

# Rethinking the Library Services Platform

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Ken Chad, Director Ken Chad Consulting.

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The recent decision by ProQuest to acquire ExLibris has again focussed attention on the future of library systems and the relationship between discovery, delivery technologies and content. Assuming the acquisition gets through the necessary regulatory processes we will see a large library services company with a diverse range of sometimes overlapping product offerings. We often think of library system companies like ExLibris, SirsiDynix and Innovative as large companies. While they would not be characterised as small and medium sized enterprises (SME), which are commonly defined as having up to 250 employees, they are not behemoths either. Companies like ESBCO and ProQuest are much larger. ProQuest was acquired in 2007 by Cambridge Information Group and its 2014 annual revenue of around \$500m is roughly the same as Marshall Breeding's estimate for the entire US library system market. ProQuest is roughly five times larger than ExLibris which is one of the largest library system vendors. And of course compared to the largest library company of them all – Google - they are minnows. Some while ago a librarian asked me what I thought would happen if a software giant like Microsoft developed a library system. I countered, only a little tongue-in-cheek, that the most popular electronic resource management (ERM) system in UK university libraries was in fact already produced by Microsoft. It is Excel.

Size matters. The University of Cambridge has annual revenues of over £1.5 billion. The relative upstart University of Hertfordshire's revenues are around £240 million. Higher Education is big business and libraries are becoming more integrated into their institutions. Librarians realise they must be seen to be much better aligned with institutional strategy and goals. One university librarian I know has a title of Director of Library Services & Employability. Another heads up the university press. Others are developing workflows and systems to manage article processing charges to support Gold Open Access. It has become commonplace, in the UK at least, for librarians to manage the institutional repository and more and more have roles in supporting research. In October the University of Bath advertised for a Senior Data Librarian. This person: "will deliver strategic direction and co-ordination of activities to ensure the continued development and delivery of the Library's research data service." We used to talk about 'stand alone' library systems. Now it's a complex ecosystem. Moreover it's an ecosystem where the divide between library and learning technologies is becoming increasingly blurred. Librarians rarely manage the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE - also known as the learning management system) but the VLE is often integrated with the reading list system which is managed by the library.

The conventional library management system/integrated library system (LMS/ILS) has only ever managed a part of the business of the library. So doesn't it seem rather odd that a solution can only be deemed a library services platform (LSP) if it has features to manage the cataloguing, acquisition and circulation of *print* material? Perhaps we need to shift our point of view to that of the user. If

they use the ProQuest Summon or EBSCO discovery services they will typically be able to find print materials and electronic resources integrated into the same user interface. If they find a print book they will check it out using a self service terminal provided by a vendor like Bibliotheca. Of course this oversimplifies the situation but it does suggest that the LMS/ILS tail still wags the library platform dog. Writing on LSPs in 2012 consultant Carl Grant explained that their development had been hampered because: "Existing ILS products, while containing limitations in serving today's digital environment, represent hundreds of person-years of development, testing, and documentation. You simply can't replicate all this functionality in a new software architecture in a short period of time, even with agile development techniques." But maybe that is the wrong way to look at it. Maybe we no longer need all that complexity. A new user focussed perspective on the LSP might help redefine and simplify the elements of print resource management.

My point is not to get into a wearisome semantic debate about what defines a LSP. The issue is that the problems librarians are trying to solve have widened. I doubt if any single integrated solution will do it all. Maybe the most successful companies in the information space are ones that don't define themselves as content or software or tools-based; there are no boundaries. In this view the key for solution providers is a focus on improving the workflows of their customers.

These factors are not unique to libraries. Library systems have sometimes been equated with enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems like SAP and ORACLE. Gartner, an information technology market research and advisory firm, argues that as ERP products move to the cloud it encourages a process of deconstruction. The ERP doesn't solve all the problems anymore than the LMS/ILS does. The monolithic ERP is losing relevancy. Disillusioned users is one of the core drivers in this change to what Gartner characterises as the 'postmodern' ERP. ORACLE is no longer a single product suite but sits in the cloud alongside interoperable applications from independent software vendors (ISVs). In summary their analysis is that the ERP suite is being deconstructed into postmodern ERP that will result in a more federated, loosely coupled ERP environment with much of the functionality sourced as cloud services or via business process outsourcers.

This analysis of the ERP market resonates with what is happening around library systems. It suggests that we should view both ProQuest and EBSCO as LSP vendors alongside OCLC. Indeed that would be the case even if ProQuest had not bought ExLibris. They will need to continue a process of integrating their existing products into a cloud based platform. Some rationalisation will inevitably take place: it makes little sense for ProQuest to maintain two knowledge bases and central indexes for discovery. However that will still leave gaps in the ecosystem that will be filled by solutions from ISVs. These cloud based third party solutions will be much more interoperable than solutions today. They will be part of what Gartner described above as: "a more federated, loosely coupled ERP environment." That means that LSP providers will have to raise their game in terms of opening up their platforms to ISVs. The partner programmes, developer networks and services currently offered are relatively weak compared to what mainstream platform providers like Microsoft and ORACLE sustain. There is potential here too for the library community to use open source. Indeed as I discussed earlier I think there is a good case to be made for much simpler interoperable LMS/ILS components to be developed in this way. Sector bodies like Jisc and NISO could play a larger and more determined role. In 2013 the Jisc library system change project report noted: "The failure of the library community to better contribute to the development of modern web-centric library interoperability standards has hampered the evolution of an open 'loosely coupled' library systems environment."