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Do More with More

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Do More with More

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My consulting practice seems to go in phases and lately I've been in the consortia phase. It's a gratifying place to be. In each case, I see the power that comes from libraries coming together to do something better than any one library could do on its own. In some cases, it creates opportunities that would be completely beyond a library's capability due to lack of resources (be they human or financial or both).

Initiatives that require costly technology or costly technology experts are particularly good projects to handle at the consortial level. The integrated library system (ILS) is one of those big, complicated, costly technologies that can be leveraged in many ways. There's the underlying platform (server and operating system), the application (the ILS itself), and there are the people involved in managing the system (ILS Administrator) plus the staff using the system. Some, or all, of these components can be shared across libraries.

For example, a group of libraries can use the same server and application yet operate as independent libraries. That's what a group of libraries in Northern California is doing. They are each part of a shared Koha system hosted by a service provider. Each library administers its own system and has its own patron records and collection. But they save a lot of money by sharing that platform and that vendor contract, and by not having to manage the operating system and deal with backups and software updates.

You can leverage the shared ILS a little further by sharing the content too. With one shared collection and one set of patrons and a coordinated set of policies, it usually only requires one or

two people to run the system for everyone, instead of one or two people in each library. To the extent that cataloging can be centralized, this too can often result in significant savings for everyone. It also usually results in a much better catalog too. Fewer catalogers working in concert results in a more consistent, and higher quality set of records than a group of distributed, and independent, catalogers can provide.

A shared ILS creates the opportunity for resource-sharing without the cost of another application, and equally important, without the headache of introducing a middle layer application requiring integration and endless tweaking. With a shared collection and shared patrons, items can move around the consortium just like they would within a library system. Resource sharing can just happen organically.

Of course with resource sharing comes delivery. And the cost of moving material around all libraries within a consortium can be significantly more than the cost of moving material within a single library system. But this too can be managed centrally to reduce the costs. I know of one consortium that runs its own courier operation at a cost of fifteen cents per item shipped. I know of another consortium that outsources its delivery operation to a regional courier at a cost of seventeen cents per item shipped. Done right, these logistics operations can be affordable. But it does require hiring the right people for the job.

I've worked with many consortia that are already sharing an ILS and already providing delivery services, so were ready to kick up their collaborative services offerings another level.



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With these consortia, I am often looking at automating the central sorting operation in order to dramatically reduce the delivery workload on the library staff side. This means looking at the ways library staff label, sort, and package their outbound deliveries and also improving the workflow on the receiving side.

For example, many libraries label every item they send out or they presort, meaning they put all items targeted for a location into a designated bin. This is time consuming and/or space consuming – two things that many libraries do not have. So instead of asking the library staff to sort, a centralized sort operation can be set up to query the ILS to find out where items should go. The central sorting staff then switch from reading labels on items to inducting items onto the sorter which handles the communication with the ILS. The sorter says “here’s a barcode number, what should I do?” and the ILS says “that one’s going to South Branch to fill a hold” and the automated sorter routes it to the appropriate bin (e.g. South Branch’s Holds bin).

One consortium in the country provides a central sort operation like I’ve just described above, but without the automated sorter. In this case, the sorting team uses “sort-to-light” software that communicates with the ILS just like the automated sorter. But, it uses humans for conveying and sorting. In this scenario, the human sorter scans the barcode and when the ILS reports the status of that item back to the “sort-to-light” software, the system flashes a light above a bin and the human sorter places the item into that bin.

Whether it is via a sort-to-light system or an automated central sorter, the sorting process is much more accurate and saves a lot of library staff time because presorting and labeling has been eliminated. Another nice benefit of this type of ILS-driven central sort operation is that it picks up extra holds that have been requested

between the time the item is picked up at one location and when it would otherwise have been delivered to its destination (only then to have the hold captured and the item re-routed).

And you can take collaboration to another level. Certain central sorter vendors offer systems that keep track of each item that is sorted into a bin so that when the bin is delivered to the receiving library, the items can be uploaded in a batch for quicker, more ergonomic check-in. This is particularly effective for items being returned. There are some extra tricks you need to implement to make it useful for holds, but there too, you can do some pretty slick things for library staff receiving material via delivery.

Let’s go another step beyond sharing the collection and look at coordinated collection management. Instead of having all the libraries in the consortium randomly purchasing items based on their own limited view of how the collection is being used, why not centralize the analysis of use and help ensure that more popular titles are ordered only when the system really needs them. Too often, I see individual libraries in a consortium setting their holds ratios and purchasing new items only to find that other libraries have done the same thing and suddenly there are way more copies of something than are really needed.

Coordinated collection analysis can also result in an even richer collection than the consortium would have by blindly bringing everyone’s collection into one set of holdings. With a little coordination, a consortium can evolve the collection with each library focusing on certain niche areas. This results in more “long tail items” and a much more diverse collection in terms of topics and languages. It may even further reduce the need for costly ILL requests.



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Many consortia limit the leveraging of human resources at the consortia level to the obvious roles: ILS administrator, courier, maybe cataloger or electronic resources librarian. But there's more that can be done at the consortium level that will result in ratcheting up the skill level of staff working on library initiatives. For example, managing public access computers and print management systems takes a certain set of skills that many smaller libraries cannot afford. Instead, these libraries have their "accidental" tech person who does his or her best to keep things going. A better solution is to have a strong desktop and network team at the consortium that can set up these systems for all the member libraries according to industry best practices.

The same goes for website development. Developing and maintaining vibrant, user-friendly, websites that bring together library services and result in an integrated "e-branch" require a variety of technical skills. Unfortunately, many library websites reflect the fact that the library lacks the resources to make a state-of-the-art web experience for their patrons. But if libraries banded together to hire a broader range of technical talent that could be shared, each member library would have access to the skills needed to bump up its web-based services. This would also automatically improve each library's ability to deliver services to their patrons' mobile devices since any good website developer would be using responsive design that works on tablets and smartphones as well as it does online.

There are lots of things that could be done by pooling financial resources to enhance human resources available for all members. Too often the charge of the consortium is to save money and hiring a lot of consortia staff seems counter to that directive. But there are so many things that high-quality consortia staff could do for libraries that would result, in the long run, in reduced costs. For example, consortia running open source library systems such as Koha and

Evergreen could save money by reducing their reliance on vendors for support and development. There's no reason not to develop the skills in house since the software cannot be taken away by the vendor. Learning to use it and develop it is a good investment.

Training and organizational development is another underutilized opportunity for consortia. All libraries need more help building strong leaders and more effective teams and enhancing the skills of staff to match the real needs of today's library workers. Centralizing some of these resources at the consortium, or perhaps just provisioning some of these human resources via the consortium, would benefit member libraries tremendously.

It's increasingly difficult for libraries to handle the complex needs of a state-of-the-art library, but by banding together with other libraries and strategically leveraging both technical and human resources, they have a much better chance of doing what they would really like to do.

So, think big. Take resource-sharing and collaboration to the next level. And the next. Don't do more with less. Do more with more.

