

SR Visits

EBSCO Publishing

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EBSCO Publishing is an innovative company that has its roots in paper publishing. It now produces hundreds of online resources in a state-of-the-art facility located along the banks of the Ipswich River in Massachusetts. Considerable work occurs behind the scenes in Ipswich (and around the world) to produce the online databases in EBSCOhost that appear to the user at the click of a mouse. Jennifer Carroll toured the headquarters in Ipswich to learn about the processes that make these valuable resources available. *Serials Review* 2007; 33:145–148.

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Introduction

EBSCO Publishing is located in Ipswich, Massachusetts, a quaint town on Boston's North Shore. A winding drive through beautiful New England villages full of historic homes brings the visitor into the town of Ipswich, where EBSCO Publishing is housed in an old brick mill complex. The trip to the company's headquarters may evoke in visitors a feeling of traveling backward in time. That feeling disappears, however, as soon as they walk through the door of this vibrant and innovative publisher that has so drastically changed the way libraries all over the world provide information to their patrons.

EBSCO Publishing produces aggregated online databases for academic, school, public, medical, and corporate libraries around the world. It currently delivers 250 databases covering subjects from terrorism to horticulture. EBSCO Publishing started in 1984 with two employees and has grown to over 790 employees, including forty librarians. Most of us in the information industry are familiar with the products, but on a recent visit I was lucky enough to get to see how the operation works.

During my tour, I discovered that while many of the company's processes are different from those of a library, many of the processes carried out at EBSCO Publishing are very similar to those we are familiar

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with in our own collection development, technical services, and systems departments. It also became clear to me that EBSCO is dealing with many of the same issues libraries struggle with in today's hybrid print and online environment.

Facilities

The company's headquarters are in a converted mill complex along the Ipswich River. Three of the site's buildings are occupied, with a fourth — a parking garage — now under construction. While the outside looks old-fashioned, the inside is anything but. Within the exposed brick walls is a state-of-the-art facility. My tour began in the main building, which houses offices as well as a full service café and a gym for staff. The first EBSCOhost server room is also in this building. In the second building are the serials and editorial departments which handle licensing, subscription maintenance, and check-in of print and electronic materials. The third building houses the second and most recently implemented data center, which has over two hundred servers.

History

The company began in Massachusetts in 1984 with two employees and a print publication called *Popular Magazine Review (PMR)*, which provided abstracts of magazine articles from three hundred titles. In 1987, EBSCO Industries purchased the company and created EBSCO Publishing, and the publication name was changed from *PMR* to *Magazine Article Summaries (MAS)*. In 1989 the first CD-ROM version of *MAS* was published. Today, EBSCO Publishing employs approximately 750 people, including forty librarians, and it produces over 290 online databases.

The “Library”

My first visit was with the product management and sales and marketing departments. Unlike other online database providers, EBSCO Publishing does not sell its products through distributors. All sales are directly through EBSCO Publishing sales representatives in offices around the globe. The Ipswich-based publisher is proud of its direct links to its customers. These relationships are important because the company's representatives are not only salespeople, but they are also responsible for gathering vital feedback for the product development team.

Another important source of development information is EBSCO Publishing's seventeen advisory boards, three-quarters of which have members from academic institutions. One of the functions of the advisory boards is to provide feedback that is translated into product enhancements and as guidance for new product development.

Such close ties to customers allow EBSCO Publishing to be responsive to customer needs, in terms of both

improving existing products and developing new products. The product development department also targets top titles for addition, as well as adding full text to abstracts that get high usage in the databases. I see this as similar to an academic library's collection development process. Liaisons gather requests from constituents on campus and bring them back to collection development, where they are prioritized and sent on to acquisitions. The resources are ordered, and then staff monitors use of those resources.

EBSCO Publishing considers user feedback, advisory board suggestions, current top titles in subject areas, and abstracts with high usage when negotiating with publishers for new content to be added to databases. As with libraries, EBSCO keeps track of gaps in content availability and is always looking for ways to make these materials available to users. For example, during my visit, I found out that EBSCO had just secured the rights to add the full text of the entire run of the *Paris Review* to its database content. This is a title that until now has not been available anywhere online. (Full text for the *Paris Review* is available only in EBSCO's database, *Humanities International Complete*.)

Once the content to be added has been selected, the process of acquisition begins in the company's serials/editorial department. Once a title has been selected for inclusion in a database, a staff member contacts the publisher, sets up the subscription, and then the material is collected. The publisher either sends materials electronically or in print format. Like most libraries today, EBSCO Publishing deals with a hybrid of print and online media. Approximately 65 percent of the 37,000 active subscriptions the company receives are delivered electronically, and 35 percent are still delivered in print format.

All materials are checked in using a proprietary system. None of the existing library systems was flexible enough to meet the company's needs, so EBSCO Publishing developed its own. After materials are checked in, they are indexed and abstracted. In some cases, the indexing and abstracting are provided by the publisher; if not, it is done in-house. So, while most libraries are tracking serials only to the title level, EBSCO continues processing down to the article level. That is right: 37,000 subscriptions, down to the title level. There are currently seven employees handling subscriptions, nine managing e-content, and six responsible for check-in.

After check-in, print journals are cut and scanned, and the scans are attached to a skeletal table of contents record. The record goes to the indexing and abstracting department where subject headings are assigned, and specialized thesauri are leveraged to enhance indexing. Abstracts are also written if they were not supplied by the publisher. The vast majority (85 percent) of journals indexed in EBSCO's databases, however, include author-supplied abstracts. Within this department, there are six people dedicated to handing controlled vocabulary. Obviously, electronically received materials skip the scanning process and head to indexing and abstracting

if the publisher has not included this information with the article PDFs. An extremely high percentage of PDFs are “native,” coming directly from the publishers. The departments have certain rates that must be maintained, including a goal for number of pages to scan each day as well as a goal for indexing and abstracting. These rates help with prioritization and fitting new products into the workflow.

After scanning (when applicable) and processing, content is posted to an internal database, and from there the production team adds it to the customer-facing databases. Some of the electronically received material can go directly to production and is added to databases immediately. In this way, some content can be available to customers on EBSCO*host* databases before libraries have even received their print copies. For the materials received in print form, high-priority content is added to the databases within twenty-four hours of receipt, and lowest priority materials can take up to three weeks.

EBSCO has several high-speed scanners for handling received print materials, and there is also an overhead scanner to handle borrowed materials. EBSCO continues to fill in gaps and add back runs of titles. To do this, it sometimes relies on library partners to provide bound volumes for scanning. The overhead scanner can scan these volumes without having to cut the volumes apart or even touch the pages to turn them.

After paper issues are scanned, they are stored on shelving in the basement stacks. An inventory management system gives each print issue a shelf identification which makes it possible for staff to locate issues if they are needed again. One-third of this collection was lost during floods in the spring of 2006, so there is a recataloging project in process, as well as construction of a higher retaining wall to protect against future floods. The company has also started a project to scan every print issue in the basement to create an online archive of all materials. There are no current plans to discard the print issues once everything has been scanned, however.

One unexpected role played by EBSCO Publishing is as the de facto online archive for some of the content in the databases. Some of the publishers that still function completely in print actually rely on EBSCO to be their online archive as the content is unavailable anywhere else online.

Like many libraries, EBSCO Publishing works with legacy systems and faces the challenges of collecting new material types and developing associated processes. Originally its databases included only journal materials, but today they include many other types of materials, such as monographic content, reports, images, and videos. Currently, the company is grappling with the incorporation of Web logs (blogs) and Web sites. It has licensed the content of several blogs and now is deciding how to add this content to the databases. There is also a push to add more non-English language content. This brings the added challenge of finding additional non-English-speaking employees. Right now, EBSCO Publishing is focusing on French, Spanish, German, and Italian. They are also starting to investigate content using non-Roman alphabets. Finally, with an increased

focus on subject-specific databases (more on this later), EBSCO Publishing is also starting to look for employees with corresponding subject expertise.

Once all of the content is in the databases, how does EBSCO Publishing make it accessible to the users? My tour ended in the state-of-the-art data center in the third mill building. The data center currently has over two hundred Web servers holding between eighty and one hundred terabytes of data. There are multiple Internet service provider connections with diverse paths for redundancy. Not that the company has ever had a major problem, but in the main mill building there is another data center that is completely redundant, and there's another backup site in Alabama. EBSCO*host* regularly and easily handles five million searches per day; on the peak day of the week prior to my visit, the number reached six million. EBSCO*host* is among the top 2,100 Web sites searched worldwide.

Current Initiatives

EBSCO Publishing is working on creating relationships in developing nations. According to company executives, the EBSCO databases are used more in Third World countries than the databases of all other publishers combined. Since 2000, four EBSCO vice presidents have made between seventy and eighty multicountry trips between them, and the company has established offices with local representatives all over the world, including new representatives in China, India, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition to new markets, the company is focusing on the development of new products. An updated version of *Academic Search* called *Academic Search Complete* (ASC) is due for release in April 2007. This version will include 1,000 more titles than the current *Academic Search Premier* (ASP). The different versions of databases are available so that customers with all levels of funding will be able to subscribe. Customers with larger budgets will be able to subscribe to ASC, and customers with fixed budgets will be able to continue subscribing to ASP at a stable price. Through this tiered strategy the company is thereby able to provide stable pricing and at the same time provide additional content for those who have the funding to support the higher prices.

The company has a push to create new subject-specific databases to complement the full text available in *Academic Search* and to better meet the research needs of customers. Usage data have shown that education and business are the top two subject searches on EBSCO*host*. In response to this demand, *Education Research Complete* was released in July 2006, and *EconLit with Full Text* was released in December 2006. Both databases include previously unavailable content.

Conclusion

Through energetic solicitation of input and close communication with customers, EBSCO Publishing

continues to anticipate and respond to the research needs of users around the world. A close examination of the company's internal operations made it clear to me that the company deals with and has a good understanding of many of the same issues that

libraries face in today's schizophrenic world of print and online media. While EBSCO Publishing has its roots in the print world, it has embraced the online world and continues to expand the possibilities of all its library partners.