

## Outsourcing Digitisation | January 2011

### Summary

As part of the process of undertaking [Case Study 4: Physical conservation vs digitisation for preservation](#), LIFE-SHARE spoke to many digitisation providers about quotations for digitising print.

Clear communication is absolutely essential when obtaining outsourcing quotes of any kind, but particularly so when pertaining to something complex such as digitisation. LIFE-SHARE approached several third parties to find out how much they would charge to digitise a sample of 200 monographs; the aim of this document is set out the lessons learned so that other digitisation projects or services will be able to undertake this process more efficiently and effectively.

### Choosing a company

LIFE-SHARE got in touch with digitisation providers based on this extensive list from JISC Digital Media, a partner in the Project and acknowledged expert in the field: <http://www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk/crossmedia/advice/digitisation-services/>. This list does not claim to include every company offering a digitisation service, and nor have JDM vetted those listed and assessed their services – but it is an excellent starting point from which to assemble a shortlist of providers, from whom to obtain a quote.

After checking the brief summaries available on the list, we then visited the websites of those companies who appeared to cater for the specific requirements of our project (in this case, the ability to digitise to a high standard, using a Digital SLR Camera, and to handle fragile documents). We looked out for the following:

- **Examples of their work available to view online:** clearly being able to see examples of previous digitisation the company has undertaken, particularly in situ on the client's website / repository rather than just reproduced on the provider's own website, is an excellent way of determining the quality of their work
- **A list of clients:** although not the be-all and end-all, if the list of clients is impressive (particularly if the company has ongoing relationships with institutions of a high standing in the Special Collections, Archives, Preservation or Digitisation communities) this bodes well
- **Testimonies from customers:** detailed feedback from customers with good reputations is always a positive sign
- **Evidence of their technical expertise:** some companies will refer to the technical side of digitisation in a way which encourages the potential customer that the company truly understands the process. For example, some companies referred to the correct calibration of digitisation equipment (such as colour-calibrating their monitors) or to their environmental / handling / security credentials (e.g. "Compliant with BS5454, we ensure appropriate and secure accommodation for all archival material in our care" etc). This is a good way of ensuring the company is not one which *can* provide digitisation services, but one which appreciates the high level of technical expertise to do it well.

Once we had narrowed our shortlist down further based on the above criteria, we sought recommendations from digital practitioners we respected and trusted. Some of these coincided with the providers we had determined as being suitable for our needs, so clearly we would approach these, and others led us down new avenues we had not previously considered.

In the end we had 12 providers to whom we sent initial exploratory emails.

## Initial approach

LIFE-SHARE contacted all of the providers via email – the intention was to establish contact with some general information and prices, and then use this to narrow down the list and proceed from there. If we had our time again, we would do things differently.

The initial email read along the following lines:

I'm writing on behalf of the library at the University of Leeds. We'd like to get an example quote on a couple of theoretical digitisation scenarios.

We're interested in digitising fragile materials that would require a certain amount of careful handling, via photography rather than scanning, and resulting in high quality TIFF files. I'd like to know prices for two sizes – firstly up to 165mm in height, and secondly 200mm, and I'd like prices in both those sizes for 100 leaves, 500 leaves, and then any economies of scale that kick-in thereafter whereby mass digitisation works out at a cheaper rate per page. I'd also like to know if whether the binding is hardback or paperback (or loose leaf) makes any difference to the price.

This did produce some useful responses – it was immediately clear that a couple of providers we had approached would not be able to meet our requirements, so could be crossed off the list. However, our email was not specific enough. For projects of this kind, it is really important to say exactly what you want the provider to do, because a: the price and resources involved vary enormously, b: providers really do not like talking in general terms, they prefer specifics and c: because it takes some time for them to assemble the quote, so it is in neither your interests or theirs for this process to happen more times than is necessary.

The quotes we got back were, by and large, astronomically expensive. This was due in a large part to not having made our needs clear successfully. Our 200 book sample actually contained 46,000 pages in total – clearly, to mention 100 leaves, 500 leaves and then 'any economies of scale that kick in thereafter' was wholly inadequate to convey this. Similarly 'a certain amount of careful handling' was far too vague a phrase to use as providers like the ones approached are used to dealing with Special Collections materials (ancient manuscripts and so on) and so will naturally assume that is the level of care required. In fact, although our collection was indeed fragile, it was not of intrinsic value and was not, for example, in need of full colour reproductions of beautiful illuminated manuscripts – it was just, for the most part, books published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. All of this information should have been included in the initial approach.

It is also worth noting that the two sizes we quoted made no difference to the price – it was the same for both, with all the providers we approached. Clearly digitising A0 documents will be much more expensive than digitising A4, but for a 40mm difference it did not influence the price per image. However, loose-leaf was invariably much cheaper to digitise than bound volumes.

In the event we then had to get back in touch with all the specific information mentioned above, and obtain a new quotation from each provider. This second iteration was invariably much, much cheaper – mainly because 46,000 pages is such an enormous amount for one digitisation project that the economies of scale meant the providers could offer their lowest working rates. In some cases, the second quote was a sixth of the first quote, meaning a difference of hundreds of thousands of pounds.

It is worth noting that due to the complex nature of the digitisation process, and the fact that providers do not wish to misquote and would rather insert several caveats into a ball-park figure, digitisation companies will often prefer to phone you up and talk about the project, rather than set something down in an email which may not be valid

once all the circumstances are known. For this reason it is good to have all the information about the Project easily to hand in your office.

Before making a final quotation, most providers will want to see the analogue materials in person, so a visit will need to be arranged.

## Factors to consider regarding price

Although the process of obtaining a digitisation quotation as described above is fairly complicated, it still may not be that the figure you have is entirely representative of what you would actually pay for your project. Factors to keep in mind when discussing price include:

- **VAT** (especially if the rate has changed since you opened discussion with the provider)
- **Whether the digitisation will take place on location** (in which case will you need to pay for travel and accommodation for the digitisers, and have a room set up to house their equipment)
- **Whether the digitisation will take place on-site at the digitisers** (in which case will you pay for the transportation / storage of the materials, or is this included in the price?)
- **How much post-processing does the figure include?** (It is likely that the price will include clean-up and upload to an FTP server or similar, but does it include technical metadata or any other description?)

## Summing Up

The process of obtaining quotations is surprisingly long and involved, and of course if done well can save your organisation thousands of pounds compared to it being done badly. The most important thing is to include clear and explicit detail as to your requirements, right from the very beginning, and to make sure you know what those requirements are inside-out. Then make sure you know exactly what you are getting for the price, and whether there are any extra costs that may be incurred depending on circumstances.

**LIFE-SHARE Project |**

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The logo for JISC, consisting of the letters 'JISC' in a bold, orange, sans-serif font.