
The Rise and Fall of Favor-Based Digitization: Workflows Taste Better on a Cake

Mikala Narlock, Pat Lawton, Patrick Rader

Publication Date

14-10-1900

License

This work is made available under a CC BY 4.0 license and should only be used in accordance with that license.

Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Narlock, M., Lawton, P., & Rader, P. (1900). *The Rise and Fall of Favor-Based Digitization: Workflows Taste Better on a Cake* (Version 1). University of Notre Dame. <https://doi.org/10.7274/r0-9cnw-w345>

This work was downloaded from CurateND, the University of Notre Dame's institutional repository.

For more information about this work, to report or an issue, or to preserve and share your original work, please contact the CurateND team for assistance at curate@nd.edu.

Electronic Currents

Assistant Editor: Sarah Dorpinghaus, University of Kentucky. Contact Sarah at sarah.dorpinghaus@uky.edu if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.

The Rise and Fall of Favor-Based Digitization: Workflows Taste Better on a Cake¹

By Mikala Narlock, Pat Lawton, and Patrick Rader, University of Notre Dame

Introduction

At Hesburgh Libraries at the University of Notre Dame, digitization had been an obscure process: roles and responsibilities were unclear, capacity was opaque, and institutional capabilities were mostly unknown. Collections were being digitized, but many were unclear how to go about it and what the possibilities were. Some characterized what had evolved as a “favor-based” system. To resolve these uncertainties, the Digital Collections Workflow (DCW) Team was established and charged with ensuring digital initiatives could flow smoothly and processes were understood by all. Over the course of a year (January–December 2018), this team identified nine use cases and tested six workflows. The success of this team ultimately resulted in the creation of a new oversight team led by case managers responsible for monitoring all digital project requests.

Spring 2018: Digital Collections Workflow Team

In early 2018, DCW kicked off. Drawing from units across the library,² this team included digitization specialists, developers, catalogers, subject selectors, and archivists. They were tasked with answering a large question shared by many in the library: How do items move from selection, through digitization, to being preserved and accessible to library patrons? This process was, at first, like exploring a knowledge jungle: with new territory to cover and unknown collection “creatures” of different shapes and patterns, DCW team members were often cutting through undergrowth and forging new paths.

A problem with our current system soon became clear, namely that the process of digitizing content and creating digital collections seemed more like a favor system instead of a codified process. Subject selectors and curators felt forced to reach out to their preferred points of contact and were unsure how to sustain the digitization process. To address this, DCW created avenues for transferring knowledge between units and individuals. After fits and starts, two DCW members devised a particularly complex use case designed to challenge the team. This theoretical project, comprised of everything from manuscripts to a tea set, required involvement from every department in

the library. DCW members were asked to describe and chart on large whiteboards how this collection would move through their respective units. Over the course of several marathon working sessions, the group came to a shared understanding of how this project would progress through the library (see Figure 1). The final narrative and workflow for this use case had clearly defined roles, hand-offs, and

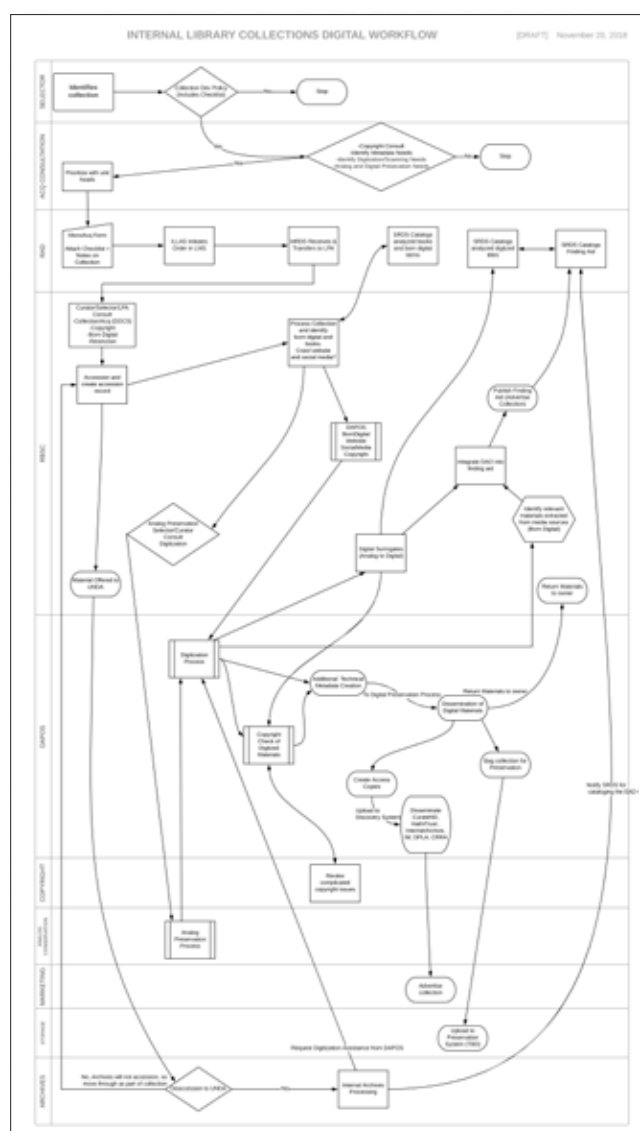


Figure 1: Our first use case would impact every unit in the library.

unit involvement. This was crucial in establishing a shared understanding across units.

Summer 2018: Demise of the Favor System

Having worked through the most intricate use case possible, the team had a clear vision of its task and set out to develop a set of use cases based on requests. At the end of the project, we had nine distinct use cases: from small collections destined for our institutional repository to migrating born-digital media, these sample projects had representative workflows that could flow smoothly. Each use case brought a different challenge to the team, including how content is ingested into our repository, how we communicate with units to request work, and how a selector will know when the item is accessible online. This extensive and iterative process necessitated many small meetings between units. Representatives met outside of DCW to describe their workflows to one another and decide how the process would flow. While time consuming, our team produced robust use cases with customized workflows represented in simple diagrams, resulting in a clear understanding of unit and individual responsibilities.

For the remainder of the summer, the team tested six of the nine use cases. With every implementation, more issues emerged and additional solutions were created. The implementation process was crucial for ensuring the workflows would proceed as anticipated. During this time, we refined supplementary documents in response to questions raised early in the process, all aimed at clarifying and sharing knowledge across the library. The first of these was a glossary of terms and acronyms, an extensive document that ensured we were working from the same definition. The second deliverable was a thorough description of the various storage and access systems available to our library. For each system, we defined the scope, formats accepted, primary function, and access controls, and set about identifying the units and individuals responsible for managing the system and uploading content.

Developing use cases, testing workflows, and creating the supplementary deliverables were incredibly time consuming, requiring the investment of dozens of meeting hours. However, these tasks were ultimately crucial to establishing a shared vocabulary and a clearer understanding of unit roles and responsibilities. This common knowledge was reported back to DCW team members' units, and we realized the favor system had toppled.

Fall 2018: Rise of the Case Managers

In early October, our team experienced a moment of panic. With only six weeks left in our team charge, we realized that selectors, one of the primary audiences of our work, had no way to interact with the workflows we had painstakingly defined. The workflows alone did not answer the question *"How do items move from selection, through digitization, to being preserved and accessible to library patrons?"* These workflows were more like blueprints: collections may have a different path depending on desired outcomes and identified needs, meaning workflows may need customization. Moreover, these workflows were more important for the units responsible for the work; while they clarify hand-offs and roles, they also require negotiation and compromise. Last, a selector has his or her own responsibilities to attend to on a daily basis. It is unreasonable, and unsustainable to assume selectors should track their own requests. With all of these concerns, we wondered how to ensure DCW's success continued and communicate this process to selectors. Enter the hero: the case manager.

Based on project management principles, the case manager is a low-tech approach to overseeing workflows and ensuring the timely completion of requests. The case manager provides guidance and support for digitization and born-digital projects, and serves as a liaison between units. As a facilitator, he or she is also responsible for customizing workflows and keeping the selector apprised of all progress and impediments. In short, this person is the primary point of contact for all project stakeholders (see Figure 2). We recognize that various project management software can be had that provides some support with tracking and communication. However, we opted for the personal and low-tech approach to rebuild trust in the process and to better understand the different types of requests.

Winter 2018 to Present: Let Them Eat Cake

In December, we were fortunate enough to celebrate the successes of DCW with a cake, complete with edible workflows (see Figure 3). We thanked our colleagues for their hard work and took the holiday break to relish our victories. Upon our return in January, we set about sustaining and extending the work by building a community of practice around case management, namely a team of individuals dedicated to ensuring the timely completion of projects. We officially established this second team, the Digital Collections Oversight Team (DCOT) in March with support from our library cabinet.

(Continued on page 22)

(Continued from page 21)



Figure 2: The case manager serves as a liaison between requesters, the workflows, and the units responsible for the work. Image by Patrick Rader (CC-BY-NC-ND).

The success of DCW was due, at least in part, to the cross-unit collaboration and knowledge sharing and building, and we will continue this in DCOT. The team is expanding to include new roles to perpetuate the transparency and processes established thus far, and to support the work of shepherding cases. In addition to case managers, we have recruited unit liaisons, who serve as unit representatives empowered to make decisions and report on unit capacities. These individuals are not necessarily in leadership or administrative roles, as we recruited people who are responsible for the work. In the event our current case managers are overwhelmed with work, we have also recruited a few supplemental case managers who will monitor projects as needed. Last, our cabinet sponsor will lead an assessment group to study the process from request to ingest to discover the patterns of requests, better understand problems, and develop solutions organically. While we did not hire any new personnel to fill these roles, many units have encouraged current employees interested in digital collection work to collaborate with us in light of this organizational need. So far, the response to the call for participation has exceeded expectations.

Conclusion

The success of DCW and the creation of DCOT has led to a resolution revolution in the library. Projects are completed in a timely manner. Selectors receive prompt replies to digitization requests and are more aware of timelines and capabilities. Workflow participants know their roles and responsibilities. As we continue to learn and grow, we are optimistic that pain points will become obvious and solutions can be sourced from those responsible for the work. The new team will continue to promote transparency, timeliness, and accountability while ensuring all successes are celebrated; after all, workflows taste better on a cake.

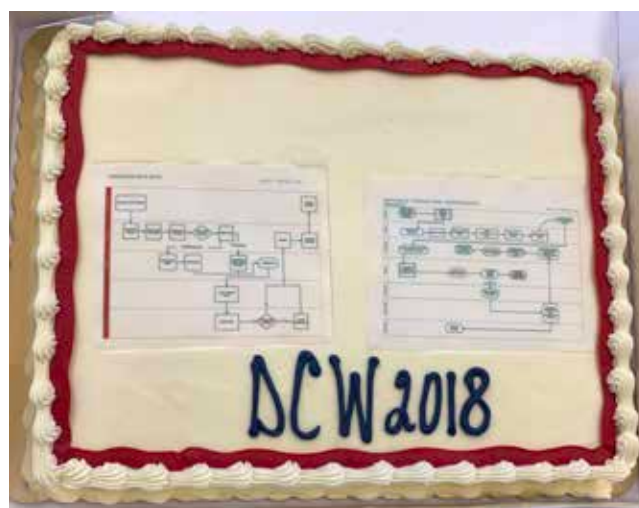


Figure 3: Our celebration cake, complete with two workflows

Notes

1. This article is based on a presentation at the Best Practices Exchange 2019 held in Columbus, Ohio, April 29–May 1. Slides are available at [doi:10.7274/r0-pwd4-jp23](https://doi.org/10.7274/r0-pwd4-jp23).
2. With special thanks to DCW team members Kevin Cawley, Aedin Clements, Jeremy Friesen, Helen Hockx-Yu, Hye-jin Juhn, Robert Kusmer, Laurie McGowan, and Patrick Milhoan.