

Evaluation of Library Systems and Software

by

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I am tasked to talk about the Evaluation of Library Systems and Software. I will go on with my lecture by qualifying library systems as an information system since my discussion will focus on the evaluation of an information system specifically the software component. I will be also using the term "package" which means a solution to the problems of customs design. This will include the computer programs or software and the hardware.

Being the people ware component in the information system, the basic questions that you must ask are: What do I really need? Often times, you will get a clear understanding of your basic needs as you evaluate, since there are other considerations that will be unveiled to you during the process. Will an IT solution such as creating a program or buying a library information system or a library software answer to my needs? It does not necessarily follow that a library software will work well to all libraries or information centers. If you have a system analyst in your organization, preparing a design such as defining the output requirements, file contents and inputs needed can be done. If none, making a preliminary analysis of the present system that you have would be of great help. Will this library information system or software support the goals of my organization? And finally, How much is my budget?

There are two possible solutions that can be explored: 1) In-House Developed Library information system or 2) An Application package readily available in the market. Depending on the type of the organization you are working in, a library program can be developed by your own system analysts and programmers. Aside from low cost or even no cost at all, customization and ease of modification are the key advantages of developing one. You are assured that all the functions that you want will be included. The best part of this, is, you as users, are involved from day one. One disadvantage of in-house development is the extra features that we often see in application software are not present. The assurance that the software or package has been tested, debugged and have run successfully and used by others is not present.

For an Application package or software, the time element is an advantage. No detailed programming is needed plus there is the inclusion of added features that are not seen often in in-house developed information systems. One disadvantage of this is, there could be possibilities that the users might adjust to the package and not the package to the users, to avoid extra cost. It could also be necessary, that it might require a hardware for that package.

Since a library information system is a dedicated package, it would be best to determine what scale of hardware is needed. Would it run in a pc-desktop? Or requires a server? Will the system be used network wide? How many transactions have to be processed? If there are computers in the organization, check if the library information system can run in it?

For a commercial software that are offered by vendors, the following attributes should be considered: functionality, compatibility, reliability, scalability and cost which include licensing scheme and support scheme.

Functionality

Simply put, this all about what a library information system or a library software can do for you as librarians and to your users. The question: did the program do what I really want it to do? will then be easy to answer.

Compatibility

Compatibility with existing requirements that you have such as operating system. Will the product run on the following machines, Unix box, Intel based box and others? What hardware does it require in terms of power, a pc-based server or high end servers? What are the system requirements? Please note that it is seldom to find all functionalities you require in one software. Changes and additions can be done in-house or by paying your supplier/vendor to do the work, if not included in your support scheme.

Reliability

Reliability is an attribute that means consistency in performance including convenient access to components for upgrades and patches. These could be sent to you through CDs or can be accessed online. However, always remember that there is no product that is 100% totally free of bugs or technical errors.

Scalability

Scalability is the ability of a software to function well as it changed in size or volume to meet the user's need. This is as far as the software can be customized according to your needs. Not only that it will function well but should reach an excellent performance as your needs increase. In other words, the performance should not be affected when changes are adopted.

Cost

Cost is the most important and crucial attribute in the evaluation process. Always choose products that are cost-effective in terms of initial cash outlay and support services.

Be sure that all types of costs are in your calculations. Carefully examine one-time costs, continuing costs and at the same time watch out for hidden costs. Make sure that training costs are considered.

Part of cost that should be scrutinized is the support scheme and licensing scheme offers. Support covers training, installing, answering questions, adding new capabilities or enhancing. This can be done through on-site assistance where a technical person goes to the users, for a monthly or an annual fee. Telephone hotlines can also be provided by the vendors where advice and trouble shooting can be done via telephone. When both hardware and software are included in the procurement, service sites for repairs are often established on business areas. Make sure however, that a service unit will be provided to you to avoid downtime. Please note however, that every form of assistance provided spells costs. That's why, seeking help from Users Group has become popular. This is also a good venue for exchange of experiences on the user friendliness of a software.

Licensing Schemes/License Issues

Carefully examine the license requirements of the software you are considering. There are softwares that can be installed on a one license per computer basis or per server basis. Some vendors in their license agreement can include access even remotely to do compliance audits. Should unlicensed copies be found, large fines can be slapped to your organizations.

Read always the An End User License Agreement or EULA. Taken from webopaedia.com, this is a legal contract between a software application author or publisher and the user of that application. The EULA, often referred to as the "software license," is similar to a rental agreement; the user agrees to pay for the privilege of using the software, and promises the software author or publisher to comply with all restrictions stated in the EULA. The user is asked to indicate they that "accept" the terms of the EULA by opening the shrink wrap on the application package, breaking the seal on the CD case, sending a card back to the software publisher, installing the application, executing a downloadable file, or by simply using the application. The user can refuse to enter into the agreement by returning the software product for a refund or clicking "I do not accept" when prompted to accept the EULA during an install.

This is applicable to PC-based software. On cases of software for enterprise use, different licensing scheme are available. It is advisable to work closely or coordinate with your technical group, in-charge of all your IT plans and implementations, should you have one in your organization. Otherwise, you can start by finding out the market share or the popularity of a particular software you have in mind. But it would be best to have a list, hoping to find the best fit for you. Asking questions to vendors on what they claim and support is encouraged.

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