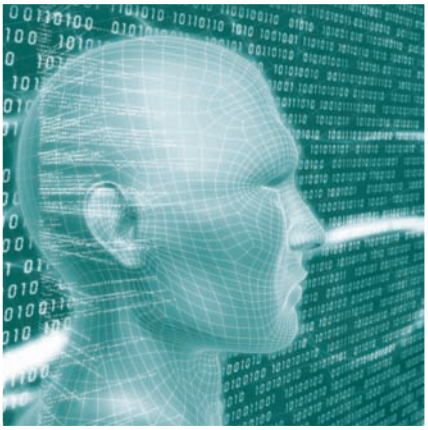

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Is the LMS at a tipping point?

New technology is threatening the domination of the Unix-based LMS. Is it time for libraries to downsize their systems and lower costs?

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Libraries didn't have to buy hardware from the LMS vendor. This was a problem for vendors who had made the most of their money by selling proprietary hardware. Libraries didn't get a choice and even many of the peripheral devices were proprietary and had to be purchased from the LMS vendor. Software by comparison was practically given away. The new market conditions meant that vendors had to change their business model. Almost overnight, software became a lot more 'valuable' and commanded a higher price. Library companies became library software companies.

'Big systems', typically in the higher education and public library sectors, became, and largely remain, Unix based. This is because Unix is inherently multi-user and, at the time, could scale better than Windows, which was reserved for small, often single-user, PC-based systems. Functionality was also more complex in larger systems, with a multiplicity of circulation loan rules and more complex cataloguing and acquisitions.

Today, there is no reason why a LMS based on a Windows server cannot scale to meet the demands of almost any large library.

However, as I discussed in my last Gazette column (1 June)[1], by the 1990s functionality had reached a plateau and LMSs became less functionally differentiated. Meanwhile Windows itself and Windows-based LMSs developed. Indeed in some respects the so-called 'small' Windows-based systems exceed the functionality of the larger less nimble Unix-based systems. Today, there is no reason why a LMS based on a Windows server cannot scale to meet the demands of almost any large library.

Have these technological changes created a 'tipping point' in the LMS marketplace? At first sight it does not seem so. The 'churn' in system replacement remains low. Libraries continue to be very loyal to their LMS vendors. However, there are some signs of disruption.

- Local authorities in particular,[2] FE and a growing proportion of HE institutions are moving away from Unix to Windows and no longer have the Unix skills to maintain their legacy systems.

1 'Taking apart the library system' By Ken Chad. CILIP Library+information Gazette. 1st June 2007. Available for download from the Ken Chad Consulting website www.kenchadconsulting.co.uk/images/stories/taking_apart_the%20_library_system_1_june_2007.pdf

2 See the annual SOCITM 'IT Surveys' www.socitm.gov.uk/socitm

- The functionality and scalability of native Windows systems have grown. Some of these systems are already proven outside the UK in large public, academic and consortia systems.

- Value is moving away from the core LMS functions to new areas such as the management of electronic resources and next-generation user interfaces. These new functions are an added cost and may not even be purchased from the LMS vendors. Academic libraries in particular are already questioning why they are paying so much for their core LMS, which manages predominantly print resources, when most of their spending goes on electronic materials.

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- Pressure is increasing in all organisations to reduce costs – especially annual revenue costs. A library running a large Unix-based LMS could pay in excess of £35,000 a year in annual maintenance. An alternative native Windows system could cost around £5,000.

- The market is not completely closed to a determined new entrant. For example Civica, with its Spydus system, has had recent success in displacing some long-established public sector LMS vendors.

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- Open source LMS solutions are emerging. Of course many LMSs have some open source components (an Apache web server for example), but a fully functional open source LMS is new. In the US the large (252 public libraries) Georgia Pines consortium is up and running with its Pines-Evergreen system. 'This software can be downloaded for free, and anyone can contribute to development efforts.'[3] Even an established vendor, Talis, has released some of its own software as open source.[4]

However, there are still issues to resolve.

- Vendors with low-cost Windows-based LMSs don't yet seem to have recognised the potential opportunity. They remain focused on their traditional school, FE or corporate markets. There are considerable risks and costs in entering new sectors. It is not just a question of having adequate functionality. They need to invest in a new marketing, sales and support approach to attack a conservative and entrenched market.

- If libraries purchase a new LMS at the cost of an executive car they are going to have to make some compromises in both detailed functionality and process. Many libraries will find this hard to swallow.

- Switching costs are still considerable so actual savings may take some time to materialise. While open source software may be free to download it is not free of support costs. Indeed the key to open source is whether there is a sufficiently large, motivated and capable community of developers out there to sustain it. There is still a question mark about that.

Nevertheless, at some point a library and a vendor will start a genuine dialogue and we may realise that the LMS market is poised again at one of those 'tipping points'.

3 Evergreen Integrated Library System. www.open-ils.org
4 Talis Developer Network. 'Project Cenote Code Released as Open Source'. www.talis.com/tdn/node/1718

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Works with organisations such as government, local authorities, schools, colleges and universities, to help make better use of their technology to realise the full potential of their library and information function.

Phrases like "Web 2.0" (and even now "Web 3.0"), the "semantic web" and "Library 2.0" have become common currency. Innovative business models driven by new, web based technologies have profoundly and permanently changed the way many users interact with the increasingly global world of information. Google and Amazon have redefined the way we search for information and acquire books, digital content and other resources. Libraries in all organisations face stiff competition but have huge potential to deliver new services more effectively and efficiently. Libraries already have significant IT investments that can almost certainly be operated better. In addition, there is a new generation of technologies to be exploited.

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We provide that additional capacity and expertise to enable service improvement and efficiencies to be gained more quickly and at lower cost. Unlike generic consulting companies we have in-depth experience and understanding of the library and information sector. Combined with a detailed and strategic understanding of the related technologies we can work with you to transform your library and information services while delivering major efficiencies.

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