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The Holy Grail of Library Automation: The Shared Library System

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Over the last year, I’ve been working closely with consortia in my home state of California. I’ve participated in something of a “listening tour” to hear what is working and what isn’t working at the consortial level and to find out what they really need that the consortium could provide.

What I’ve learned is that it is very hard to get beyond the basics: shared e-resources, shared delivery and networking with their peers. Initiatives much bigger than that, strike them as beyond the realm of possibility. What I would love to see is some “hive mind” where the members suddenly become aware of their ability to address many of the challenges that hold them back with one big change – moving to a shared library system.

The shared library system is the holy grail of library automation. It’s awesome and yet so difficult to acquire. For libraries lucky enough to have gone down this path years ago, it might not seem so magical, but the shared library system has many wondrous qualities.

**Built-in resource-sharing**

With a shared library system, the patrons and the library material from each member library are all part of a single system so resource-sharing happens transparently. Instead of an expensive and clunky system to which patrons must be transferred when they want to look beyond their local catalog, a shared library system allows patrons to request items from their reciprocal borrowing partners as easily as they do from their own library. There is no need to create a virtual and/or union catalog that patrons need to use when their search fails. Instead, they have access to everything in one place.

Staff workflows are significantly easier with a shared library system. Items from other libraries don’t need to be checked in and out in a separate interface. All circulation transactions are handled in one system without any duplicate data entry required. No ILL paperwork and book wrappers and all that hooha that used to be associated with resource-sharing required. All circs become equal.

**Simplified Authentication of Shared Resources**

Let’s say you don’t want to share all of your collection but you do share some stuff with other libraries like that Enki eBook platform, the Mango Languages subscription, or Homework Help. With a shared library system, the authentication for using those shared resources only needs to be set up once. In most cases, the time required to setup authentication for a new collection will be reduced by as many times as there are participating libraries. And, depending on the authentication method used, it might only require one additional piece of software rather than software purchase per library.

**Cost Savings**

Okay, now let’s say you don’t care about reciprocal borrowing or resource-sharing of any kind. Turns out the shared library system still makes a ton of sense. You can share a system and still keep all your patron and collections separate. In such a case, what you are now sharing is the platform and that is still significant. If you share a library system, you don’t need as much hardware, software, licenses, or people as you do...
when you are on your own. The vendors figured this out long ago which is why they started providing hosted systems. They leverage their own hardware and software and broadband connection across multiple clients. Libraries can do the same thing with each other.

Shared Expertise

When a library goes down the road of a shared library system, other things tend to get shared as well. For example, rather than having a system administrator for each library, there can be one or two for everyone. Cataloging services can be shared and maybe even selections and acquisitions. It makes sense that collection management be coordinated for all members, if the group is sharing the collection. So, fewer collection management personnel are needed.

The result of sharing some staff is that you can spend money on people with even more skills than you might otherwise be able to afford on your own. Instead of having five entry level people with some web design, a tiny bit of programming experience and minimal skills extracting and formatting data from the library system, you could have a solid team composed of a database administrator with programming experience, a strong web designer and usability specialist, and a business analyst.

Shared Library Systems and Consortia

I actually think we made a mistake long ago when we bought into the “One Library - One Library System” paradigm that we were sold when the integrated library system was introduced. The amount of money spent on the thousands of installations of the same library systems doing the same thing is mind-boggling. Good for vendors. Terrible for libraries.

Consortia can lead the charge toward consolidation.

As soon as you share a library system, you’ve created a consortium. It is at the consortium level that everyone will decide how to make decisions around how decisions will be made and who does what for whom. For libraries that are sharing resources, circulation and holds policies, service level agreements about turnaround times, and how material will be packaged and transported will be defined at the consortium level. The relationships and trust built between libraries in a consortium can go a long way to easing the transition from a stand-alone library system to a shared library system while providing a tremendous leveraging opportunity.

Yet, only a quarter of consortia actually provide their members with a shared library system (per OCLC’s 2013 snapshot of U.S. Library Consortia). What is it that makes libraries think they should pay for their own library system? With so few library systems to choose from these days, it certainly can’t be that they think their library has unique needs and so the group couldn’t possibly agree on one system!

As the vendors themselves move to multitenant, cloud based systems, and as entities like OCLC and DPLA build out platforms that scale nationally (and beyond), I suspect we may one day see a shared national library system where libraries would retain their own collections and continue to serve their local communities while leveraging the technologies needed to manage those collections at a very large scale. Like Amazon Prime but without the Amazon part. It makes so much more sense to share the platform and the software, than to have everyone paying for the same thing over and over again. I am confident we could be using the human and financial resources spent on individual installations of library management systems much more wisely. And, it probably needs to begin with your consortium.