

The Care and Feeding of Your Integrated Library System

by **Norma Graham** and
Agnes Rivers-Moore

Your integrated library system (ILS) is like the plumbing in your home: you don't think about it much when it is working well, but when it stops working or becomes obsolete, you are faced with some difficult challenges. Good maintenance practices, forethought, and planning can keep the trials and tribulations to a minimum.

We are part of a consortium of six small public libraries in southwestern Ontario, the Saugeen Library Consortium. The consortium was formed in 2007 after our ILS, Winnebago Spectrum, was "orphaned": Spectrum was bought by Follett, and Follett informed us that they would no longer be supplying updates or support for the program. For small rural libraries like ours, this was a huge problem, since our budgets are already very tight, with no spare funds for the enormous cost that a new ILS can represent. After much deliberation and research, the consortium chose an open source system called Koha, and in 2009 all six libraries changed over to the new system.

This experience has taught us some important lessons:

- Ensure that the computer hardware that you will use as your server is current, robust, and secure. Because library program applications have evolved from a time when computer storage was minimal, they tend to be quite dense and do not require a lot of storage space. So you may think that an old computer could be used as a server. But as computers age, their ability to process and retain information can be reduced (rather like people in that regard), and you may find that data becomes fragmented or lost altogether. When you attempt to migrate to a new system, recovering lost data can cost time, money, and stress. It is worth spending a bit more up front for good hardware.
- Ensure that any IT people who are working with your ILS are knowledgeable and that they consult with either the software company's tech support or, in the case of opensource software, the programmer and the users' community, before making any changes to the system setup. Many of us have had the experience of trusting an overconfident tech support person to fix a problem with a computer and finding that things get rather worse after they're done with it. Don't let a computer daredevil have free rein in your ILS software or hardware. At least one staff member in your library

should have sufficient understanding of the system to know what is, and what is not, a reasonable idea for making changes to your system. If you don't know, find out before the change is made.

- There are many types of barcodes. Codabar and Code 39 are two that are in common use in libraries. We advise that you use one kind of barcode for all your materials in all your branches, and do not change from that one kind of barcode. Your present system may be able to read different kinds of barcodes, but when it comes time for you to migrate your data, you may find that the new system doesn't like a lot of different kinds of barcodes and refuses to acknowledge the existence of part of your collection. Unless you have a very amenable programmer working for you who is willing and able to write extra code to accommodate different kinds of barcodes, you might find yourself having to re-barcode, and we all have better ways to spend our time and energy than that.
- Keep a tidy house. Databases and ILS systems work better if they are not clogged up with accumulated years of unused data. These systems are recording every move of every item in the library, going back to the day the system was turned on. Weed the data as you would your library stock, removing out-of-date circulation history, membership records for the lost and deceased, and stock that has vanished from your shelves. If you change a policy, make sure the system reflects your current practices; remove references to old item types or loan rules. If there are repair procedures for your older ILS, use them to keep the system healthy. Like good housekeeping, keeping the database tidy and unclogged makes everything run more smoothly, and when it comes time to move there is much less "stuff" to migrate to your new ILS.
- Libraries need to do succession planning for their ILS. Planning will ensure a smoother transition when the time comes for your ILS to be replaced, because you can find out if the data from the old system will migrate smoothly into your new system. This can prevent irritation at a time when you're already stressed from what can be a major change. You can better ensure the integrity of your data when you keep both your present system and your next system in mind. Consultation with other libraries that have systems

you are considering will help inform your choice as well. ILS succession planning will also help you to budget for the new system. It is true that proprietary software companies make it very difficult to budget for a new system by imposing strict confidentiality agreements on their customers, so you can't just ask someone at another library what their system cost them unless they went open-source. But having at least some funds in place will mean that you can get a new system when you need it – not a few years later than you needed it, when your data is losing integrity and your ILS has begun to crumble from lack of support and upgrades.

We strongly recommend that CEOs and library staff involved in systems management keep up to date with the rapid changes in library software technology by following relevant blogs and websites. One site that we suggest is Marshall Breeding's "Library Technology Guides: Key Resources in the Field of Library Automation" (available at librarytechnology.org). Breeding tracks current trends in libraries' use of ILS technology, including what systems are being chosen by which libraries in over 50 countries, and provides contact information so you can get in touch and ask their opinions of the systems. He also charts the history and current status of various software companies whose main business has been ILS software.

A little planning and research and good maintenance practices can make the change to a new ILS much less traumatic. There's a world of difference between having your migrated data click smoothly into place, and having to mash it in with a mallet. We hope these tips will make your experience delightful, not difficult.

Norma Graham

is a Library Technician with a BA from the University of Toronto, and works at the Kimberley branch of the Grey Highlands Public Library.
kimberleylibrary@cablerocket.com

Agnes Rivers-Moore

has her Dip. Lib from Aberystwyth University in Wales and a BA from the University of Natal in South Africa. She works at the Hanover Public Library.
arm@hanover.ca