The RFP Starter Kit
for Library Automation Software

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The purpose of any Request for Proposals (RFP) process should be to identify the system that will best support the needs of your library customers for many years to come.

And while the system is what you and your staff interact with on a daily basis, in the future the ways in which your library customers will interact with the system is much more important. The system must be so engaging that people will be drawn to interact with the content that is made accessible in ways that users can add reviews, ratings, recommendations and links to social media tools. The system must become so transparent that it disappears from the customer’s perception as people interact with one another as they add value and build community around the library provided content.

The Typical RFP Process

The typical RFP process involves six steps:

1. Identify your needs
2. Write your RFP
3. Issue the RFP
It is important to remember that your customers and colleagues are increasingly interacting on the internet rather than using your organization's various systems, including your integrated library system.

This guide will help you think about the variety of components that will be a part of any RFP, identify the key questions and concerns that your library must address so that you can choose the right solution, and perhaps more importantly, a results-oriented partner who understands your challenges and has a solution for them.

4. Evaluate the responding proposals

5. Select your preferred vendor

6. Negotiate a contract
Identify your needs and articulate these needs as a set of written specifications

It may be necessary to consult closely with a number of patrons about their needs, how they currently obtain access to necessary information and other resources, and what Web-based resources they routinely visit to complete their work. It is also important to identify what you and your staff like (and don’t like) about your current automated library system as well as identifying what functionality you believe that you will need in the future.

You may find it valuable to ask several vendors to share their vision of the future for their integrated library system. This alerts the vendors of your desire to change systems and you benefit as you consider the merits of the vendor’s vision compared to the needs of your library and your customer’s.

Moving to a new system also allows the library to significantly alter its workflow processes. Every existing process should be carefully examined to determine if it still adds value for the library’s customer. The library should be able to answer the following three questions for each workflow process:

- Can the activity be eliminated?
- Can the process be simplified?
- Can the process be automated?

Tasks

- Begin to communicate with your staff and customers about their needs.
- Compile statistical information that describes the library (archives, knowledge management) and other areas to be automated.
- Assess the library’s operating environment and identify any constraints (i.e. based on internal policies, is placing assets in the cloud an option?).
- Identify the most important areas to automate.
Write your RFP document

The intent is to identify your needs as a series of statements to which you ask the vendor to respond as to whether the capability currently exists. The best RFP today clearly identifies the most important capabilities you are looking for rather than developing an exhaustive list of the functions that should be present in the ideal system. The library should also prepare a process of evaluating the proposals on how well they match your requirements.

“The best RFP today clearly identifies the most important capabilities you are looking for”

Tasks

- Write a narrative to describe the library, size of the library, number of patrons, and the type of system desired by the library.
- Include the functional specifications along with any IT system requirements.
- Describe the process that will be followed to evaluate the submitted proposals.
- Create a process for evaluating the responses; determining how well they meet your requirements.
**Issue the RFP**

Your list of library-related capabilities is then integrated with your organization’s broader concerns as expressed in the boilerplate that is usually found in a RFP. You should clearly state the RFP issue date, date to submit questions, and the due date for proposals to be submitted. You should ensure that the RFP document is distributed widely to every possibly vendor that might possible respond.

Each vendor must determine whether they should invest the resources to respond to your library’s RFP (the revenue they will earn if they are selected versus the risk they will not be selected yet still incurring the costs associated with preparing a proposal).

**Tasks**

- Share the RFP widely
- Allow 4 to 6 weeks for the vendors to prepare their proposal
- Determine whether you would prefer to have pricing information submitted as a separate proposal. Ask the vendor to identify all first year costs and all costs for the succeeding years.
Evaluate the proposals that have been received

Review how compliant each proposal is compared to the library’s requirements as expressed in the RFP document. As stated on page 4, use your evaluation process to determine how well each response matches your requirements. Then weigh those factors against the cost of a new system. It may be best for a library to embrace the “least total cost” approach rather than using the first-year price to license the software as a way to rank the vendors based on costs. For reference, least total cost was discussed in an earlier Webinar [go to 20:20].

Once the library has identified the top three to four vendors, it should schedule an online demonstration of each system. This is an opportunity to determine first-hand how easy the system is to use (the user interface) as well as clarify any questions that may have arisen in reading the vendor’s proposal. The library should develop an agenda of what it wants to accomplish during the demonstrations (the agenda will likely be different for each vendor) rather than allowing the vendor to dominate the demonstration.

Tasks

- Read and evaluate each of the proposals.
- Develop a list of questions pertaining to each proposal.
- Develop a preliminary list of the vendors in rank order of preference.
Select the preferred vendor

Using the evaluation process, systematically rate each proposal plus the information learned as the result of the demonstration of each vendor’s system.

“Your next system should be a library management system that integrates most if not all of these “silo” systems into a single comprehensive system.”

Tasks

- Invite top 3 – 4 vendors to demonstrate their system online– control the agenda and the discussions.
- Create a final list of the vendors in rank order.
- Call vendor references and discuss the system with your peers.
Until the final agreement has been signed, the library should not make any public announcement about its vendor of choice. The agreement should reference the library’s RFP and indicate when the various payments for the system will be made.

Increasingly libraries are licensing the vendor’s software as a service (SaaS) over a number of years rather than installing the software of a server purchased and maintained by the library. The advantages of the software as a service (SaaS) approach, sometimes called software in the cloud or a cloud-based service, have been discussed in a prior Webinar [go to 27:10].

Another important topic that should be addressed in the Agreement is the implementation plan, including the migration of existing machine-readable files from the existing system to the new system. This migration effort offers the library the opportunity to really clean up its existing data using a variety of techniques.

**Tasks**

- Ask the vendors for a copy of their preferred License Agreement and Maintenance Agreement as a part of the RFP.
- Involve legal counsel, if necessary, to review these standard Agreements to ensure that they provide sufficient safeguards for your library.
- Contact the vendor if you have any legal issues to resolve.
- The Licensing Agreement should reference the library’s RFP.
- Ensure that you review and approve of any press release the vendor may want to release once parties have signed the Agreements.
The most frequent reasons why a RFP process is used to select a system are:

- Legal requirements due to government regulations
- Protect the organization from legal problems
- Transparency in the expenditure of (public) funds

Less frequently, the RFP process is used to:

- Select the best system to meet the library’s needs
- Provide documentation of vendor promises and commitments
- Ensure active participation of other departments within the organization

Libraries have any number of automated systems that are stand-alone, sometimes called silos, even though some of them may be linked to one another. For example, your library may have an integrated library system, an electronic management system, a repository, interlibrary loan system, authentication system, a Web-based discovery system, plus access to any number of electronic resources (journals and/or databases), eBooks, and the library’s Web site.

Your next system should be a library management system that integrates most if not all of these “silo” systems into a single comprehensive system.
Pitfalls of the RFP Process

Depending upon the number of staff members involved, the RFP process can be fairly expensive and time consuming. Given the advanced state of development with almost all systems in the marketplace, the RFP process no longer needs an extensive list of functionality in each module (as was the case in the early days of library automation). With nearly thirty years of developing library automation software most mature companies will deliver a workable, useful system; it will come down to your library’s needs and preferences for distinguishing features and quality of support.

The Strengths of the RFP Process

The process encourages a library to think carefully and systematically and its needs, and more importantly, the needs of its customers. Understanding what capabilities currently exist in the marketplace can, and should, hone the expectations of libraries. It may lead to the conclusion that the library may need to migrate from its current ILS system to a newer generation system. Remember that every system has a useful life cycle and it is important to recognize when a system is moving into its twilight years.
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