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Library Services Platforms: Alma Case Study

University of East London (UEL). UK Library & Learning Services UK (<http://www.uel.ac.uk/lis/>)

Interview with Gurdish Sandhu - Associate Director (Library & Learning Services).

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For more general information about 'next generation' Library Services Platforms refer to the Higher Education Library Technology (HELibTech) 'Next Generation' article: <http://helibtech.com/Next+Generation>

UEL began full production running of the ExLibris Alma library service Platform in August 2012. It was one of the first international 'early adopters' and the first Europe & UK University to go live with Alma.

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Background

Around five years ago the newly appointed Associate Director (Systems) –Gurdish Sandhu lead the Library Digital team to setup the vision to focus on strategic use of technology to deliver library customer oriented, effective & efficient library services. The vision created was “Working together, we aspire to develop innovative ideas & technological solutions to transform the services we provide and be recognised as leaders within the University and in the library sector”. The library team was committed to realise the vision and library staff undertook the review of the library technology including the library management system in use. We found that the UEL library systems infrastructure was very fragmented. The library wanted a seamless approach to resource discovery and delivery and a single interface for information resources and digital content management. Our focus was on achieving our vision rather than worrying about funding and replicating our current processes. This helped us to concentrate on end user requirements.

Three years ago the UEL made a major migration from the Talis (now Capita) library system and SerialsSolutions products to an almost full suite of ExLibris resource discovery and resource management products (except the DigiTool-the Digital repository application). There was a consensus amongst library staff that the ExLibris Primo/Aleph solution was the best fit to meet needs at the time. The Talis to Aleph move was completed in four months. This relatively fast migration was enabled, in part, by good vendor-provided project management and implementation services.

At that time Ex Libris had already announced it was developing a new ‘Unified Resource Management’ (URM) system (later to be named Alma) and a move to unified (across print and electronic) resource management was an integral part of the library’s strategy. The library did not so much purchase a product or suite of products but rather a vision to move towards a state-of-the-art library infrastructure. The ability of the chosen solution to deliver on that vision was a higher priority than matching the detailed functionality of the old system. The library didn't want to simply replicate what they already had. So the ‘requirement’ communicated to staff was a high level one to utilize the new systems’ capability and capacity to maximise return on investment.

The migration process

The support from Ex Libris for the transition has been good. They remain very committed to the Library. This is characterised by both a strategic commitment and practical on the ground technical support. The migration to Alma has not been flawless. While this is to be expected as an early adopter and it doesn’t mean the library has always been happy about it. However the support from Ex Libris senior managers has been outstanding. They came over from Israel to talk directly to the members of library staff who were using Alma. There were some problems about the use of patron IDs in the fulfilment module for example, which had a significant impact on the speed with which staff could deal with students. After looking at the issues, Ex Libris managers responded quickly by getting developers on the ground to fully understand the nature of the problem. It was not so much a bug as a workflow issue. The developers saw how members of staff were using the system and gained a firsthand understanding of the impact and nature of problem. As a consequence they were motivated and able (because of the agile development approach used in Alma) to make changes quickly.

Benefits of the change

Financial benefits

The transition three years ago from Talis to Ex Libris delivered significant savings in system costs.

The vendor provided migration services that represented good value in enabling a fast and effective transition. Even taking migration costs into account the transition has enabled the library to make cost savings within a three year period. Similarly the migration to Alma will be cost neutral if accounted over a three year period. The Library took the opportunity at the initial Talis to Ex Libris transition stage to create integrated teams across print and electronic resources. These teams employed the *Aleph* Library Management Systems and the *Verde* Electronic Resource management System. However the need to deliver further efficiencies does not stop. Over the last year the library has lost eight people and that increased the need to further streamline systems and operations.

In terms of budget planning the move to a subscription based cloud service meant the Library did not have to bid for capital to make the change to Alma. Three years on from the original migration the move to Alma enabled the library to make further savings—most notably in systems infrastructure (servers). If the decision had not been taken to move ahead with Alma, the server would have had to be upgraded or replaced. The move to a cloud based system solved this problem. As a consequence there were also savings in library IT support costs in terms of basic IT admin tasks such as backups, patches and upgrades. But the motivation has not simply been cost reduction. The library wanted to free up technical resources to enable it to devote resources to new services and innovation such as the management of primary research data, and new more personalised user services.

Workflows

Improvements to workflow have been one of the best outcomes of the move to Alma. Alma has much better integration of print and electronic workflows than was possible with Aleph and Verde. In addition licensing data is managed better than in Verde.

Analytics

One of the key benefits of Alma is a move from management information to an approach based more on analytics. The library increasingly needs better evidenced-based approaches to making business cases—for example in making a case for Patron Driven Acquisition (PDA) of ebooks. Previously bringing together appropriate data was hard. Alma makes it easier. For example usage data on the library subscribed databases is good and, in addition, is presented well. The use of such data will help the library better align library material with usage activity and trends. This is a key factor in maximising the ROI of library resources. University Vice Chancellors pay more attention when strategies and business cases can be backed up with good, well presented evidence.

Staff morale attitude and professional development

From the beginning the change of systems was not justified in terms of losing members of staff. UEL has found that moving systems releases staff energy and helps to inculcate more forward looking attitudes. It helps to challenge existing practices and encourages new approaches to delivering services. Senior management wanted to ensure library staff recognised they were valued and as such were being equipped with state-of-the-art tools to help them do their jobs.

Being an early adopter—or what the library prefers to call a development partner- has engaged members of library staff with their international peers in other institutions around the world. There has been a lot of interest in the UEL experience from libraries around the world and this has had a positive impact on staff.

The extensive use by Ex Libris of webinars has been effective in bringing together members of

library staff from around the world with the Alma developers. The agile development methodology used by ExLibris means changes and developments don't take as long as they did in the past. At the moment new releases of the software occur once a month.

Shared data

Whilst there are potential benefits in sharing data across the Alma community it is too early to accrue these benefits as the Alma community is currently very small.

Issues, problem and concerns

UK specific functionality

Like many UK academic libraries, UEL makes extensive and sophisticated use of self service circulation. Ex Libris has worked hard to solve initial problems and delays in getting self service to work adequately. Ex Libris has realised the central importance of such functionality both in terms of service to users, and in terms of the library's fines income.

Development was also needed to support UK Inter Library Loan (ILL) practices, in particular the central role of the British Library's (BL) ILL system. It has helped that the BL - as Ex Libris UK's largest customer - has taken a strong interest in Alma's development.

Integration with non-library systems

The interface (API) to the university's SITS (student records) system works well. The university has just deployed a new financial system (Agresso), and as soon as the University is ready, it will be linked to Alma. More of a priority (because it is student facing system) is the Moodle (VLE) which is currently being implemented. The Library is aiming to replicate the sophisticated Primo / Moodle integration that has already been successful at other Primo sites.

Change of ownership of Ex Libris

Ex Libris was acquired by Golden Gate Capital in 2012 and the library undertook successful due diligence to satisfy itself that Golden Gate were committed to ongoing strong support for the Ex Libris strategy.

Data security a data protection

The University's IT Director was anxious to ensure compliance with appropriate policies and practices around data protection and security. These have a specific UK/European quality. Ex Libris responded with improved and more formal policy, documentation and practices and they have established a European data centre (in Amsterdam).

A loss of control as systems move to the cloud

One of the advantages of a locally hosted and managed system is the ability for library systems staff to respond quickly to technical issues or to modify the library application parameters. In this sense there was a sense of disempowerment as the system became hosted and managed in the cloud. In response Ex Libris have given the systems team training to ensure they have the desired level of local control. This is not to do tasks such as upgrades but rather to give them increased control over parameterisation changes to the application itself to meet local practices. The team will also of course be able to use Alma's wide range of integration tools and APIs to further embed the system into the University's wider IT landscape.
