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5-7-1999

Selection of an Automated Library System Using a Structured Decision Model

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Selection of an Automated Library System Using a Structured Decision Model: The Final Phase

Iowa Academic and College Research Libraries annual meeting

May 7, 1999

I. Reference Checks

In mid November, the Steering Committee began rounds of ambitious reference calling. In six separate areas, library staff called up to 6 libraries for all four vendors. I believe that many of these calls lasted up to an hour. In the case of DRA we were talking to libraries who had not installed the software yet. In the case of Ex Libris, many of our calls were overseas.

After the reference calls were complete, written reports on each call were submitted to the Steering Committee. Points for each category and each vendor were assigned by the caller, and folded into the Decision Model which Caitlin described.

II. Online Demonstrations

The 4 short list vendors were scheduled to give online demonstrations in December. Six functional teams prepared topic lists for the demos.

In addition to the sessions with a functional focus, we scheduled 1) a General Staff Orientation, 2) a Faculty Demonstration, 3) an In-depth session limited to the Steering Committee, and 4) an Open Question and Answer Session.

The schedule and topic lists were mailed to the vendors in November to give them time to prepare for the demonstrations. The schedule was pretty grueling but necessary to meet the university's request that we complete the selection in January, 1999.

After the Topic Lists were mailed, Score Sheets and Comment Sheets were prepared. In all but the general sessions, Scoring was done only by the Functional Team. For Acquisitions and Serials, this included 8 individuals. The Information Technology Team included 10 individuals, most from the computer center.

A General Staff session allowed the vendors to introduce their system's functions. All staff had an opportunity to attend and to submit written comments.

The faculty demonstrations focused specifically on user needs: the online catalog, downloading, Web performance—a mix of what the vendor wanted to show and questions from the faculty. We advertised this session in campus newsletters, various faculty listservs and posted bright signs all over the main library. Attendance was fair but disappointing. I'm sure the December schedules impacted the number of faculty who could attend.

The session called "In Depth Discussion" also became known informally as our rude session. Only the Steering Committee attended. Questions from the Committee often addressed issues which surfaced during reference calls. In this session we tried to cull out the truth from rumors; we spent a long time on issues which seemed possible weaknesses. This session was the only session in which the questions varied from vendor to vendor.

The demos ended in a full staff Question and Answer session. These were very well attended even though falling at the end of an intense two day marathon that didn't even include breaks or lunch off. All staff could get a Comment Sheet and forward opinions to the Committee.

During the demonstrations the vendors followed the Topic Lists reasonably well, some better than others but we told them they could address the issues in the order that made sense for their system. The teams cast grades (A to F) for each sub-topic. Following each demo, each team came up with a group score which incorporated each member's score and also written comments from the audience at large.

The scoring for the general sessions varied from this pattern. The General Overview and the Question and Answer sessions were not scored separately but comments and evaluations were made available to Steering Committee members. The Faculty Session evaluations were folded into the scores of the OPAC Team. The In Depth Session evaluations were included in the ratings provided by each of the Steering Committee members.

III. The Selection

So now, the data gathering is done. Scores are arriving from the Functional Teams. Scores from the RFP analysis and the Reference Checks had already been compiled.

This left the input from the Steering Committee. The Committee felt strongly that they should have the ability to do subjective evaluations in addition to the objective measures of functionality.

Each of the Committee members had three areas in which to assign points. The In Depth Session was rated for compliance to our needs and then added to the other Demo scores. The Development criteria addressed how complete the modules were and included

information from the demo sessions and the reference checks. These development scores provided a little extra weight for complete functionality.

The final category which the Steering Committee members addressed was Suitability, a totally subjective measure of the system, the vendor, hardware and software architecture, and even whether the style of the company and product were seen as compatible with the Library's environment. Each committee member completed these scores in isolation, working with the huge piles of documentation and notes from this final phase of evaluation. All scores went to Caitlin who compiled composite spreadsheets.

The committee convened and the composite score sheets were distributed to the members for the first time. There were some surprises. The range of scores between the four vendors was significant. There was no solid front runner, and it was clear one vendor might be strong in one category while another vendor might be strong in another. After some lengthy deliberation about all four vendors, the Committee decided to limit the systems under active consideration to two.

The group disbanded with some assignments. First, committee members were strongly encouraged to send email to the committee at large stating their opinions and rational for any issue but especially for those issues which were surfacing as tie breakers. System architecture, functionality of the OPAC client, political issues such as stability in the U.S. marketplace, and the ability to influence design were addressed. Second, the committee members were asked to go over their scores and to make changes as a result of the first selection meeting and of the written commentaries being submitted by the members to each other. All revised scores again went to Caitlin.

A week later the group reconvened with new spreadsheets for only two vendors. Again there was no clear front runner, but there had been considerable changing of votes. Again we talked and talked and talked. We did a simple ballot and a front runner did emerge, but it was clear that some committee members were still reluctant to endorse the decision.

At this point we identified three functional areas where vendor development would be required in the contract, and this time the vote was unanimous. This group who had worked closely together for three years felt we had made the right choice. After forwarding a recommendation report to the library administration, we had a fine party.

IV. Conclusions

We've told you about our ILS Selection process, and about aspects of this effort which are solely relevant to selecting an Integrated Library System.

I would encourage you to think about our Selection Model, in many arenas far beyond library automation. Using a complex structured decision model is only relevant for those decisions which have broad impact. Consider using such a model to evaluate high level options in a staff reorganization effort. Prioritizing a limited number of long range goals might benefit from such a process. Options for space allocation could sort themselves out using this tool. We offer this model whenever an important decision is required from a group of people.

V. Questions

Now I'd like to open the floor to questions. You can address them to any of the three of us.