

eLab-oration: Production Model and Workflow of a Digital Imaging Lab

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ABOUT THE DIGITAL IMAGING LAB

NYPL's Digital Imaging Unit (DIU) is an in-house digitization service responsible for producing high-quality captures of special collections and archives materials. We support NYPL's three research libraries through internal and vendor projects, creating digital images for everything from paid commercial use to online exhibitions. The lab is equipped to digitize a variety of materials, including rare books, manuscripts, slides and negatives, and 3D objects.

BEFORE | PREVIOUS WORKFLOW

Our first project management tool was a Trello board tracking the basics. Once a ticket was populated from a template, an assigned Collections Photographer would use the information on the ticket (typically limited to its metadata information) to digitize the material, and mark as ready for quality control when digitization is complete. No production details were retained for recordkeeping.

CHALLENGES: This workflow lacked the granular features that would allow photographers to share work and information within projects. Due to the limitations, we were consigned to single projects over several months at one workstation. The arrangement left little room for learning, engagement, and flexibility for the production staff. Without a complete record of the imaging process being maintained, crucial project communication was frequently lost during and after the digitization process—sometimes requiring the reimagining of materials. Overall, the approach reduced efficiency and increased frustration among the staff.

While the Trello board (designed to allow stakeholders to easily check the status of their requests) may have worked for some users, it did not work for the lab. It was clear that we needed a more robust system for better communication.

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AFTER | PRODUCTION MODEL

Following NYPL's closure for COVID-19, the DIU returned to work in July of 2020 and faced a host of fresh problems: social distancing, new building hours, limited work stations, collections quarantine, and sanitizing measures.

Upon our return, we deployed ClickUp as our new workflow management system, moving away from a broader Kanban approach. Every library item is processed in ClickUp, with its appropriate template guide, labels, and photography instructions in place. We use production stages and workflow checklists to track each project's life cycle within our lab. Special fields dedicated to equipment tracking, collections location, capture count, and research library identifiers allow for valuable data to be extracted from tickets, and ensure the integrity of our systems.

MONTHLY PRODUCTION SPRINTS

In the beginning of the month, photographers are divided into teams, and each team is assigned to a body of work (i.e., public orders, exhibition work, or internal library projects). This is a means of creating a more predictable and productive project load. The staff also gets to expand their experience by handling various specialized equipment and collaborating with rotating teammates. The structure has been successful in improving our production output and professional development.

DIGITIZATION EQUIPMENT

Cultural heritage digitization requires specialized equipment and components to build an imaging workstation. Earlier this year, we (alongside colleagues Rebecca Baldwin and Marietta Davis) conducted an independent survey to examine the tools used in other organizations. We received responses from sites worldwide, from local archives to national libraries. While our analysis is still in progress, we hope that the study will shed light on how varying labs operate to support digital imaging.

ClickUp: Ticket Stage

Open
Check-In in Progress
Evaluation in Progress

In Production

In Quality Control

Delivered
Repository Check

Moved for Metadata

Production Completed
Removed

Digitization Status

- Project ticket is created in ClickUp.
- Material is delivered to the DIU.
- Production supervisors examine the items and prepare instructions.
- A Collections Photographer claims a ticket. Digitization is in process.
- Imaging is complete. Another photographer proofs work for issues.
- The digital file is sent to the client.
- File security in digital repository is confirmed.
- Metadata staff completes the records for NYPL database and website.
- Digitization process is complete.
- Item is returned to its collection and the project ticket is closed.



"Photographing New York City - on a slender support 18 stories above pavement of Fifth Avenue [man with a camera]." (NYPL, 1906)

WORK CULTURE AND FUTURE PLANS

As the need for digital access continues to surge, the DIU plans to expand library services and use this production model across the network. It will strengthen communication, collaboration, and transparency—values that reflect in our work culture and priorities. Moving forward, we are optimistic that our model will make an effective impact on imaging practices, as we continue to work together in achieving digital accessibility for all.

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