

Library stock verification : a ritual and an occupational hazard^{*}

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ABSTRACT: Explains the sensitive controversial stock verification as one of the occupational hazards and a post mortem, emphasises need for clarity of objectives and procedures regarding stock verification and responsibilities of loss, points out that the cost of stock verification often far exceed the benefits, highlights norms and procedures of stock verification for Government of India institutions, discusses some advantages and various methods and procedures of physical verification, put forth precautionary measures to be taken against loss and mutilation of library documents, analyses the issue of responsibility of loss and ways of resolving the conflict of responsibility, presents the procedure for write-off of reasonable loss, finally concludes by stressing the need for rational and updated rules and procedures about stock verification, responsibility of loss and limits to write-off loss as well as vital role of professional bodies in this direction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stock verification or physical verification is to periodically check and account for the documents acquired by a library. Stock verification is an insignificant aspect of librarianship as far as teachers, researchers and library experts are concerned. But in practice stock verification is considered as a sensitive, controversial and unwanted evil activity. Practicing librarians are often perturbed and worried over the process of library stock verification and its results and implications. The spirit and philosophy of librarianship towards books as emotion filled animate beings dissipates when books are subjected to stock verification. As such some consider stock verification as one of the occupational hazards. The other hazards include mutilation of documents and loss in transit of supplies. Stock verification is often done like a ritual without clear identification of aims and objectives and hence a host of confusion surrounds stock verification. If the objectives and procedures of physical verification and responsibilities about loss of documents are clearly enumerated, the process becomes plain and simple.

2. STOCK VERIFICATION : A RITUAL/ POST MORTEM

Often, the cost of carrying out a stock verification, particularly in a dynamic, comprehensive, well defined and compact collection like that of a special library far exceeds the benefits derived and even the loss discovered. Hence at the outset this post-mortem or futile exercise appears to have no positive benefits except accounting for the stock. On the other hand this may cause inconvenience to users, disturbance to routines of library, health hazard to library staff, loss of man hours, time, money and service in a library. Whether to take up such an activity or not, if taken up at what frequency and is it for entire collection or for a sample collection, etc. are mostly decided by the parent organisation and the rules governed by it. For example, in case of Government of India (1983,1984) organisations¹ complete annual physical verification of books has to be done by a library having not more than 20,000 volumes and not fewer than two library qualified staff. However, complete physical verification has to be done at intervals of not more than three years in case of libraries having upto 20,000 volumes with only one library qualified staff as well as libraries having more than 20,000 volumes but not more than 50,000 volumes. Further, only a sample physical verification at intervals of not more than five years is needed in case of libraries having more than 50,000 volumes. If such sample verification reveals unusual or unreasonable shortages, complete verification shall be done. What type of documents need to be counted for the above purpose is not enumerated but it can be assumed to be books and bound volumes of journals ignoring the ephemeral and gray literature and microforms.

3. ADVANTAGES OF STOCK VERIFICATION

A library should also take note of some advantages in carrying out stock verification. Firstly, periodic stock verification and write-off of resultant loss helps to reduce unnecessary escalation in book value of assets. Secondly, physical verification also helps in replacing relevant, useful and on demand documents with new copies wherever lost or mutilated. Thirdly, stock verification is the time to introduce new ways of arrangement of stack, modified or new lending system and other procedures. Fourthly, if a library calls back all issued out documents for stock verification purpose, it can provide an opportunity for its users to browse the entire collection after verification. This very much counters the otherwise bias of less useful books lying on shelves all

through the year. Fifthly, stock verification helps to review the precautionary measures already taken in preventing loss and mutilation as well as to identify any deficiencies in the existing procedure of maintenance of library and vigilance. Above all, stock verification helps as a way of identifying and discarding obsolete volumes. Normally in an active collection of a well organised library, loss of on-demand books are only noticed in day to day working. Other incidental benefits of stock verification include identification of damaged and worn-out documents for repair or rebinding, keeping shelf list and other records up-to-date, rearrangement and cleaning of stack, better acquaintance of collection and popular documents by library staff, etc.

4. METHODS OF STOCK VERIFICATION

As far as methods of carrying out stock verification are concerned the parent organisation may involve or may not involve external persons in the team of stock verification and may decide to exclude certain types of material in the library. The rest of the methodology of verification depends on the provisions already made in the design and organisation of library records. There are a number of methods followed for stock verification. The most crude method is to numerically count the number of documents and it practically does not serve any purpose except to know the number of documents lost. The old and fairly crude method is to physically check and tally documents on shelves with accession register. This method is not only cumbersome and time consuming but also require the entire register to be kept while checking. It may also lead to spoiling the register with tick marks. However, with the advent of new ways of reproduction of accession register now the original register can still be saved. Another accession number based scheme which also has the disadvantage of keeping the entire register (or its surrogate) is to have prewriting/typed/printed cards carrying accession numbers in blocks of 100 numbers while physically checking the documents on shelves. In both these methods the simultaneous working of number of batches depends on availability of number of copies of accession register or its surrogate and if more than one copy of accession register is used the results of checking needs to be consolidated from different copies/batches. All these not only make it cumbersome but also lead to waste of time and efforts. It is also possible now with the proliferation of personal computers to just key-in all accession numbers as and when checked to consolidate the loss in terms of missing accession numbers. The most economical and fast way of entering accession number is to use a mobile bar

code/wand reader to scan accession numbers of books from the bar code stickers in the books. But bar code system is yet to pickup in this country. The most popular and fairly reliable and quick manual method is to verify stock based on shelf list. This method requires an up-to-date shelf list. All these methods presuppose closing library for verification purpose. Yet another shelf list based method which does not require closing down the library but ensures reasonably economical, quick and dependable stock checking is to have two (book) card systems. In this method two different color book cards are prepared for each document and one of them is maintained as shelf list card and the other kept in book. At the time of stock verification these two book cards are exchanged. This method allows for simultaneous working of many batches as both shelf list and documents are arranged in the same sequence and also allows for rectifying errors of stock verification at a later date.

5. PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES AGAINST LOSS

Having carried out stock verification in a library, the very first question to be asked is that 'are the existing precautionary measures against loss of library documents enough? and 'is there any scope to take further precautions?' (This may even be one of the objectives of the stock verification). Here again the preventive and precautionary actions normally cost much more than the value of loss. The usual precautions taken at the time of planning a library is to operate with one exit cum entrance, not allowing personal belongings inside the library and covering all windows of the building with suitable wire mesh or metal grills to avoid passing books through windows. Additional precautions like a check point at exit gate with a person and/or vigilance manpower including security guard, magnetised document checking/burglar's alarm and other electronic book security system, CCTV, insurance against loss, etc. cost substantially to the organisation in addition to being not fool proof. What additional precautions are to be taken depends on how much additional expenditure (ie., in addition to the cost of stock verification) the organisation is willing to incur. Here two things need special mention. Firstly some of the costs like salaries of vigilance/checking staff are often invisible. Secondly, any physical check by a security guard in reputed institution may not only bring resistance from users but also makes an ugly show. Apart from intensifying vigilance, another positive approach propounded is to liberalise services like extended library hours during examination time, liberal or subsidised xerox service and liberal lending of books marked 'not to be issued'.

It is natural to raise a question as to how library books are lost that too in research institutions where majority of the users are from higher strata of society. Mysteriously, it becomes almost impossible to pin point at any individual or set of individuals. Nor it is easy to catch redhandedly such thieves. Where they are caught also, surprisingly the legal process is so fragile that it becomes difficult to establish a theft. Any way librarian is not a police officer. While discussing various security methods Pierce (1980,p271-249) says "... maintaining the security of library materials has changed from a minor irritant to a major problem. Many libraries have discovered that they are losing more than one percent of their collections each year [and] vandalism, arson and wanton destruction have become more common in libraries and will probably continue and even possibly increase".²

An analysis of types of books lost and the distribution of value of books lost as against the strength of collection and average cost of books acquired should provide some guidelines about type and nature of books lost the need for vigilance, the need for change in arrangement and organisation of collection. Such analysis with some useful ratios³ like loss to use/consultation, loss to stock (in value), loss per user per year, etc. would be quite useful. Annexure I provide one such analysis of loss of ISRO Satellite Centre (ISAC) Library for the year 1987-88. It has clearly indicated that text books and other popular books in the area of office rules, electronics, computer science, etc. costing far less than the average cost of book acquired are lost. Annexure II provides a ratio analysis of loss of ISAC Library. It may be observed from Annexure II that for every Rupee in the stock Re 0.0005 is lost in a year and for every user 0.0458 document (or 4 documents for every 100 users per year) or Rs. 3.09 worth documents are lost in a year. Further, for every 1000 documents in stock on an average 3.67 documents are lost. As against Govt. of India guideline (cited earlier) of allowing 3 books for every 1000 circulated/consulted, ISAC library has lost only 0.58 document. Lastly the value of loss of ISAC library is just 80% of the incidental revenue earned in the form of nominal overdue charges levied by library.

6. RESPONSIBILITY AND WRITEOFF OF LOSS

After accepting and probably implementing wherever possible the additional precautionary measures against loss of library documents the ordeal does not end. No

precautionary measure without fully undermining the service function in an open access library can ensure total elimination of loss. A negligible number of perverted, possessive, habituated persons responsible for loss and mutilation are likely to continue inspite of liberalised services and strict vigilance. Further what has already been lost and what is going to be discovered as lost in the future stock verifications need to be explained to and got write-off by the competent authority. At this stage the question of who is responsible for loss of library documents often surfaces with an indirect hint at librarian or librarian together with his staff though most of special libraries and information centres are directly or indirectly managed by non librarians either in the form of committees or as officer incharge. In some libraries, the librarian may be directly held responsible for the loss.

Loss of moveable property, stores and consumable is a universal phenomenon. Individuals, insitutions, departments, public and private enterprises incur loss of many types of moveable property, stores and consumables. An individual library user, who looses a book borrowed from the library pays the 'replacement cost' to the library, rightfully and sometimes vengefully feels that what is lost by librarian should be made good by librarian. But he conveniently forgets to distinguish librarian as individual user from librarian as a functional head of the library.

In no other area of loss like that of minor equipment and consumable in any organisation so much of fuss about responsibility of loss arises as it happens in loss of library documents. As such stock verification is covertly viewed as a tool to punish librarians. Librarian in the process of providing service to users antagonises those who loose documents borrowed in their names and earns a psychological dislike or hatred by recovering the 'replacement cost' of documents. It is extremely rare to see a situation in an organisation where recoveries are made for loss of minor equipment and consumables even though they are issued in the names of individuals for keeping in their exclusive possession.

Compared to the magnitude of losses in many types of stores items in an organisation, the loss of library documents is meager. Secondly the stores items including smaller equipments would have been kept under exclusive possession in lock and key and there may not be a need to share them with others. Infact, many times books issued to individual departments are also lost. Further all other types of items are subjected to

strict security with gate passes. On the other hand, documents in an open access library are meant for shared use by many. Library staff is not meant to keep custody of library documents alone. This comparison of the circumstances in which loss of library documents occur with that of stores items clearly shows that loss in libraries are inevitable. For argument sake, an anti-service attitude can be taken by a library and advocate for having security guarded closed access library with gate pass system. But it takes away the essence of library services. Results of stock verification should not be used to impose restrictions. In any organisation, if librarian and his colleagues have to take the full responsibility for the loss of documents and make good the loss from their salary, it is obvious that he and his colleagues who share the responsibility be given a 'risk allowance' on line with allowances given for jobs like that of cashier in offices in addition to providing freedom in amending the policies and procedures of library to minimise loss.

However, the more reasonable way of clearing the deadlock of responsibility is to treat the loss of library documents like any other loss in the organisation and the competent authority write-off the same unless the situation warrants an enquiry about negligence and dereliction of duty on the part of librarian and library staff. The rules governed by the institution would indicate the financial powers and limits for write-off and the extent of loss allowed. For example in case of Govt. of India institutions, (as per references cited earlier) librarian in the rank not below that of a Deputy Secretary to the Govt. of India or Head of the Department who has financial powers can write-off loss of library documents to the extent of financial powers and monetary limits. A loss of 3 volumes per 1000 volumes issued/consulted in a year is proposed as reasonable limit for loss unless the loss is attributable to dishonesty or negligence on the part of librarian. Loss of a book of the value exceeding Rs.200/-* and the books of – special nature and rarity shall invariably be investigated and consequential action taken. Further rare books and books of special nature may be kept under closed access. There is also a provision in the above rules that there should not be any objection to the disposing of mutilated/damaged/obsolete volumes to the best interest of the

* Too low compared to average cost of S&T books in 1984. In case of documents acquired through gratis and exchange, fixing value becomes difficult.

library as long as it is based on recommendations of a three member committee appointed by the Department.

In practice, many authorities have a peculiar way of looking at new policies, procedures, services including write-off of loss. They wish to know what is the situation in Y&Z libraries nearby and how they have acted. Unfortunately the authorities of Y&Z libraries would have desired to know the situation in X&Z and X&Y libraries, respectively. This kind of conservative and risk less attitude prevails in many places. Lastly, there is also a dishonest way of handling this occupational hazard of library stock verification being practiced by some libraries by way of declaring the loss as much less than actual and hence defeating the very purpose and advantages of stock verifications.

7. CONCLUSION

Library stock verification is not just an unnecessary evil which brings very little benefit to the users and library staff but has some advantages. There are many ways of quickly and effectively completing stock verification depending on the organisation of records, magnitude of work and availability of tools and men. There are an array of precautionary measures against loss of library documents depending on the purse of the institution. But the cost of such measures often far exceed the saving they may provide to the library. The issue of fixing responsibility for loss of library documents has created an occupational hazard for librarianship. Rationalisation and updation of rules regarding stock verification and the prescribed limits regarding writeoff of the loss in service oriented libraries would go long way to provide better services to users. Particularly, the guidelines should be made more explicit about type of material to be covered (ie., only books and bound journals) for stock verification and rational about fixing the limit on the cost of the book for initiating enquiry and action. It may be reasonable to say that a book costing more than 150% of the average cost of the book acquired during the year only need to be subjected to further enquiry when it is lost. Professional bodies have a vital role to play in this regard.

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* IASLIC Bulletin, 36(3) September 1991: 103-110.

ANNEXURE I

DISTRIBUTION OF COST OF LOST DOCUMENTS OF ISAC LIBRARY AGAINST TYPES OF DOCUMENT

1988	Gratis	≤25	Cost in Rs.					Total No.	Total Cost.
			26-50	51-100	101-200	201-300	≥301		
Books	2	39	21	7	8	2	2	81	4,868.28
Reports	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	174.00
Standards	4	11	0	0	1	0	0	16	279.80
Journals	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	1,529.00
Reprints	8	0	1	1	0	0	0	10	92.40
Total	16	50	22	9	10	2	4	113	6,943.48

Note: Year: 1987-88; Average cost of lost documents: 61=45;
Average cost of a book acquired = Rs. 500

ANNEXURE II

RATIO ANALYSIS OF LOSS OF ISAC LIBRARY DOCUMENTS

Sl. No.	Period	Loss		Value of documents in stock† (Rs. in Lakhs)	Loss per yr per Re. in stock (4/5)	Members@	Loss per user per year	
		No.	Amount (Rs.)				No. (3/7)	Amount (4/7) Rs.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.	1972-Dec 78	117	6584	16.60	0.0007	364	0.0536	3.01
2.	Jan 79-Mar 85	186	9052	106.24	0.0009	953	0.0325	1.58
3.	Apr 85-Mar 86	82	6927	124.69	0.0006	1305	0.0628	5.31
4.	Apr 86-Mar 87	37	4000	145.09	0.0003	1525	0.0243	2.62
5.	Apr 87-Mar 88	113	6943	166.84	0.0004	1676	0.0674	4.14
6.	Apr 88-Mar 89	137	10846	193.09	0.0005	1731	0.0578	5.35
Total/Av.		672	44352	752.55 (14 yrs)	0.0005	1259	0.0458	3.09

Sl. No.	Period	Collection*	Loss per year for 1000 vol. in stock (3/10)	Use (loan + consultations) in 000's	Loss per 1000 loans/consultations (3/12)	Overdue charges collected	Ratio of loss to overdue charges (4/14)
1	2	10	11	12	13	14	15
1.	72-Dec 78	3041	6.41	NA	NA	NA	NA
2.	Jan 79-Mar 85	20225	1.53	359	0.52	NA	NA
3.	Apr 85-Mar 86	33943	2.42	122	0.67	7765	0.89
4.	Apr 86-Mar 87	38047	0.97	126	0.29	9069	0.44
5.	Apr 87-Mar 88	42241	2.68	142	0.80	9664	0.72
6.	Apr 88-Mar 89	45407	2.20	203	0.49	9225	1.00
Total/Av.		30484	3.67	952	0.58	35723	0.76

Key : * Average of collection in a given year excluding microforms and unaccessioned trade catalogs are shown; † about 75% of total budget of library (excluding salaries and stationaries, etc, supplied through central stores) normally spent on books, reports, journals and other reading materials are shown; @ Average number of registered members based on yearly statistics of registered members at the end of the year is taken. Actual users are much more than registered members.

About the Author

Dr. M. S. Sridhar is a post graduate in Mathematics and Business Management and a Doctorate in Library and Information Science. He is in the profession for last 36 years. Since 1978, he is heading the Library and Documentation Division of ISRO Satellite Centre, Bangalore. Earlier he has worked in the libraries of



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