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Whose Job is it Anyway?

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In the early days of my library consulting career, I did a lot of work for Infopeople, an excellent library training organization here in California. The most popular workshop was "Computer and and Internet Troubleshooting." It was an all-day workshop that helped people understand basic troubleshooting techniques. I taught it over 40 times. People learned how data packets made their way from a remote server, across the Internet, into their building, and to their public computer screen so they could begin to understand and identify problems at the computer-level (reboot), library-level (router) or website-level (their problem, not yours). They looked inside a hard drive so they could see the delicate components. After a brief overview of the parts of a PC and how it all works, they had to attach all the external devices on their computers (keyboard, monitor, mouse, power) and boot up successfully.

During the period I taught those 40+ classes, library staff were just starting to accept that computers really were part of their job. They were beginning to recognize that it wasn't okay to put an "OUT OF ORDER" sign on their public PC and go about their business. Those PCs were their business.

Today, there's no question that computer competency is a requirement of the job. Patrons come in with smartphones and ebook readers and need help downloading library content. Students need help accessing course reserves and searching databases. Many libraries now have sophisticated media labs, and the "makerspaces" movement is ramping up the need for computer and technical competencies even more.

Still, there's another level of engagement in technology that needs to happen. Specifically, libraries need to become more proficient at not just administering, but at integrating the software they use to run their libraries. And those same people, the software integrators, must be involved in the procurement of the software. If the same people in libraries that were responsible for making software work were also involved in selecting software, I think libraries would be making different decisions.

They'd see exactly what goes on behind the scenes when third party vendors try to integrate their products with the ILS. They'd see the workarounds required to get past the lack of true openness. If people writing procurement documents really understood how SIP and NCIP work (see my previous column), they might use more precise language in their RFPs. They'd eventually start selecting ILS vendors that actually make it easier for third party products to communicate with the ILS instead of choosing products that make it more difficult than ever. They'd choose software that created opportunities for the library IT staff to do new and creative things with their own data rather than choosing products that frustrated anyone with new, big ideas.

ReadersFirst represents the kind of change I'm talking about. It is a "movement to improve e-book access and services for public library users." ReadersFirst coalition partners have issued a set of content access requirements for ebook platforms. The 270 libraries that have signed on to the ReadersFirst requirements have pledged to hold content providers to the stated standards and promised to prioritize the ReadersFirst standards when acquiring e-books. The demands are technical. They are not lofty statements about traditional library principles. Here are some examples:

- The service's API, web services, and other external access methods must be available with few restrictions and must

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be sub-licensable to other service providers under contract by the customer.

- The service must provide methods that allow programmatic access for approved external services to securely perform circulation transactions on behalf of the patron and wholly within the environment of the external service.
- Must provide e-content in open formats (ONIX, ePub, PDF, HTML5) that are compatible with common reading applications, such as Bluefire.
- Proprietary apps may be developed and made available via mobile app stores and other venues, but shall not be required for displaying vendor's e-content.

In other words, the people involved with ReadersFirst represent exactly the kind of library leaders we need involved in all software procurements. They are librarians committed to serving their communities and they understand that, in order to do this, they have to have a very solid understanding of the technology they are using. We can't assume that vendors are developing products that we want for ourselves and for our patrons. We have to start defining much more explicitly what we want and what we need. And we need people involved in making those software selections that ask the right questions and know when they are being sold a bill of goods.

The next time you put together an RFP for an ILS, discovery layer, or service platform, make sure the people involved in making that software work in your environment are part of the procurement team. Instead of relying on the same RFP that has been passed around from library to library, use your team's technical knowledge and real-life experience to make wise choices for all levels of the organization. Making software choices based on sound technical criteria really is part of your job.