Chapter 2

START SHOPPING

Integrated library systems (ILS) were once expensive, unruly beasts that required racks of servers, rooms full of computers to store data, and several frazzled systems librarians placing calls to overburdened information technology (IT) staff. A half-decade of fiercely competitive product development and all-over improvements in processor speed and data storage have made these systems smarter, smoother, and somewhat less costly.

The suite of functions (acquisitions, serials control, cataloging, circulation, inventorying, and the patron access catalog) that comprise an ILS is nearly standard by now; few products survive in today's market without this basic complement of functions. For libraries looking to purchase an ILS, this industry standardization has simplified the purchase process. At the same time, this trend also has made the final selection more difficult, since librarians seem to be selecting among equals.

Although implementing and selecting technologies are hardly new to librarians, the ILS purchase process is complex and demanding—it requires patience, careful allocation of responsibilities, and imagination. This chapter discusses how to begin the purchase process, as well as ways for librarians to gain market savvy and use their networking skills before the RFP is even started. This chapter includes sections on:

- Developing a plan and timeline
- Assessing needs
- Gaining market intelligence
- Making requests for information
- Developing specifications
- Working with a consultant
- Working with a consortium

Developing a plan

Because most libraries in the market for a new library management system have likely gone through the acquisitions process more than once before, planning an acquisition can be a too-familiar task. Careful planning is valuable on several fronts—a well-formed and well-announced plan alerts the library staff to its upcoming responsibilities and keeps everyone on task, keyed to a communal deadline. Planning also leads to smooth software implementation and training once the purchase decision is made.

A well-formed acquisitions plan takes a lot of time on the part of library staff and administration. As planning isn't a new exercise for the library, the acquisitions team may be tempted to skimp on time allotted for making a plan. Librarians, like all humans, are creatures of habit. Staff members may feel as if they've been around the block before and may be inclined to plan in an ad hoc way—to just repeat the process from last time.

As anyone who has been part of a software acquisition and implementation knows, though, plans can go wrong in interesting and unusual ways. Plan carefully. Plan formally. Record all dates and deadlines in writing. Better still, record dates and deadlines electronically.

Most office networks have a shared calendar program—use it to keep the involved library staff abreast of where you are in the purchase process and what's on the horizon. During this phase, create a website for the team involved in the purchase process; host the calendar on the site and schedule regular e-mail updates for staff members. Keeping the plan visible and dynamic increases staff investment in the project.

Planning: Still not convinced?

"The alternative to planning is random movement of a series of uncoordinated reactions to external influences. Without planning there is no means of control after implementation has begun."

—Richard W. Boss, "A Model RFP for an Automated Library System,"
Library Technology Reports, *Vol. 35, No. 6*

To plan a library system purchase is to make a systemic recipe that has several ingredients: needs assessment, market analysis, synthesis, and specification.

Needs assessment

The first step of the purchase process primarily involves the higher library administration, which determines the intent of this phase: the scope, the amount of time allotted for studying the library's needs, and the budget. Someone, an in-house systems analyst or possibly a consultant, should take the role of the designated expert for this stage. The expert is responsible for assessing the project's feasibility and formulating the library's definition of needs or problem statement. This document will act as the guiding spirit of the RFP.

One person should write the problem statement, or needs assessment, but the document should be critiqued by other members of the staff. The final result will represent the input of several key personnel in the library. Meetings and discussions should be held to resolve errors in and disagreement with the problem statement until a fair consensus is reached. At this stage, the library staff should have a clear idea of what must be accomplished.

Once the needs assessment has been formulated, the statement is brought to the next higher level of management for approval and commitment. Financial and administrative commitment from higher management is vital for the project to continue. Also, the library should not be merely satisfied with a green light from higher management—the librarians managing the ILS purchase should keep the governing body informed of changes or points of progress in the project.

Sending regular, event- and milestone-based updates and reviews is almost like telling a story. By keeping higher management abreast of your progress, you are more likely to ensure their investment in the process and convince them that yours is an active, worthwhile project.

The head librarian on the project also should stay apprised of major personnel changes in the governing body or higher management during the life of the project and be sure to review the project with new presidents, provosts, library boards, or superintendents.

Making the personal gesture to tell the story of your project to new personnel makes a good impression. Writing in the December-January 1999 model RFP issue of *Library Technology Reports,* Richard Boss reminds librarians "commitments are both personal and institutional, and the latter are often shaped by the former."

Once the project gains institutional assent, the head librarian should appoint an experienced and motivated staff member to serve as project coordinator. Although this staff member needs to know the ILS market and its products, selection should primarily rely on the management skills of the individual. The head librarian should budget money and time for brief management training workshops for the project coordinator to hone the coordinator's skills and prepare him or her for the task at hand.

Market and operations analysis

This stage of the process involves analyzing the library's functions and the library system's role in those functions.

How is the library underserved by its current management system? Are there services available that will significantly alter and ease the experience of library users and staff? Will the investment in a new system be offset by increases in staff efficiency or patron satisfaction?

The purchase team should seek to devise and answer such questions and, in the process, develop expertise about current features in the market and costs of new systems. The team should be able to compare different generations of library systems and isolate the essential desired features for the next system.

You're a first-timer?

In the increasingly rare case of libraries automating for the first time, the switch from a manual system to an automated one is major. This guide is written with the assumption that the library is moving from one ILS to another. The companion model RFP at www.techsource.ala.org will be especially helpful to first-time buyers, since it contains comprehensive functional specifications.

The library should examine the ILS market to gain intelligence about development trends, product releases, pricing changes, and vendor health. The first step is to consult publications focused on library technology and integrated systems. *Library Technology Reports* is an excellent place to begin; many current issues directly confront the purchase and management of integrated library products (for example, Marshall Breeding's upcoming January-February 2004 *Library Technology Reports,* "Integrated Library System Software: A Guide to Multiuser, multifunction Systems" and "Integrated Library System Software for Smaller Libraries," by Anne Salter, May-June 2003.

Monthly publications, library-industry websites, and e-newsletters also spotlight ILS development and vendor activity. *Smart Libraries Newsletter*

Breeding's and Salter's work can be ordered online at www.techsource.ala.org/purchase/buy.pl or by telephone at 800-545-2433, press 5.

(formerly *Library Systems Newsletter*) and The Source Online, both produced by ALA TechSource, focus on vendors and products, as well as modular and add-on library management products. Several library publications, including *Smart Libraries Newsletter*, *Library Journal*, and *Computers in Libraries*, produce annual surveys of ILS vendors at the same time each year, generally in March.

The Source Online, free at www.techsource.ala.org/index.pl

Other helpful online resources include Library Technology Guides, created by Marshall Breeding of Vanderbilt University's Jean and Alexander Heard Library. These guides include recent vendor news in the form of searchable, archived press releases. Although D-Lib, an online magazine, has a digital library focus, it also provides a rundown on recent news, as well as internationally oriented articles about project implementations and innovations.

Library Technology Guides, www.librarytechnology.org

D-Lib, www.dlib.org

LISFeeds also provides library technology news at a site maintained by librarians Blake Carver and Stephen M. Cohen. This site contains feeds from numerous library news sites on the Web, which can be viewed by clicking the site title in the page's left column.

LISFeeds, www.lisfeeds.com

While librarians are developing intelligence about library products, the project team should learn about libraries similar in size and service that have undertaken similar projects. Communications with staff at those libraries should provide valuable insights into the triumphs and pitfalls of the purchase process.

Marshall Breeding's searchable lib-web-cats database allows you to find libraries based on size, type, location, branch numbers, and management system used at the site. Lib-web-cats can be accessed from the front page of Breeding's Library Technology Guides site at www.librarytechnology.org.

Attending American Library Association conferences or other professional conferences is a good way to discover and communicate with librarians from similar institutions. Conference attendance also allows library staff to visit vendor booths to see firsthand what products are available and how they work, to collect product literature, and to attend meetings and workshops about procuring library systems.

This stage is primarily about gathering information and getting up to speed with the state of product development before you dive into the RFP. Knowing what's out there helps the library to construct the RFP in realistic terms.

Vendor viability

The library system market has been riding a wave of consolidation for several years. Companies are being purchased by other vendors, are shutting their doors, or are partnering with other vendors to license and sell ILS products. The market appears to be shrinking. At this stage, someone on your library's purchase team should briefly study which vendors are still viable in the market and which are likely to have more limited life spans.

Even though a company is staying in the market, a general industry-wide emphasis on enhanced library products (portals or linking systems, for example) has shifted development and staff resources away from the ILS. This diverting of resources may bode well for the continued existence of the vendor, but it also indicates likely delays in delivery of promised ILS functionality.

Determining which vendors are both viable and actively developing updates for their integrated library systems is one way to narrow the field in a preliminary way (though there are no guarantees your vendor will not hit a rocky patch or be swallowed by a larger vendor a few years down the line).

More on viable vendors

The June 2002 issue of Library Systems Newsletter *offers a comprehensive discussion of assessing ILS vendor viability, written by Richard Boss. This article includes tables of revenues and installations, as well as the author's recommendations about healthy vendors. To order a copy for $12 plus $2 shipping and handling, call ALA TechSource at 800-545-2433, press 5.*

Revamping requests for information

A proper request for information (RFI) is increasingly rare in the library market, mainly because vendors make much of their product information available on the Internet. RFIs fell out of favor because vendors traditionally gave them cursory attention. The RFI does not seek project bids, making it a less enticing prospect for a bid writer or sales representative.

At this stage in the process, however, a reinvented RFI may give the library some foreknowledge of what systems will be worth their consideration. This time, rather than sending an RFI to vendors, the library will send its requests to similar libraries to find out about their recent (within the last two to three years) library system acquisitions.

Lib-web-cats can be accessed from the home page of Breeding's Library Technology Guides site at www.librarytechnology.org.

Librarians can use their amassed contacts to find peer libraries but also should consult Marshall Breeding's lib-web-cats database, a searchable database that allows you to find libraries based on size, type, location, branch numbers, and management system used at the site. For instance, if you are a Midwestern public library system with six branches and 500,000 holdings, you can search for the same in the advanced search screen.

The new RFI process can be much less formal than the former process; libraries should start with a basic questionnaire and conduct interviews over the phone, face-to-face at a conference, or via e-mail. The desired result is a handful of narratives that should provide basic guidance for constructing the RFP and managing the negotiation and installation processes.

Librarians are only too happy to share their experiences with vendors and products; free advice is a plentiful natural resource in the library community. Exploit it shrewdly and well.

Synthesis

Now that you know what's available in the market, you need to go back to the beginning and revise your needs assessment accordingly. The head librarian and members of the purchase team may feel overwhelmed with options—not only are the desired functions available in the market, but a vast and tempting array of add-ons and separate modules are out there, too. A coherent, systemic plan allows the library to reexamine its first steps and edit as needed.

Were cost assessments on target? Of the add-ons, separate modules and companion products, what does the library need, both in the near- and long-term? The head librarian, plus the counsel of higher management

and staff, must now decide whether to adhere to, expand, or cut short the original needs assessment.

Developing specifications

At this point, the library must begin developing detailed specifications of what it needs from a new system. These specifications should concern how the new system will perform in different situations. Design and details about the backend construction of the systems are secondary concerns; the primary purpose of the specifications document is to list the prospective system's desired functions. These specifications will comprise the RFP in its rudimentary form.

Libraries can write their own specifications or they can retain a consultant. Creating the specification document in-house will most accurately reflect the needs of the library and will assure the commitment of the staff who will work closely with the new system.

A library may prefer to work with a consultant with deep expertise in the library market to develop an RFP that speaks clearly to the actual state of the market. A consultant will know how to write an RFP that is taken seriously by vendors. The library's project leader, provided he or she grasps the market and products, may choose to develop the specifications in-house and hire a consultant to critique the draft after it is written.

Pre-RFP documents

Many institutions issue documents to staff and users to mark the beginning of an RFP development process. These documents function as a predraft of the RFP, and include reasons why the institution seeks a new system, as well as basic lists of desired functionality.

In 1999, when the California Digital Library began seeking a system to host the CDL databases, the library's RFP Steering Committee issued a background paper and RFP checklist to inform staff and solicit input from its librarians and users. These documents are included in Appendix A of this report.

Such documents are especially useful for large library systems or multilibrary institutions, where input is required from a broad community of users and staff.

Working with a consultant

Many libraries choose to work with consultants in developing an acquisitions plan for a library system. Working with a consultant can be costly (from about $80 to $150 an hour, including expenses), but it also can ensure the process will be objective, clear, and relatively short. Consultants are involved in about 22 to 35 hours in needs assessment, and an additional 12 to 20 hours in preparations of specifications and the RFP.

Consultants are objective observers who bring expertise and market intelligence to the purchase process; they also have proven modes of analysis and

the ability to hone in on problems with singular concentration (as opposed to staff members, who must balance their regular duties with responsibilities on the purchase team). The American Library Association maintains a directory of library consultants, as do several state library agencies.

Disadvantages of working with consultants include a perceived distance between the library staff and the purchase process. That is, library staff may feel removed and consequently less interested and invested in the process if an outside consultant is guiding the process.

Any consultant would be happy to work more closely with the staff, but the project manager or library head usually maintains a strict cap on the number of hours the consultant spends in staff meetings. Consultants generally give formal shape to the planning process, and the number of hours spent on the project is usually prenegotiated by the library administration.

Because most libraries have been through the initial automation process and frequently seek their second-, third-, or fourth-generation ILS, the need for a consultant seems less pressing each time around. Especially now, as many librarians feel integrated library systems are reaching a plateau of development, consultants aren't seen as necessary to negotiating an increasingly simplified ILS market. Consultants are increasingly hired to advise on digital library initiatives, such as the creation of online image repositories.

This report assumes a library is not working with a consultant. Libraries that do choose consultants will still benefit from incorporating suggestions made here into their systems purchase projects. This report also assumes a library or library system has appointed its own planning team. Planning teams devote part of their time to the planning process and spend much time gathering information about the state of the market and available ILS products.

Time spent in the planning stage becomes longer than it would be with a consultant, mainly because a consultant already has market expertise. The cost of longer planning time cannot be calculated because staff salaries are existing line items in the library's general budget; the overall impact on the library's operations budget is relatively small.

The in-house team may choose to proceed more informally than an outsider would or may vaguely define its responsibilities at the outset. The head librarian can avoid these pitfalls by holding regular meetings with the team to assure that the process is on track and that stated goals are being met.

While developing a team in-house comes at a cost, writes Boss in the November-December 1999 model RFP issue, "the greatest advantage of this approach is that nucleus of knowledgeable people develops within the library itself."

Cooperative and consortial ventures

Vendors are currently selling library management systems to consortia, and ever-larger numbers of libraries are forming buying groups for various library management products. The anecdotal and sales data of the last few years suggest that group purchasing is an idea whose time has arrived.

Because the recent flowering of development in electronic library tools has unfortunately coincided with several seasons of funding cutbacks, libraries are eager to form consortia to collectively pay for enhanced functionality. With consortia and cooperatives, groups of libraries leverage their buying power to access tools they could not otherwise afford.

Cooperative planning for a library management product can vary in scope from planning by several libraries in a community to state- or region-wide initiatives for libraries of many types and sizes. Cooperative planning does not always have to involve cooperative buying, however; libraries may choose to collaborate on data gathering and analysis, but opt to purchase separate systems.

Cooperative planning has several advantages—it may be more systemic than an individual library's plan, and it places a smaller burden on a library staff to research the market. Planning costs also are lower in a cooperative. Such plans may form the bedrock of later plans for linking libraries or sharing resources.

Although risks are diminished, the disadvantages of cooperative or consortial planning and purchasing include a slower pace of acquisition. This slowdown becomes acute close to implementation, when negotiations between a participating library and a vendor hold up the process for all consortium members.

One frequent result of cooperative planning projects is not the purchase of a shared system but of many different ILS products, which are then linked.

Purchasing a shared system can be an effective way to limit capital costs in purchasing a new ILS but not in the way you'd expect. Shared systems rarely cost less unless libraries involved are small because hardware and software are priced in tiers and by the number of user licenses.

The real financial benefit of sharing mid-size systems among libraries is realized from the governmental and foundation grants cooperative and consortial efforts can attract. The bulk of technology grants made before 2001 were for cooperative ventures, largely because they breed resource sharing across a broad population. Cooperative digital library projects are drawing the most grants, for mainly the same reason.

Conclusion

Planning for a library systems purchase is generally an unwelcome task among librarians, but a purchase process that is well-formulated from the outset is less likely to result in disorganization and disaster later on. The team of librarians entrusted with the task of researching the library market should be vigilant researchers and eager newshounds—the more knowledge you have about library system capabilities, the better and more thought-provoking your RFP will be.

After planning is well under way and the library's in-house purchase team (or the library consultant) has developed preliminary specifications, the request for proposal (RFP) begins to take shape. Armed with data from an informal RFI and from market and viability studies, you will have the expertise to ask questions that go beyond ILS-industry boilerplate.