

Working together to expand and extend the functionality of your ILMS – how to get more from your vendor

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Abstract

A collaborative working relationship with your vendor will result in positive outcomes for both parties. This paper discusses the importance of a strong customer/vendor relationship, commercial reality from the vendors' perspective, and how to work with your vendor in developing your ILMS. Two case studies are discussed; Ngee Ann Polytechnic (a major tertiary educational institution based in Singapore) implementation of an e-Payment/cashless solution and Department of Family and Community Services' (an Australian Commonwealth Department) implementation of a complete Single Requests Facilitator.

Introduction

Library Automation began its life as an automated card catalogue, however it has now moved far beyond that point. Ongoing advances in technology, particularly the introduction of the Internet, continue to raise our expectations of what an Integrated Library Management System (hereafter referred to as ILMS) could and should accomplish. Factors such as staffing levels, budgets and customer expectations are forcing libraries to become innovative users of the technology.

Libraries have become much more responsive to the requirements of their users. In the past librarians offered services because they believed they were for the betterment of society, even if those services were minimally used. Libraries now know their clients better and are tailoring their services to the changing needs of their client base, often varying greatly from organisation to organisation, suburb to suburb. Each library will want to tailor its services to best suit the needs of its particular community, whether that is the public, students, academics or colleagues.

ILMS no longer exist as an island within the library. Connecting to a global network through the ILMS is now just one of many information systems that libraries provide that library staff and their customers need to use.

The Library market is much like the Greek Agora of 400 BC, with many parties (libraries, system vendors, publishers, content providers, etc) contributing equally to the ultimate objective – providing a service to consumers. Given that each party has an equivalent vested interest in the success of the market, it is essential for each to invest in a greater understanding and appreciation of the other's mission and challenges.

The ILMS is a highly sophisticated piece of software, whose sophistication lies in its simplicity of use and operation. Certainly in the case of Civica, this simplicity is the result of over 25 years of accumulated knowledge and research – a non-trivial investment in the Library market. Importantly though, many of Civica's Library customers have been with us throughout most of this time and they have benefited from their sustained investment in the evolution of what we believe is one of the leading ILMS in the world.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the many reasons for forming a closer relationship with your ILMS vendor. I would like to start with one key thought.

If you are innovative, then it is possible that you are the first to have an idea. If that is true, then it is probable that there is no ILMS that will do what you want. In this case, how do you get what you want?

The Relationship

A strong analogy can be drawn between personal relationships and business relationships between libraries and ILMS vendors. Initially there is the courting phase, where the library shows some interest and the vendor is eager to please. Library staff will usually maintain a certain amount of distance; after all you don't tell all your secrets on a first date - do you? This is particularly the case when there are multiple 'suitors' involved. It is an opportune time for the library staff to get a feeling for the vendor and how they manage such relationships. Are they responsive to your questions? Do they understand your issues?

It is unfortunate that there is a general mistrust of sales people, given that this is the time-honoured way for participants in a market place to interact. It is also unfortunate that many ILMS decisions are made for reasons of functionality and price, rather than the true value that lies within an emerging relationship. The fact is that the ILMS is a core component of the Library's business, so it should not be viewed as a commodity. The Library is making a significant investment in its vision, and to maximise the value of that investment it is vital to buy what the product will be or could be in five years as much as what it is today.

The relationship between the vendor and library professionals should begin before you start openly looking for a system; this will allow you to talk openly to and ask questions freely of each vendor without fear of conflict. Once the tender process has begun you will not be permitted to make contact with the vendors so it is important that you have an idea of the companies that will be responding to your tender, and that they have an idea of the goals and mission of your library.

The majority of ILMS purchases are tender-based. Whilst often a necessity, tenders can also inhibit the building of a close relationship with the vendor. An arms length sales process is not necessarily conducive to a library finding out what is the best system for their needs. It is difficult for both parties to really sit down and talk through all the issues; this makes it difficult for the library to determine whether a specific system will meet their stated and often also un-stated requirements. It is therefore challenging for a vendor to get across a tailored message, as they are not sure what are the important issues for that particular organisation.

The next stage is the most exciting part of the relationship. Contracts are signed and the celebrations begin. These celebrations continue throughout the implementation process, where there is a lot of intense working with each other. There is that period where you are getting to know everything about each other. Once the system is installed and bedded down, maintenance mode begins and the intensity decreases. Both parties go back to their regular tasks, the relationships continue, but at a less intense level. This is the maintenance mode. The relationship will, like all relationships, have its highs and lows. This is a most important time; active communication is vital. After a prolonged intense experience, where the library professional is at the centre of the world, it is not uncommon that, when the ILMS has been implemented, the library feels "unloved", since the vendor has to split the available time amongst all the other customers in the user base. It is important to remember that the vendor's goal is to implement quickly and prepare clients to take ownership of their system.

The implementation of the ILMS is by no means the end of the close relationship that you will have established with your vendor - in a lot of ways it is just the beginning. Both teams have proven their ability to communicate and work together to achieve goals in a set time frame. This will form the basis of ongoing experiences, whether it be day to day system support or future joint projects. It is imperative for this reason that this relationship be treated like other important relationships, with respect and honesty. The reality is that in the course of your relationship with your vendor, you will have engaged in a great number of tasks. It is important to maintain the health and vitality of your relationship with your vendor at all times.

The dirty word - “money”

Unfortunately, as we all know, libraries are very often at the end of the food chain when it comes to budgets, and generally do not have a lot of money to spend. This in turn affects what vendors can charge for systems and ongoing support. ILMS are amongst the most sophisticated software available, and in any other marketplace vendors could charge considerably more than they charge libraries. The Australia/New Zealand ILMS market is also over serviced with suppliers and the market has become very cost competitive. Vendors are facing competing forces, reduced income and increasingly complex technologies that demand increased investment in development. A vendor cannot just go off and start developing software unless there is a market-place for it.

Libraries want to extend their systems, but each library wants to do something a little different to meet the different needs of its customer base. This makes it difficult for the vendor to deal with the competing forces in its user base, and at the same time keep within financial constraints of being a successful, viable business. A process of collaboration will enable a vendor to meet the needs of more customers, more quickly.

Working together

Vendors and libraries must work much more closely together to develop the ILMS. First of all they need to communicate, ergo the good relationship, and they need to educate each other. Libraries cannot expect the vendor to know everything that is taking place in the market-place and the vendor must assist the libraries to understand the technology behind their system, the possibilities and the limitations. The vendor needs to understand what developments are required and any reasons for urgency for developing new features in the software. Libraries need to appreciate that the vendor must balance the needs of all its customer base whilst maintaining a profitable business.

It is very difficult to predict library trends. Civica employs a considerable number of professional librarians; however unless you are a practicing librarian you will not always be aware of current issues that the profession is experiencing. To assist in strategic planning, Civica has introduced an Innovation Panel made up of representatives from all library types in our user base. The aim of this group is to help Civica in setting the strategic direction for the product. To supplement this group we also periodically call on library staff who are strong users of a particular area of the system to assist us in the ongoing development and refinement of a module.

Civica works closely with its customer base to develop and enhance Spydus. We recognise that our customers are the reason we exist. I have provided two case studies of recent collaboration initiatives where we have been successful.

Case Studies

Case Study 1

Ngee Ann Polytechnic wanted to implement an e-Payment/cashless solution, whereby all payments would be transacted using stored value/ATM cards, both at the e-payment kiosks and the Circulation counter. Cash collection, with the exception of cheque payment at the circulation counter, was to be eliminated. Ngee Ann Polytechnic approached Civica to enable this functionality.

The process:

- Preliminary specification formulated by Ngee Ann Polytechnic (hereafter referred to as NAP)
- Civica Programmer consultation with NAP staff via phone to discuss certain aspects of the specification that were unachievable in the current state. Alternative solutions proposed and implemented.
- Quotation provided
- Decision to go ahead made by both organisations
- Programming took place from Civica headquarters onto a test system on the NAP Library Server over a period of 3 months
- Testing occurred, at significant milestones during the project phase, against the agreed specification. Tweaking of the programs and specification took place along the way (prior to go live).

Analysis:

Language presented difficulties. This was overcome by using the Civica personnel stationed in Singapore to clarify things and preferring e-mail in most other cases to phone conversations.

Communication. E-mail was utilised successfully to overcome the tyranny of distance, in that screen dumps could be attached to relay instructions, problems etc. The frustration with e-mail is there is often a delayed response. The benefits of e-mail include the document trail (as opposed to a conversation) and that the responses are usually more carefully constructed.

Specification. The specification was such that testing could take place against it. The specification was very specific, it listed the problem the project was trying to address, the benefits that the project should produce, gave real examples of resulting workflows, and specific requirements (what needed to be achieved, NOT how it needed to be achieved).

Time frame. The time frame blew out. A project plan was not drawn up for the work that was conducted. If a project plan had been utilised, it would have better illustrated to everyone their responsibilities, and may have kept the project on track.

Outcome:

The customer is pleased with the project and has been utilising it in their live environment since January 2003. The success of the project is directly attributable to a well-written specification, realistic expectations, a rigorous testing regime and the priority it was given by both the customer and supplier. Another important factor in the success of this project was the strong relationship shared between NAP and Civica.

The relationship between the customer and the vendor plays an integral role to the success of any project. The implementation of an ILMS is by no means the end of the close relationship that you will have established with your vendor; in a lot of ways it is just the beginning. Both teams have proven their ability to communicate and work together to achieve goals in a set time frame. This will form the basis of ongoing experiences whether it is day-to-day system support or future joint projects.

Case Study 2

Civica was ready to combine the existing Spydus Inter-Library Loans (ILL) and Requisitions modules that were in a character format into a new Single Requests Facilitator in a graphical user interface. FaCS (Department of Family and Community Services), already having this type of functionality in a third party product, wanted to integrate it into their Spydus System that they had implemented the previous year. FaCS and Civica worked together to build a Single Requests Facilitator that combined the features of the current Spydus Inter-Library Loans and Requisitions modules and offered additional features and benefits in a user-friendly modern environment.

The process:

- FaCS arrived at the decision that the existing Spydus ILL module was not suitable for their needs
- Meetings were conducted with both parties being represented to discuss current FaCS workflows.
- Civica provided FaCS with a preliminary specification based on workflows discussed.
- Meetings were held to discuss and agree on preliminary specification.
- Full programming specification completed, discussed and agreed upon by both parties.
- Quotation provided.
- Decision to go ahead made by both organisations
- Programming took place from Civica headquarters onto a Civica in-house system over a period of 8 months.
- Tested in-house
- Installed on site December 2002
- Further programming took place from Civica headquarters onto a Civica in-house system.
- Civica in-house testing
- Test Upgrade of Spydus, reinstallation of Requests February 2003
- FaCS Testing
- FaCS go live with Spydus Requests Module June 2003
- Tweaking of the programs along the way (during testing phase and after go live)

Analysis:

Specification. The specification agreed to by Civica and FaCS did not completely represent the needs of FaCS. The analysis of workflows was a good starting point; the project would have run more smoothly, however, if a detailed specification had been provided by the FaCS. Lack of an adequate specification played a role in the time delay and the testing regime (usually utilise the specification to test against). Upon reflection, FaCS have reported that in future they would use a Business Analyst to document their workflows and provide a detailed specification. The benefits of having a SMART (Specific Measurable Attainable Realistic Time-Frame Specific) specification are innumerable.

Time frame blew out. The programs were not available in the time frame expected; consequently the library personnel at FaCS were not available for testing and the project was stagnant for several months. A detailed project plan was not drawn up for the work that was conducted until late in the piece. In hindsight if a project plan had been utilised from the beginning, it would have better illustrated everyone's responsibilities and may have kept the project on track. If a detailed specification had been utilised it would have circumvented the "shifting sands" scenario that both parties were faced with.

Communication (Personal). After the programming specification was agreed upon, very little communication occurred between FaCS and the Development team; most of the communication occurred between the Civica Development team and the Civica System Support personnel. This caused frustration for the customer since, they did not necessarily always know how far along the project had progressed. This could have been avoided if regular project meetings (in person or conference call) had been scheduled and/or demonstrations or a mockup of the workflows and screens were provided to the customer for comment.

Communications (IT). As with most government departments, Civica did not have external access to the FaCS Library environment, with the result that each implementation, minor change or fix had to be completed on site by a programmer. This is an understandable barrier, which should have been allowed for in the project plan.

Expectations. FaCS wanted a Requests Facilitator that would do what their current system did in a modern IT environment. Civica wanted a Requests Facilitator that would combine the functionality of the existing Requests and Inter Library Loans modules and would be applicable across all markets. The expectations of the two organisations were slightly mismatched and should have been negotiated, managed and documented to ensure that the expectations of both parties were the same.

Outcome:

Both parties are satisfied that the specification has been achieved. FaCS went live with the Spydus Requests Facilitator in July 2003 and is processing approximately 1500 requests per month through the module. FaCS will be, by far, the heaviest user of this module, and it is for this reason that Civica will continue working collaboratively with FaCS to further enhance the workflows in the module. With the number of requests FaCS is processing increasing substantially from year to year, the efficiency of this module is paramount to the success of its operations.

Conclusion:

There are many different factors that a library must address to expand and extend the library management system. The key point that this paper is trying to make is that between library and vendor there must be a solid foundation of a good strong working relationship with quality communication. All parties must realise that the library and vendor are not nebulous objects but people. Ian McCallum in his article "Library Management Systems?", in *inCite* November 2003, recognises this when outlining points to look at when purchasing a ILMS by saying "Buy from someone you trust. You are about to enter a long-term relationship, perhaps ten years. You had better like the style and the corporate culture of the people you are dealing with, as well as their development plans for the software. Support the companies that support the profession."

The vendor is made up of people who have a belief in what they are doing but know that they have to work in the constraints of making a profit. The libraries are staffed by people who also have a belief in what they are doing, are dependent on their vendor and also are working within financial constraints. We all need to work together and appreciate the requirements and constraints that we work within.

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Reference:

McCallum, Ian, "Library management systems?", *inCite* Volume 24, November 2003, p16