

Observations, Trends, and Ongoing Challenges

Abstract

Chapter 5 of *Library Technology Reports* (vol. 49, no. 1) “*Resource Sharing in Libraries: Concepts, Products, Technologies, and Trends*” provides perspective on the companies and products offering resource-sharing capabilities and some of the broader issues that impact how libraries develop their ongoing strategies in these areas.

A Narrow Industry

This review of the major products offered to support interlibrary loan and resource sharing reveals strikingly few options. Despite incredible interest in resource sharing, only a fairly limited slate of ongoing products is available. Relative to other business sectors related to library technologies, the niche involving resource-sharing functionality is quite small. While some new projects have emerged, such as Rapid, which also involves supporting software, there are few indications that the offerings will widen. The new open source Fulfillment project offers some promise of an additional alternative in the direct consortial borrowing arena, but it is off to a slow start. Some further product narrowing will happen through OCLC’s consolidation of its resource-sharing products on its WorldShare Platform.

Modernizing Legacy Products

It’s also an industry of longstanding products undergoing a phase of modernization. OCLC, Auto-Graphics, Relais International, and Innovative Interfaces each launched its products over two decades ago. We’ve

noted the major transformation underway at OCLC to shift WorldCat Resource Sharing, VDX, and WorldCat Navigator to the WorldShare Platform; the rebranding of Auto-Graphics AGent Resource Sharing into SHAREit, its steady evolutionary development, plus a major facelift through the new Illuminar interface; and Relais International’s expansion of its product line to include Relais D2D, which has positioned it for adoption in progressive projects such as Borrow Direct.

National Scope

Interlibrary loan continues to have a national flavor. OCLC stands as the dominant player in interlibrary loan and resource sharing, though its activity is somewhat concentrated in the United States, with uneven use internationally. Many countries operate their own union catalog and interlibrary loan systems, many based on OCLC products, but some on other systems.

Strategic Collaboration

The participation of libraries in cooperative organizations continues as a major strategy. Benefits expected include lowered automation costs, increased opportunities for resource sharing, and opportunities for efficiencies through collaborative collection development and technical processing.

Few libraries have the ability to create collections capable of meeting all possible needs of their users. Resource sharing represents only one thread in broader strategic interests of libraries in reducing costs and increasing impact through cooperative efforts. Collection development strategies regularly include aspects

of demand-driven acquisitions, allocating funds to purchase materials based on immediate requests by patrons rather than on selections made in advance by librarians. Decreased allocations to monograph collections increase the demand for consortial borrowing, interlibrary loan, and on-demand purchases. Other areas of strategic collaboration include shared physical storage facilities and collaborative digital preservation programs.

As libraries enter into consortia to share materials, they may also want to implement strategies that support coordinating areas of collection strengths. Collaborative collection development allows libraries to concentrate their budgets on strengthening areas of critical importance to their key constituents and to rely on peers for materials in other disciplines. This approach allows libraries to create deep collections in selected areas, knowing that they can rely on partner institutions for other areas of specialty.

Transition from Consortia to Shared Systems

Direct consortial borrowing provides the basis for resource sharing that decreases costs with more rapid fulfillment relative to traditional interlibrary loan services. The implementation of consortial borrowing for groups of libraries with separate ILS implementations requires an additional layer of technical infrastructure that adds considerable complexity, cost, and fragility. A trend seems underway toward ever larger consortia supported by large-scale ILS implementations. The size of an ILS implementation is much less constrained by limits of technology. The Massachusetts Library System and the Illinois Heartland Library System provide examples of a trend toward consolidation of previously separate consortia. Orbis Cascade's upcoming transition from independent ILS implementations among its thirty-seven members to a single ILS also points toward shared infrastructure in support of deeper collaboration.

A broad trend seems to involve moving to shared automation environments with built-in resource-sharing capabilities rather than more cumbersome technical environments that connect otherwise isolated systems. The need for resource-sharing systems that work among independent ILS systems will continue, but the trend toward ever-larger ILS implementations may mitigate demand for these products in the longer term.

Struggling Standards

After over two decades of struggling with the interoperability needed to achieve efficient resource sharing, the standards process remains in play. The international standard currently in force has seen only spotty adoption. Efforts have been energized to develop a new

standard consistent with current technical architectures that is simple enough to lower the barriers to adoption.

Limits of Licenses

The transition from print to electronic publication comes with a great impact on resource sharing. The guidelines associated with the fair use of printed books and journals were generally accepted by both publishers and libraries in regard to interlibrary loan lending. Once these materials become available through electronic subscriptions, they likewise shift to governance by the terms of the licenses offered by the publishers, which may or may not allow interlibrary loan lending. Libraries naturally negotiate to allow such lending, but not always successfully.

E-books present incredible challenges to libraries. With interest in e-books skyrocketing in the consumer arena, libraries struggle to find satisfactory models to provide services involving these materials equivalent to what is well established with print. The options for what e-book titles can be added to a library's collection and how they can be lent to patrons remain quite limited. Libraries continue to struggle with the basic models of incorporating e-books into their local collections and service offerings. How e-books might fit into resource-sharing and interlibrary loan services remains an even more difficult challenge.

Concluding Observations

The individuals involved in interlibrary loan and resource sharing represent a specialized segment of the profession who deserve incredible respect for their dedication to providing materials to library patrons with the greatest speed and efficiency possible. It has been my observation throughout my career in academic libraries that the technology tools that support these activities have consistently lagged behind the ambitions of the profession and the pressures of the daily workload. Today the tools available are more powerful than ever, but considerable room for improvement remains.

It seems to me that the struggle for strategies and technologies in support of more efficient ways to meet the needs of patrons beyond what resides in local collections is far from over. The evolving consolidation of libraries toward larger organizations with shared infrastructure, the redeployment and future reshaping of OCLC's services, the modernization of other products in the field, renewed efforts to develop an effective international standard, and especially the drive of library professionals as expressed through the Rethinking Resource Sharing initiative reflect the advent of a new phase of energy and innovation in this arena.