ILS Selection for an Academic Library

In choosing a new integrated library system (ILS) for our small academic library that serves a local population of approximately 3,000 users, I have narrowed the selection down to three ILS that will accomplish our goals of being user friendly, easy to maintain and add records to the catalog, as well as being part of a larger support community. These three systems are OCLC’s WorldCat Local, LibLime, and Serial Solutions. WorldCat Local will give our users access to all OCLC affiliated libraries’ cataloged items (OCLC, 2010), while LibLime offers open source independence, and Serial Solutions’ Summons offers web-scale searchability and the AquaBrowser interface for users.

Other concerns in the search for a new ILS include enhancing or adding new services while easing the management of an ILS system. Software as a Service (SaaS) capabilities removes the hassle of having our own servers, in-house installation process, and updates from our end and places it on the vendor side. However, open source would give us vendor independence. The main benefit of open source would be to prevent vendor lock in and contracts which limits our library’s ability to evolve to meet the needs of our community. For users, an ILS system that provides familiar capabilities is best represented with a web-based interface. Finally, being able to manage digital content in a more effective way was a proponent of these
three systems. Each system’s ability to meet the above features and needs are discussed in detail below.

OCLC’s WorldCat Local is the location dependent version of their larger WorldCat service. By joining WorldCat Local, our users would have access to 1,634,869,510 items (OCLC, 2010). Locally available search results are highlighted using FirstSearch technology (OCLC, 2010), but information about the location of materials in worldwide libraries is also available. This integration along with SaaS defrays the cost from our library as we join in with thousands of other libraries in sharing resources and costs of a global ILS system. A web-based interface moves all operations into a staff-friendly collaborative environment as staff are able to access community driven metadata content. By moving the ILS to the web, “allows your library to lower costs, automate critical functions, enable cooperative intelligence and free resources for high-priority services” (OCLC, 2010). Higher priority services would include staff management and more time for customer service.

Digital content creation and management that uses our library’s unique resources can be handled by WorldCat’s CONTENTdm system in conjugation with their Digital Archive. Using these tools, we can easily document our born-digital materials with better records management. By having the metadata for these digital documents in CONTENTdm and using the WorldCat system, we enhance our library’s visibility through our search results also being accessible via search engines which gives our materials an increased chance of discovery by users.

The two open source environments that were considered are Evergreen and Koha. Evergreen is used in Georgia libraries allows all their PINE libraries to collaboratively share materials (Breeding, 2007). Their website includes a demo (Evergreen, 2010) and a link to an
introductory video (Ayre, 2010). However, I choose to go with Koha, the first open source ILS that was developed in 1999 (Koha, 2010) but supported with LibLime.

The benefits of choosing this middle of the road approach with open source but with technical assistance from LibLime is that you get the flexibility of having your own independently managed Open Source ILS, but you can get troubleshooting help from experts. This mix of free and paid gives the freedom of a library to be self-sufficient but also removes the unwanted and expensive bloat-ware modules that vendors may charge. By using an open source solution, you eliminate these costly extras which add nothing to your workflow or user experience.

LibLime’s website provides a wide range of information about choosing them as your paid Koha support system. They also include additional support features beyond the basic Koha installation. These features include demos (LibLime, 2010), cataloging software (LibLime, 2010), and acquisition products (LibLime, 2010). Their products are also browser based for user-friendliness. In 2010, LibLime was acquired by “Progressive Technology Federal Systems, Inc. (PTFS). PTFS is a company responsible for creating ArchivalWare, a digital content management system (PTFS to Acquire LibLime and Move to Library Systems Premier League, 2010). This integration makes LibLime supported Koha a powerful contender with open source, web familiarity, on-site security and freedom of our data, and gives us digital content management capabilities.

Serials Solutions is primarily known for their electronic content management capabilities. However, they have expanded by creating Summon™, a “web-scale discovery service enables a familiar web-searching experience of the full breadth of content found in library collections”
This SaaS ILS removes the expense of hosting the ILS on your own servers and gives users features like searching the library’s catalog through mobile devices, citation formatting, and look for only peer-reviewed material (Serial Solutions, 2010).

My Discoveries is a joint venture between Serial Summons’ AquaBrowser and LibraryThing. AquaBrowser brings a web-browser based interface that is attractive and modern in design. Meanwhile, LibraryThing adds tagging, book reviews, and images through this integration of services (LibraryThing, 2007). This gives a Web 2.0 solution for enhanced usability and interest.

Narrowing ILS search down to just these three companies does not make the decision any easier. While a short description of each service is discussed above, what is missing is the ability to see these systems live and bearing the weight of an actual database and users. So, the next step in the process is to find libraries that are actually using these systems. This can be accomplished by looking at the ILS websites or contacting the vendors directly to ask for a list of their customers. If a vendor refuses, this should be considered a red flag since it may mean that their customer base is small or would not promote their product (Karetzky, 1998). Once a list is obtained, try to arrange site visits and meetings with these location’s librarians to see how their system works. Also go to their online catalog and check out the interface. When a system seems especially favorable, try to get key members of the library staff to visit one of these libraries so they can assess the usefulness of the system for their own departments.

Other steps include the knowledge of the salesperson and technical support, discussing the reliability of records conversion, costs associated with the move to the new ILS, the financial health and long-term plans of the vendor, and if the company has experience implementing ILS
in libraries of our size. The immediate concerns are of the ease of system use and record retrieval for staff and users and technical support. Questions for the long-term are will this ILS scalability to future needs as well as the stability of the company. Both time periods are equally important. I neglect cost here because that depends if we are looking at an in-house solution using open source versus SaaS with the ILS operating offsite.

Staff involvement in this process is vital since the ILS forms the very backbone of employee satisfaction and customer relations. For an example of the sort of unrest that can accompany staff using a frustrated system, look no further than JSTOR’s recent changes and quick rollback to the previous design in August 2010 (Librarian, 2010). Angry staff whose input was neglected and users who cannot figure out the new catalog will quickly make the library an uninviting place. So, hold sessions with users on a test-run of the desired system to see if it is intuitive enough for them to explore. Get staff involved by finding out what features they need to minimally do their job and what bonuses they would appreciate. However, remember that no ILS system can satisfy the desires of all staff and all users so we must strike a good balance of minimum requirements and usability.

Finally, a bit of information that might make the process more complex: OCLC is being sued for anti-trust policies by a competitor (Coyle, 2010). This is recent news stemming from July 2010, so not much information is available yet, but this should be considered when comparing the three systems outlined in this proposal.
Bibliography


