Archival Management Systems

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# Table of Contents

- Introduction ..................................................... 1
- Existing Data ..................................................... 1
- Finance .......................................................... 2
- IT Support ......................................................... 2
- Standards .......................................................... 3
- Usability ............................................................ 4
- Functionality ....................................................... 4
- Software Example ............................................... 5
- Conclusion ........................................................ 6
- Sources ............................................................. 7
Introduction

Archival collections can often be dense and inaccessible, rendered unusable by their sheer volume and age, but Archival Management Software can be an invaluable tool in cataloguing and making available these collections. As with museums that benefit from Collections Management Systems, Archival Software can be a tool for archivists and users to capture, share, and access information in archival collections. The National Archives published some questions for consideration when evaluating archival tools, which will serve as a guide for understanding the practical applications and best forms of Archival Management Software.

Existing Data

One of the first things to take into account is whether there is a significant amount of existing data or if your organization will be starting from scratch with the help of the new technology. As documented in a report by Lisa Spiro in 2009 entitled “Archival Management Software: A Report for the Council on Library and Information Resources,” many archives have already created finding aids for their collections and thus it is desirable that the “software will seamlessly import existing data – which can be a challenge, given the variability of EAD [Encoded Archival Description] documents and other forms of archival
data.”¹ Software should be considered in terms of whether it would support this integration if there were preexisting data. Some archivists have encountered difficulties when attempting to integrate exiting EAD data into Archival Software, due in part to “the flexibility of EAD and the resulting variability of finding aids,”² which conflicts with the generally required consistency found in the rules of many technology systems. Thus it can be useful to check to see whether the system claims it is capable of supporting EAD and whether other archivists who have used the software agree with its claims.

**Finance**

Cost is an inescapable consideration for any software. There is open source software, which can remove the expense of licensing fees for the software, but it can wind up being a costly solution to maintain and customize to your collection’s needs. Commercial software comes with start-up costs and licensing fees, which can add up quickly if there is no prepared budget for technology costs. Deciding which option to choose may depend largely on the size of the institution, as well as the accompanying budget. If the collection is fairly small and will not require extensive customization, the open-source software should suit the needs of the collection well.

**IT Support**

While it might seem like a fairly obvious thing to mention, technology more often than not requires support. Using and paying for a larger commercial software can get you access to a

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greater depth of customer service opportunities for when something goes wrong with the technology or it needs and upgrade or you want to make changes, but you cannot find the manual. IT support may not always be physically available, but if there is a line to call for assistance, this may take away some of the pressures associated with purchasing a new archives management software and hoping for a seamless transition, which so rarely happens with technology, even the best technology. There may be issues with compatibility between the software and your computer that are beyond your expertise level, but a fairly common occurrence to the support line for the software company.

Standards

Prior to searching for software, it is important to establish the standards that you are going to want to be able to meet with your collection through the technology you are adding. As Spiro says, “To facilitate interoperability and adherence to best practices, archives will want to select software that meets archival standards such as EAD, DACS, and MARC, as well as emerging standards such as EAC.” Museum and library standards can be considered as well in searching for the software that will be the most universally useful. It can also be a good idea to look into accessibility standards to see if the software has any provisions for users with disabilities. If a system is capable of meeting a wide range of standards, then it opens the door for a wider range of functions and access points for professionals and outside users who may be able to access the collections processed by the software.

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Usability

As mentioned above, it is possible that you may be looking for a software that considers not only the needs of the archivist, but also the potential user. In this case, it would be useful to look for archival management systems that incorporate user interfaces into the software so that the information catalogued can be accessed for wider use. Archival collections can be networked together so that users only have to go to one location to gain access to the collections held by multiple institutions, but this is only possible if the software on which the collection was catalogued is compatible with the systems of these sorts of discovery resources so doing research on these requirements before making a choice is necessary if this is one of the goals of cataloguing your collection.

Functionality

The National Archives website suggests that you determine whether there any other additional features you are looking for in a service. Perhaps you are looking for “an enquiry management module, [to] capture digital objects and/or metadata, [to] capture accessions data, [or for the] ability to contribute data to archive networks easily.”4 There are a lot of available products that are capable of all kinds of different functions as long as you can decide on what you need, starting with the most important functions of the software, so that whichever service you select, it has the best functionality for your archival collections.

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Software Example

Archivists’ Toolkit calls itself “the first open source archival data management system to provide broad, integrated support for the management of archives.”\(^5\) According to another source, it is “designed to assist archival institutions in asserting intellectual control over their archival collections and representing them in the most discoverable way possible.”\(^6\) Archivists’ Toolkit has mandatory descriptive fields, but a lack of standards governing those fields. It is a tool that relies on applied metadata standards, but it has an impressive flexibility, which makes it a definite asset. This open source software is free to use, but is still in development so there may be changes or issues encountered along the way. There are FAQs and links to user manuals on the Archivists’ Toolkit website, but the most direct line for help is an email address with no guarantee of immediate assistance. With this kind of free software, support is present, but not necessarily as responsive as with more costly options. Software like Archivists’ Toolkit is a good place to begin, especially with a relatively small amount of archival collections. If your institution would like to create finding aids for much a much larger collection and plans to rely on the software as a user interface, it would likely be worth it to pay for a more expensive software, provided it meets the other needs of your institution.


Conclusion

Institutions with archival collections that have not been completely processed or are inaccessible to all users would greatly benefit from looking into archival management systems, which can provide a wide range of services that will improve the collection and the experience of users, professional or otherwise. With so many archival collections limited by conventional cataloguing, which would take far too long, archival management systems provide a solution to the problem of time and access. By using the guidelines outlined above, you can find the right system for your needs that will work with existing data, be the right financial move, provide technology support, interact with relevant standards, promote usability, and have any additional functionality required.
Bibliography


