Removing Friction From

Content Discovery
and **Acquisition**

By Mitja-Alexander Linss

There are three things every researcher seeks to do when acquiring scientific content: Boost speed, expand access, and slash costs. This is easy to say but not so easy to do. When research or regulatory requirements necessitate access to tens, hundreds, or even thousands of papers, challenges and frustrations lurk at everyturn— incomplete citations, long document delivery turnaround times, authentication difficulties, high article costs, buggy tools, confusing copyright, and one-size-fits-all solutions that don't fit.

Beyond these difficulties lie the overwhelming volume and complexity of content and the myriad ways of accessing and managing it. Because this content is the fuel that powers researchers' discoveries and innovations, the success of the entire organization depends upon quick, efficient, cost-effective, and unfettered access. Ensuring these outcomes calls for a knowledge management strategy—a strategy that addresses the what, where, when, and how of discovering and acquiring scientific content. This article considers each of these aspects, as well as the attributes that comprise a solution for streamlining information workflows from a document delivery and research retrieval perspective.

GETTING WHAT YOU WANT

For deep scientific research, no source is too esoteric or obscure. What researchers want could exist in journal articles, book chapters, conference proceedings, theses, posters, standards, prepress articles, supplementary materials, pharmacopeias, or old print. While identifying the content you need may be easy enough, getting your hands on it is another matter.

For starters, there's the basic problem of access to the literature of *all* publishers, wherever they may be, and in whatever form their materials may be published. This is particularly challenging for smaller research organizations, which often resort to manual methods to obtain content. Whenever you acquire articles from individual publisher websites, paying for them one at a time with a credit card, rounding up shared online alumni accounts to manually check for free full-text

In research, urgency is typically the rule rather than the exception.
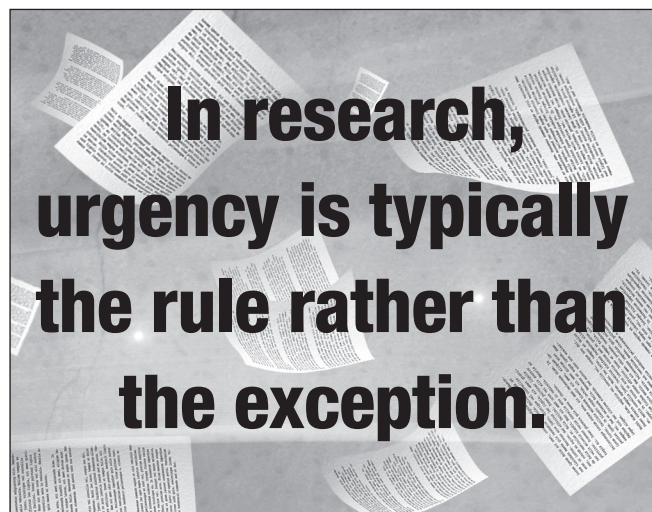
access, or sending your scientists off to the university library in an effort to save money, you waste valuable time and effort, pay more, and get less. It's simply not efficient and detracts from other critical research activities.

So what to do? The first step is to link the discovery process directly to the delivery of content. In other words, remove the friction. In addition to integrating the delivery of content with researchers' preferred discovery processes, the best document delivery providers also deliver research support services. Look for one that not only goes the extra mile in locating and securing the most elusive of documents, but also offers a comprehensive platform that delivers time- and cost-savings that may have traditionally been available only to the larger research organizations.

HOW YOU WANT IT

Document format is important, but so are quality and the channels that the document flows through on its way to the researcher's desk. Let's deal with the latter point first. Simply stated, workflow matters. The logistical hoops through which a document must pass, including any choke points encountered along the way, impact how researchers ultimately receive the information request.

No doubt, there is room for improvement. Even on the path of least resistance one still encounters resistance! This is especially true for researchers. With so many moving parts, it can be difficult to navigate the ins and outs of your own organization's particular workflows and procedures, whether they involve departmental or project-based charge-backs, integrations with other online tools, or special requirements around authentication for secure access. In any case, a good docu-

ment delivery solution provider can help optimize workflows as well as user experiences, thereby helping all parties involved to become more productive. As to the document itself, nowadays, the vast majority of articles and supplemental materials are delivered in native PDF format. Scanning technology has improved markedly, but documents scanned using older technologies are still with us. That doesn't change the fact that you still need a crisp, clean PDF. It is essential to have a quality assurance process set up so each page of every document is squared up, cleaned up, and otherwise repaired in a host of other ways that transform that old scan into what looks like a fresh, native, color PDF. Look for a provider who can deliver just that—and is able to do so with ultra-rapid turnaround.

WHEN YOU WANT IT

In research, urgency is typically the rule rather than the exception. Faster is always better—which is why many researchers understand the term "rush" to mean not just the same day but within hours, if not minutes. In order to support this kind of demand, you need a supplier with a great diversity of document retrieval resources—including the more obscure variety (often born in print) or those that require hands-on attention.

To this end, achieving a 99% on-time fulfilment rate (another important metric to check) requires a combination of deep publisher relationships, a strong library network, and other content partners. Further, it requires the ability to process orders 24/7. Your organization's global coverage shouldn't be affected by time zones, odd working hours, or geographic locations. Your offices and researchers on the opposite coast or across an ocean work according to their own timescales. They need *what* they need, *when* they need it, *where* they are.

Look, then, for a provider that can not only provide such levels of customer support, but can also enable automation of delivery tasks when there is no librarian or other mediator available. The service shouldn't come to a standstill when someone clocks out for the day in your company or at your vendor's regional office. When desired, orders should be fulfilled automatically or, as appropriate, be held in a queue so they receive special attention the next morning.

WHERE YOU WANT IT

"Where" involves both to and from: *from* your preferred document discovery platform and *to* the destination of the desired documents—wherever both may be. It is often the case that "link resolvers" take researchers on a scenic route, without ever arriving at the intended destination. A proper link resolver will bypass all the obstacles to deliver the full-text article via a direct article-level link, whether it is to subscription content, open access (OA) articles, rentals, or other sources. And, by the way, it should always filter requests automatically against any existing subscriptions, holdings, reuse rights, and OA availability to ensure you never pay for documents unnecessarily. A good platform will simply take you where you need to go, doing so on the most favorable terms.
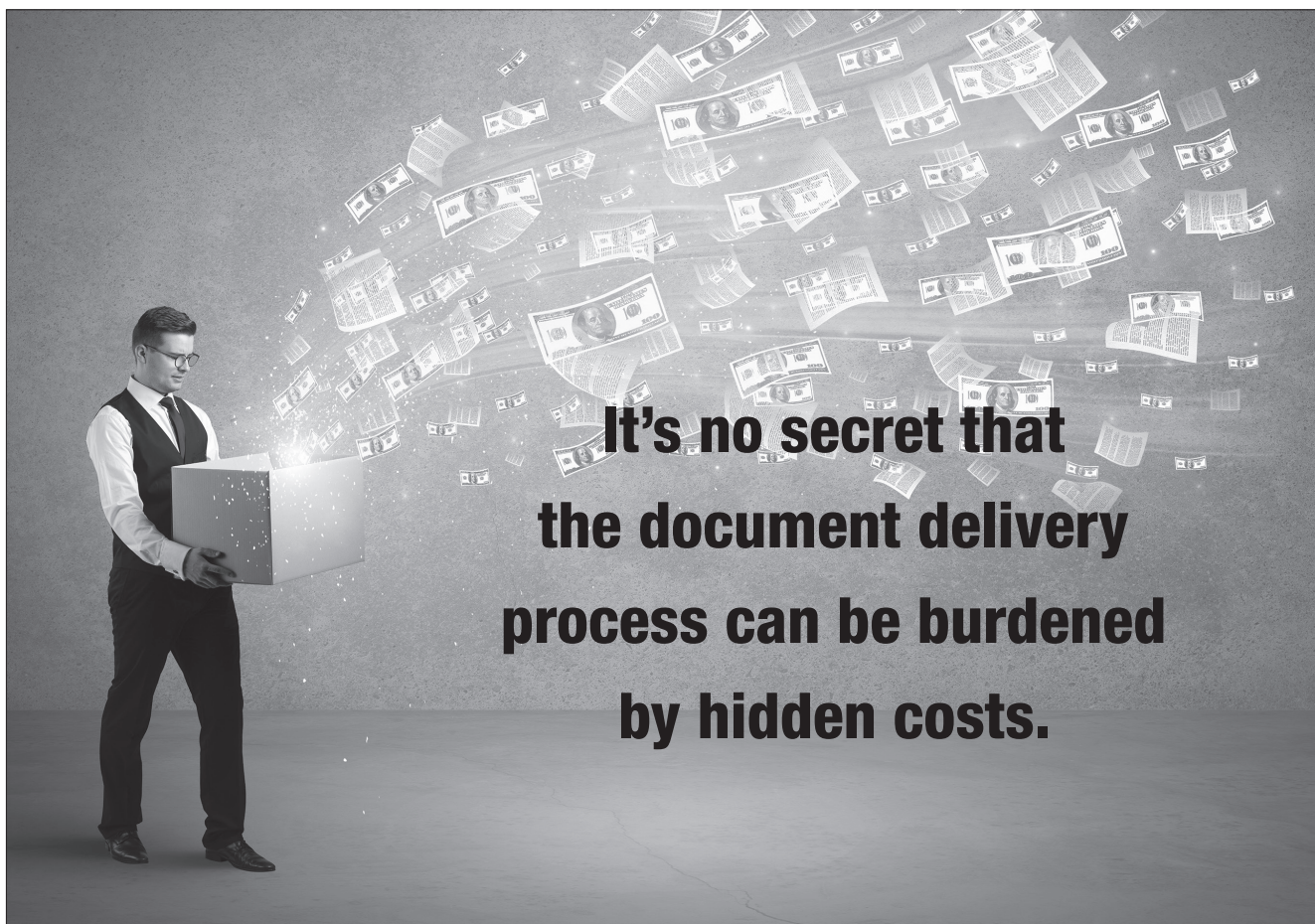
It's no secret that the document delivery process can be burdened by hidden costs.

As for discovery platforms, look for a provider whose offering is fully integrated with PubMed, Google Scholar, SciFinder, EMBASE, and the many other essential research tools that information professionals use on a routine basis. With this capability in place, there should be no logging in and entering credit cards at multiple publisher sites. Researchers should simply be able to place their order requests, and let intelligent filters take care of the rest, saving them time, expense, and worry in the process. Again, the last thing you want is to be paying for content you already have access to: A good document delivery solution will preserve the value of your investments.

AND GETTING IT ALL LEGALLY AT THE LOWEST TOTAL COST

It's no secret that the document delivery process can be burdened by hidden costs. Sometimes the content is royalty-free; other times it's covered by your existing subscriptions. You shouldn't pay extra for these. A good document delivery service provider should deliver royalty-free OA copies of articles whenever possible and also alert your staff when an article has already been purchased by someone else in the company, or, of course, if it can be read for free via in-house subscriptions, paper holdings, or prepaid tokens. In all cases, your provider should always show you exactly what the costs are, broken out in detail, not bundled into a non-transparent lump sum. Lump sums are where the hidden costs hide.

The opportunity for cost savings should really begin with an analysis of your workflows and spending patterns. This is important because, while one provider may help save $1 on a document delivery (and that certainly adds up across thousands of documents), you should also be able to identify and eliminate the equivalent of $2, $3, $5, or more in overhead somewhere else along the line. This requires taking a holistic view of document delivery operations—including your order history—to be able to account for the *true* total cost of ownership. The outcome of such an exercise should include "current state" and potential "future state" comparisons, demonstrating both improved processes and what could add up to significant cost savings.

Finally, a good document delivery provider will offer options for acquiring content when necessary, including, for example, article rentals and guaranteed lowest-cost transactional service fees—and without rush, special referencing fees, or other "extras" you could easily be paying for without even knowing it.

Mitja-Alexander Linss (mlinss@reprintsdesk.com) is director of marketing, Reprints Desk.
Comments? Email the editor-in-chief (marydee@xmission.com).

RD | REPRINTS DESK
The Content Workflow Company