

Chapter 6

Space Managing System for the Physical Collection: Information Experts Merging IT and Collection Management for Real Solutions in the User Environment

ABSTRACT

Collection space management is an important endeavor to any collection that is heavily composed of physical material. Books on shelves covering vast areas of stacks can quickly get out of hand, space wise, if solid technology and practices are not implemented in its management. Weeding and stacks expansion can be great tools, but will prove increasingly less efficient as the collection becomes more chaotic. Shifting is the only tool that can restore order in this case. With this understanding, it is a great advantage for any library professional and library administrator to become aware of good practices and applications of shifting technologies in order to take control over and guide the user environment in their own institutions. Operations, such as shifting large physical collections and developing effective techniques to do it, have not been, and continue to remain an important topic neglected by the library field today. A new paradigm of space management, developed through extensive planning and field applications and designed from the ground up, for shifting large physical collections is outlined here—called the MEL Space Management System, or in short, the MEL System. Surveyed in this chapter is a review of this driving technology and its applications, covering the NITA Methodology Stage-I, Stage-II, and Stage-III in its developmental process.

INTRODUCTION

Physical collection management is central to the efficient functionality of the library as an institution. Along with patron service, collection content,

and learning commons, it remains one of the pillars of the institution of today and tomorrow. It is also the greatest determining physical factor for the shape of the user environments and the library space as a whole. Managing the physical space, meaning the relationship between the physical volumes of the collection in relation to the avail-

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able storage space, within the stacks is critical to collection growth, shelving efficiency, and content discoverability. Proper space management of a physical collection gives the library staff more options in how to layout their stacks for maximum access and presentation of the content, as well as allowing efficient leverage in mutual support of the commons areas throughout the library space.

Most library professionals only see space management as a minor element of collection development, perhaps solely as collection maintenance and not in its boarder light, and this is incorrect and fatal to any library's user environment scheme. Poor space management of the institution's collections, virtual and physical, and not poor content or limited staff remains one of the top reasons why many libraries have deficient user environments that struggle to satisfy their patrons' expectations—good order is as much a psychological stimulation to the patron as well as a practical necessity for healthy collection development. Effective space management of a physical collection allows flexibility in how the institution will mold and present its user environment, and a well ordered collection offers more options to the institution to attract and service its patrons' information needs. An easily navigated collection frees library staff to focus on patron services such as proper research techniques and information use—the true propose of the professional as an information expert—and not just directing patrons to specific books like some glorified usher. Even if an institution has the best library as far as content is concerned, it is superfluous if the collection is not accessible or user-friendly for its patrons. For example, there are very valid reasons why no commercial bookstore presents its collection by either the Dewey Decimal System or the Library of Congress Classification System—users find navigating the collection both frustrating and wasteful of their limited time. Even the Library of Congress does not use the system in presentation of its accessible collection, instead opting for a much more user-friendly and pleasant

hybrid user environment consisting of reading rooms combined with closed stacks. The Library of Congress is a fine example of the effects, both psychological and practical, of a well presented and ordered stacks, especially given its massive collection.

Physical collection management has a bag full of tools always at the disposal of the space and quality conscious library staff, and each one of those tools is pretty well known by library professional in the field today. Space management tools such as weeding are well-documented and defined, and its use is fairly well applied in managing a library's collection and will not be discussed in this paradigm. If the institution is blessed with the resources, then it can afford for more space to be physically allocated to the collection in the guise of facility expansion and/or conversions for additional shelving areas, but such solutions are always costly and out of reach for most institutions. The importance and methodologies of shelving is more efficiently classified under content management in the collection management processes. The reader is encouraged to research those sources and evaluate them for use in their library. The last tool in the bag is in many ways the most powerful, but remains the least documented and not surprisingly the one continuously used least effectively—the space management tool composed of the mutually supporting practices of collection shifting and space maintenance.

The practice and technology of space maintenance and shifting collections for purposes of collection space management, as opposed to collection relocation to another facility, is in a dismal state. What little that does go on is conducted on an *ad hoc* and haphazard manner with no serious thought into the institution's future growth and space needs. Not only does the practice lack systems and common sense approaches, but given how important it remains as the premier collection space management tool for it does not require you to either shrink your collection by

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