Administrators of Automated Systems: A Job Description

The automated system may be, and most likely is, the most expensive and visible thing you will ever put into the library. The costs of both procuring and maintaining the automated system are significant. An event of this magnitude with a tremendous impact on the library’s operation requires that the best possible person be put in charge, even if the library really doesn’t want to spend the money.

In the best of all possible worlds, the person in charge, the system administrator, should be the director, but that’s not very realistic. The director does not have the dedicated time to devote to the project, and may not have the skills or interest. But what the director does have is the authority to get things done when they need to be done and to work across divisional or departmental lines to effect compromises that benefit the library as a whole.

Although the director is rarely the system administrator, the system administrator must be someone who has the complete confidence of the director and who can communicate with the director when the need arises. This person also has to be someone who knows something about automation, or can learn.

For most turnkey systems, the system administrator’s initial library knowledge is much more important than the initial automation knowledge. (A software-only system may require a greater degree of automation knowledge. As discussed in “Turnkey or Software-Only?” [Managing Technology, LJ, February 15, p. 168, 171], that person may have to resolve conflicts between vendors of different parts of the system or actually determine which pieces will fit together.)

The system administrator must be someone who has the time to devote to the project, someone who can assume the heavy workload, especially during the initial implementation period. The library should not give the implementation project to someone who has a heavy line responsibility, or expect the system administrator to do all of the regular work and implement the automated system on the side.

Libraries do this, and it doesn’t work. One of the two jobs tends to slip. And that one tends to be the automation implementation because the day-to-day pressures of managing people and getting books on the shelves or serving the public get in the way of the long timelines related to implementation. The library can use someone who has a heavy line responsibility as a system administrator if some backup support is provided to take care of daily details of running a department.

Relating to the system

The system administrator must truly understand the library’s current manual systems, policies, and procedures so that they can be related to the new automated system. For libraries moving to second systems, it is important that the system administrator know not only how the current automated system works, but why and what policy and parameter decisions were made in implementing the first system.

Decisions were made for many reasons, not all of them still applicable. A decision may have been made because the vendor’s system provided only one option, but with later releases of the software more options became available that the library never investigated. In this case, the library may not even recognize that there are options both in the current and the new system and that they should be investigated before assuming that the new system should work exactly like the old system.

Knowledge of decisions regarding the actual system data and indexing is particularly important for the system administrator of a migration project. It is also an asset if the system administrator is familiar with operations in several areas of the library so that possible areas of cooperation and contention can be anticipated.

A personable, persuasive paragon

In general terms, the system administrator should be personable, persuasive, and a paragon. It also helps if this person does well with very little sleep and has a good sense of humor. Although those qualities are vital, they are not enough for a job description or recruitment. It isn’t possible to tell the personnel department that you’ll recognize the right person when she comes along. Some serious consideration needs to be given to the qualifications of the system administrator and to the duties to be performed—though it is true that the most frequently performed duties are included under that all-purpose “and other duties as may be assigned.”

A review of a number of job descriptions for system administrators and other library employees whose jobs are related to automation provides some assistance in developing the position description necessary to obtain the right person for the job. Although the level of experience, authority, complexity, and compensation varies considerably depending upon the scope of the project, the tasks listed are included in a high percentage of system administrator job descriptions.

A typical position description includes these duties:

1. Plans for effects of automation on the division and on the library system. Does appropriate research and analysis. Maintains level of knowledge and expertise to formulate and recommend plans on solid foundation of current information.

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2. Coordinates the planning, development and implementation, and monitoring of all library automated systems.

3. Investigates, troubleshoots, and resolves computer hardware and software problems.

4. Coordinates projects and communications for those using the automated system.

5. Develops and coordinates training on the automated system for staff, the public, boards, committees, and administrators.

6. Analyzes the services provided by the library in order to improve services. Identifies library objectives and determines method and timing of implementation. Organizes equipment and activities needed to accomplish objectives.

7. Acts as liaison and single point of contact with the automated system vendor and jurisdiction data processing department. Recommends actions, solutions, and changes to the library administration based on changing circumstances and needed adjustments. Handles emergencies as required.

8. Coordinates automated systems in the library with other local, state, regional, and national systems and programs.


10. Serves on a management team for the library system.

11. Manages and coordinates division staff, including counseling and conflict resolution as required.

12. Develops general work plan and organization of the division, including staffing and budget.

13. Maintains effective communications within the division and with other divisions of the library.

14. Attends professional meetings and maintains active memberships in local, state, regional, and national organizations.

15. Other duties and related tasks as assigned.

The qualifications for these positions are often grouped under terms such as "Selection Factors" or "Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities" and include a wide variety of competencies. They all indicate, however, that the library tends to be looking for someone with the necessary library knowledge rather than someone with computer knowledge.

How the vendor sees it

One vendor of software-only, complex automated library systems has prepared a suggested job description for the position that has primary responsibility for the application side of the system and is the support person for all library-related problems. The required experience includes: "Experienced librarian, knowledge of USMARC, project management experience, and experience with a library automation system, preferably integrated."

Desirable experience includes: "Experience in training of staff and users, project management experience involving a library automation system, and experience in implementing and supporting an integrated library automation system." Even in this situation, library knowledge provides the foundation for the position.

A composite list of the knowledge, abilities, and skills or selection factors commonly found in position descriptions includes:

1. Thorough knowledge of basic principles of library administration and philosophy of library service.

2. Thorough knowledge of current trends and practices affecting librarianship, particularly in the area of automation.

3. Ability to think analytically and to develop new or revised systems, procedures, and work flow.

4. Ability to plan, direct, and train a staff of librarians, paraprofessionals, and clerical personnel in specialized library services.

5. Ability to establish and maintain effective working relationships with library administration, staff, and library users.

6. Ability to represent the library's interests effectively and efficiently with vendors. Has high level of knowledge of automation procedures required to consult with vendors and library management in an informed manner.

7. Ability to exercise initiative and independent judgment.

8. Ability to effectively analyze program services, identify and write objectives, and determine implementation methods and resources.

9. Considerable knowledge of computers, data communications, and commercially available software.

10. Considerable knowledge of purchasing principles, practices, and methods.

11. Ability to establish and maintain effective working relationships.

12. Ability to prepare comprehensive reports and present ideas clearly and concisely in written and oral form.

Wanted: a special person

And then there was the system administrator job description that admitted that a special person was needed. Instead of attempting to list skills and knowledge, it developed a list of personality traits needed by the system administrator. This is not only a fairly unique approach, but one that quite accurately describes the person needed. That section of the job description is quoted in its entirety:

**Personality Traits:**

Exceptional communication and listening skills, positive and network-promoting relationship with library staff and administrators; good problem-solving skills; strong teaching skills; understanding of library processes and needs; strong organizational and reporting skills; quick learner; aptitude for learning the vendor software, including application software, report generator, and system utilities; not intimidated by computer, peripheral, or telecommunication equipment; tact; courtesy; good judgment; ability to communicate pleasantly and effectively with general public and co-workers; does not panic under pressure.

That library has described the person all libraries want for their system administrator—a paragon with a sense of humor. You will note, however, that the system administrator does not have to leap tall buildings in a single bound. There are real people out there doing an excellent job, learning as they go, developing a new standard for library professionals. A later column will report on a survey of some of these system administrators—their backgrounds, skills, and duties—the human side of formal job descriptions.