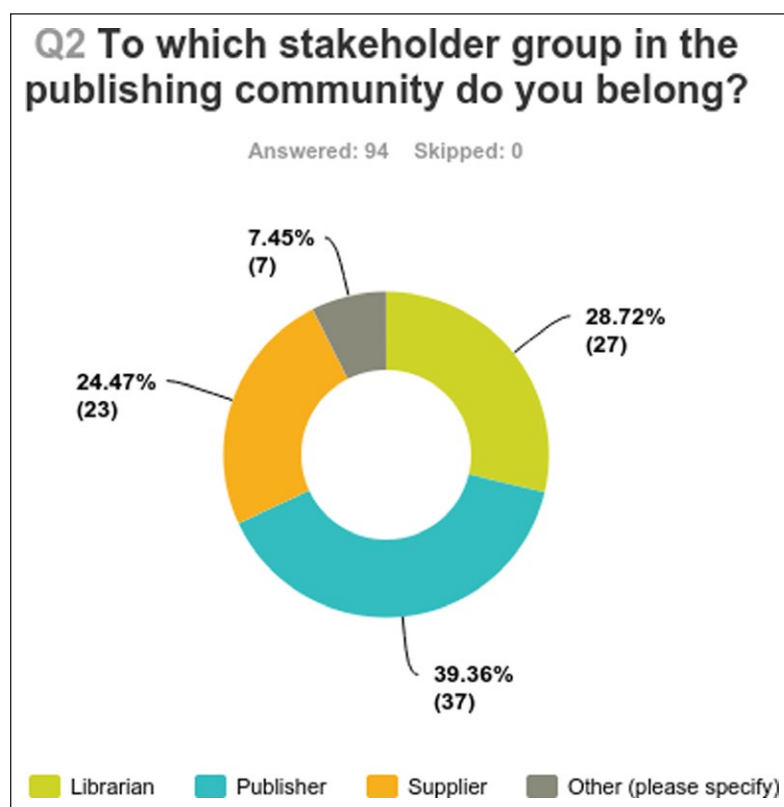

Figure 1. The proportion of respondents from each stakeholder group

1. Accountancy (2)	8. Library services (4)
2. Business Development (2)	9. Marketing (3)
3. Content Management (7)	10. Peer Review (1)
4. HR (3)	11. Production (3)
5. IT – Data (3)	12. Sales (2)
6. IT – Hosting/content (7)	13. Subscription management (1)
7. IT – Services (6)	Other

Table 1. Categories of outsourcing (with numbers of sub-categories in brackets)

Q3. Which functions do you currently outsource?

The top five functions currently outsourced across all three stakeholder groups (publishers, librarians and suppliers) but not including 'Other' are shown in Figure 2. The top five functions outsourced by librarians are shown in Figure 3, by publishers in Figure 4 and by suppliers in Figure 5.
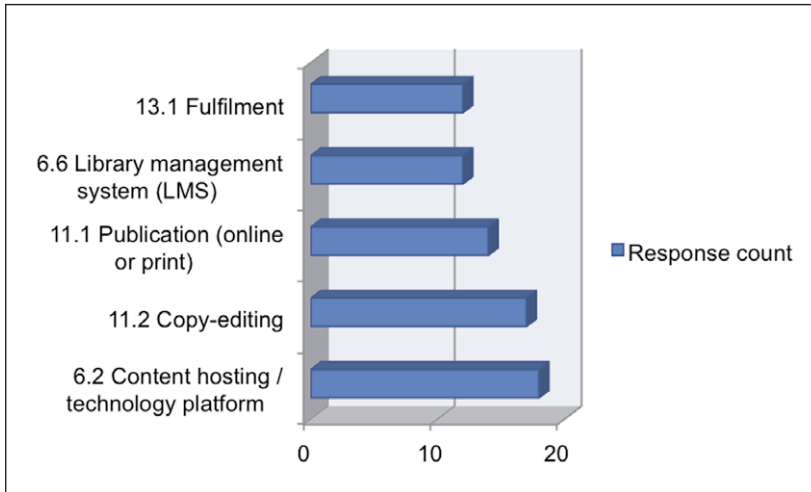

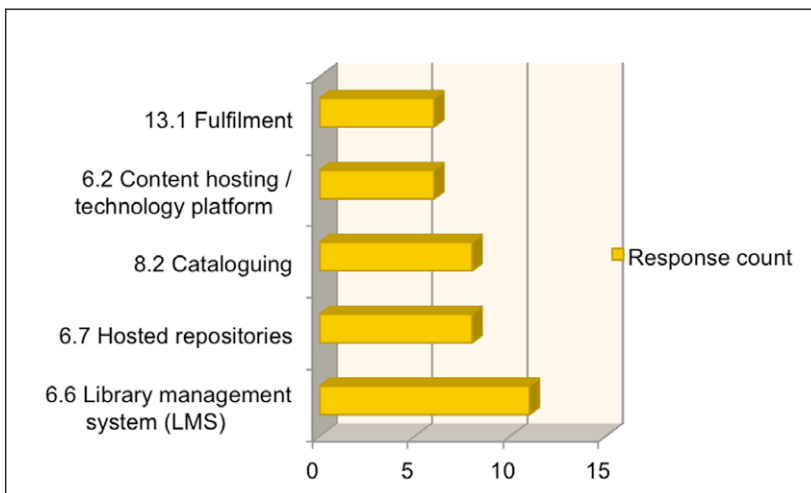Figure 2. Top five functions outsourced across all three stakeholder groups (publishers, librarians and suppliers)

Figure 3. Top five functions outsourced by librarians
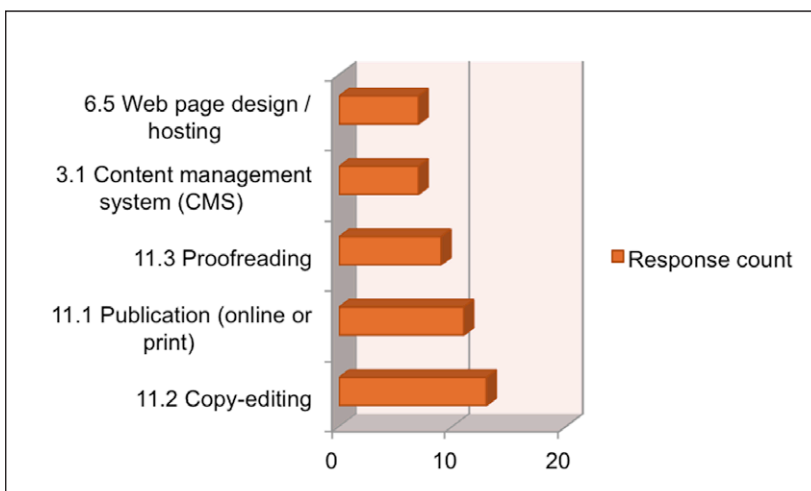
Figure 4. Top five functions outsourced by publishers
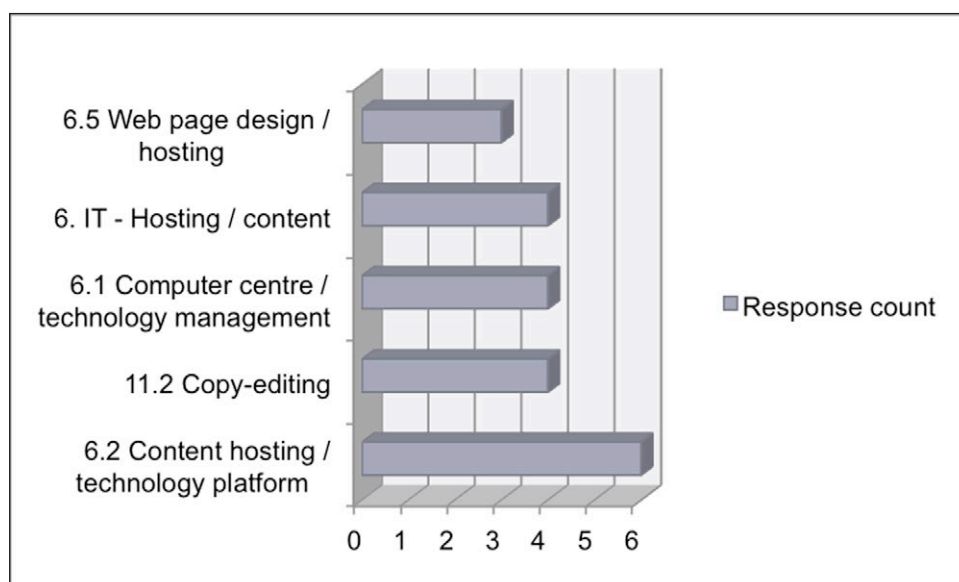
Figure 5. Top five functions outsourced by suppliers

According to the survey results, 84 participants responded to question three and ten participants skipped the question completely, suggesting they did not currently outsource a service. The majority of these tended to be suppliers. Every sub-category was selected from the list at least once, apart from 3.5 Microfilming.

Other categories suggested in the open-ended responses but not already included in the multiple-choice list available included the following (respondent group shown in brackets):

- Online and telephone enquiries (librarian)

- Indexing (publisher)

- OA systems (supplier)

- Customer service (publisher)

- Annotation (not-for-profit tech start-up)

- Typesetting (publisher)

- Data storage (librarian)

- Physical process of new print books and journal issues (librarian).

Outsourcing forecast

Q4. Which functions are you considering outsourcing?

The category options included in this multi-choice question replicated those contained in the previous question.

The top five functions being considered for outsourcing are shown in Figure 6.

When it came to measuring the functions being considered for outsourcing, out of a total of 94 participants, 42 responded and 52 skipped this question.

The results showed that 12 functions are being considered for outsourcing by librarians (Figure 7), 32 by publishers (Figure 8) and 18 by suppliers (Figure 9).

Those sub-categories not selected in this multiple-choice question included:

- 2.1 Research (although 7.5% of participants did select 2.2 Specialized research)
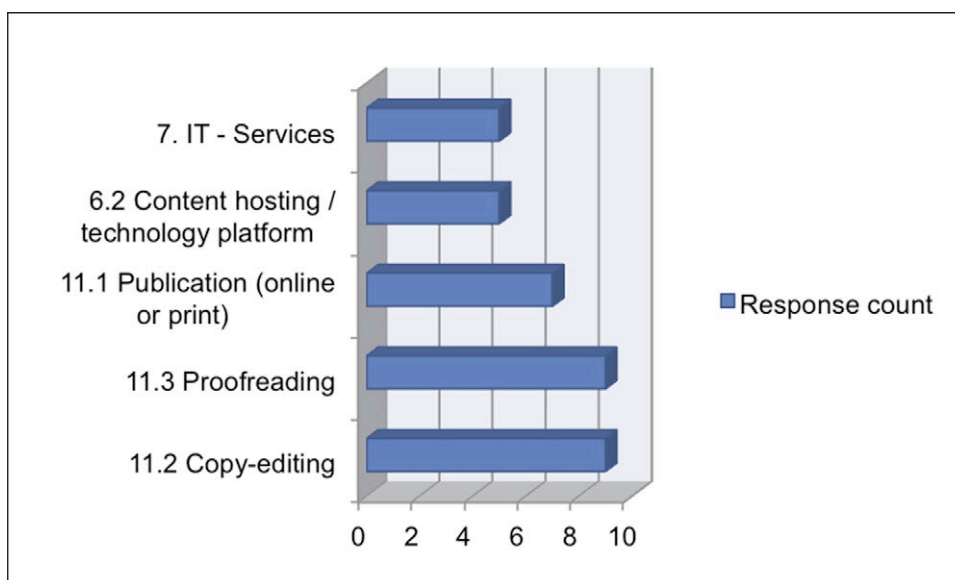
Figure 6. Top five functions being considered for outsourcing across all three stakeholder groups (publishers, librarians and suppliers)
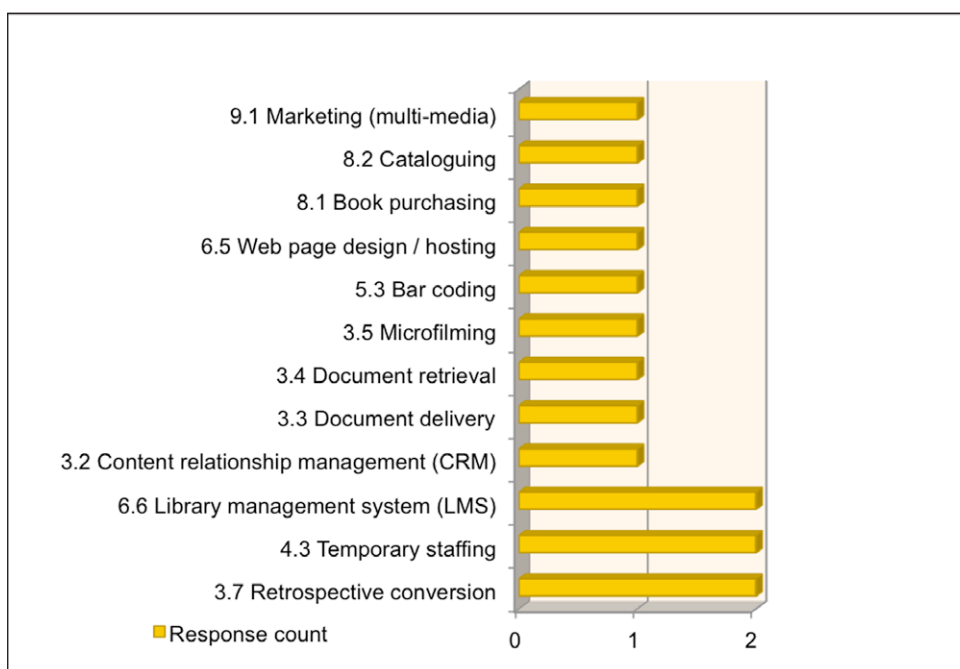

Figure 7. Functions being considered for outsourcing by librarians

- 6.3 Data recovery

- 7.3 Messenger services

- 7.6 Routing

- 12.2 Sales representation (telesales).

Other categories suggested but not already included in the multi-choice list available are as follows:

- Typesetting

- Customer service

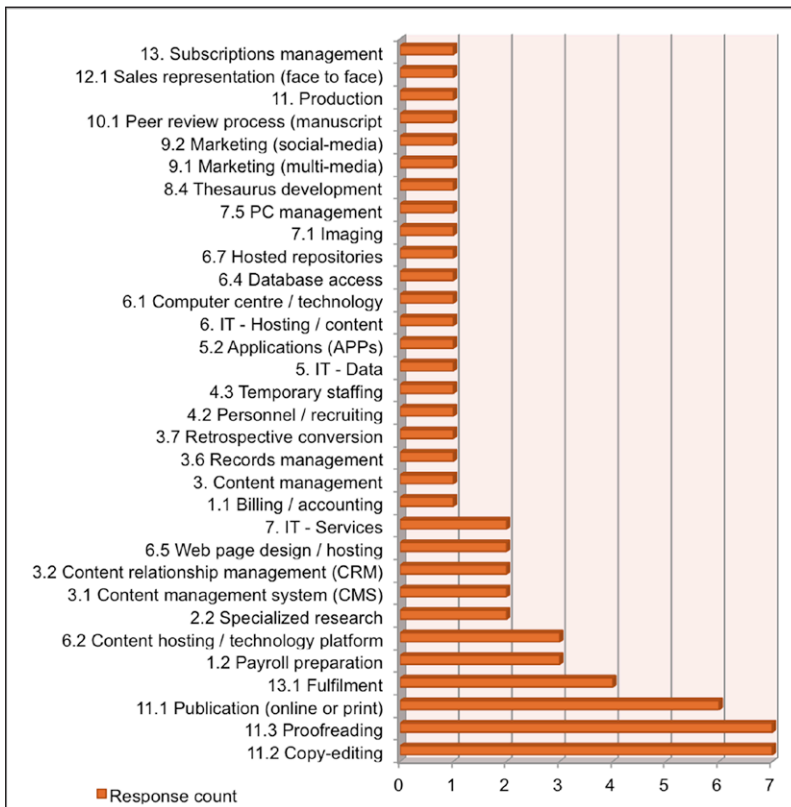- IT support for non-English language market.

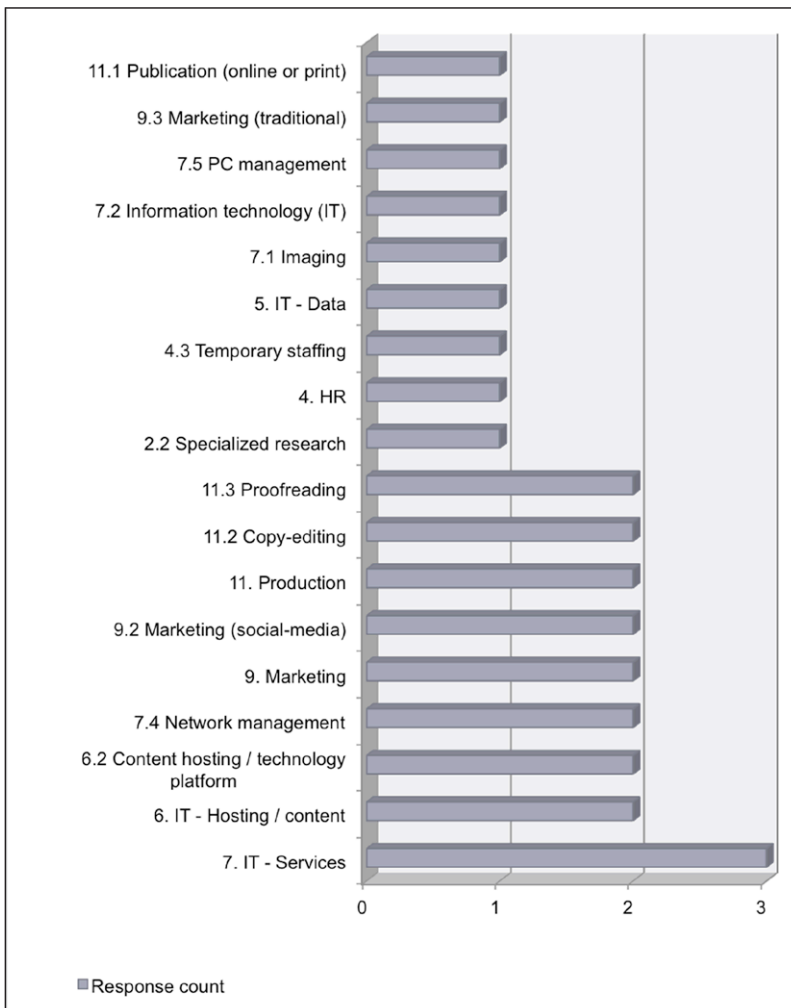Figure 8. Functions being considered for outsourcing by publishers

Figure 9. Functions being considered for outsourcing by suppliers

Conclusion

The survey found the top sub-category function currently outsourced across all three stakeholder groups to be 'Content hosting/technology platform', selected by a total of 18 survey respondents. (This sub-category, 6.2, was one of seven sub-categories associated under the parent category 6. IT-Hosting/content.)

The top functions outsourced by individual stakeholder groups are as follows: 6.6 Library management system (LMS), selected by 11 Librarians; 11.2 Copy-editing, selected by 13 publishers, and 6.2 Content hosting/technology platform, selected by six suppliers.

The results differed when it came to measuring those functions currently being considered for outsourcing. The response rate to this question was much lower, with more than half of the respondents skipping this question. The reason that so many skipped the question could be that they are either not intending to expand their outsourcing further or are not certain of how to respond at this time. The top sub-category functions being considered for outsourcing included 11.2 Copy-editing and 11.3 Proofreading, both equally obtaining a total count of nine selections each from across all stakeholder groups.

A total of 12 functions are currently being considered for outsourcing by librarians, though the majority of functions were selected just once, with the following three functions each being selected by two librarians: 6.6 Library management system (LMS); 4.3 Temporary staffing and 3.7 Retrospective conversion.

With a total of 32 functions selected, the survey shows that publishers participating in the survey are considering far more additional functions to outsource than librarians and nearly twice as many as suppliers. The two top functions selected, each with a count of seven, are 11.2 Copy-editing and 11.3 Proofreading, followed closely by 11.1 Publication (online or print) with a count of six.

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In the supplier sector, a total of 18 functions are currently being considered for outsourcing, of which 50% have been selected just once. Three suppliers in all selected the top function, 7. IT services.

Apart from one multi-choice sub-category (3.5 Microfilming), all sub-categories included in the survey were selected at least once by participants completing the survey. Therefore, the list of 57 terms describing the outsource functions have all been recognized and, with the addition of nine further outsource functions suggested by participants, a newly revised, comprehensive list of outsource functions can now be created for future survey use.

Call to action

The final question of the survey asked whether the respondents would be interested in participating in a future survey on the topic of outsourcing and invited individuals to share their contact details. For those of you also interested in helping to shape and promote a more comprehensive survey, please contact Ellery Matthews Consulting to discuss further.

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References

1. Survey Monkey – Survey: Outsourcing – Measuring the Status Quo!
   A PDF copy of the survey hosted on the authors website:
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2. Survey Monkey – Survey summary
   The question summaries, five in total, and data trends for the survey can be viewed via the following URL:
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   https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/operations/articles/global-outsourcing-survey.htm (accessed 2 May 2017).

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5. Smartsourcing, not outsourcing (write-up on the outcome of a recent 'outsourcing challenges' workshop held during the R2R 2017 Conference, London, BMA House), *Research Information*, March 2017:
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