LIBRARY BRITISH

Aleph at the British Library

Creating a robust foundation for the library of the world's knowledge

The British Library is the world's preeminent research library with over 150 million items collected over the course of 250 years. Over 16,000 visitors access the Library catalog on the web or in person each day.

Challenges

After 30 years of implementing dozens of homegrown systems to address their many unique requirements, the British Library identified a need for a commercial system that could manage its massive data volume and support millions of records in hundreds of languages.

Solution

Over the course of 18 months, Ex Libris replaced 16 legacy systems, representing 40 catalogs, with a single Aleph system. Aleph's open architecture enabled the Library's remaining legacy systems to operate seamlessly within the new ILS environment.

After 30 years of relying on home grown systems to manage an ever-expanding collection and rapidly growing user base, it became apparent that maintaining these systems was no longer a viable option for the British Library. With requirements for broad functionality, scalability, and extensive multi-language support, Aleph was the natural fit to serve as the British Library's Integrated Library System.

The British Library is one of the greatest historical repositories in the world, in both size and stature. With a collection that spans across 625 kilometers (390 miles) of shelving and includes everything from the Magna Carta to a recording of Nelson Mandela's trial speech, the British Library truly lives up to its mission—to offer access to the World's Knowledge.

The Library houses a vast collection of items from around the world and in almost every known language. Over 150 million items collected over the course of 250 years represent almost every format imaginable—from manuscripts to maps, sound recordings, and patents, including:

- 13 million books

- 56 million patents

- 3.5 million sound recordings

- 8 million stamps

Over 16,000 people use the Library collections each day, including academic and government researchers, business users, and the general public. Many patrons access the British Library collections remotely via the online catalog, with over six million searches performed each year. The Library operates the world's largest document delivery service, providing millions of items each year to patrons all over the world.

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CASE STUDY

Results

Aleph offers both patrons and staff a standard view of Library holdings, broader remote search capabilities, faster turnaround time for material delivery, and the ability to catalog and access materials in all of the languages of the world.

Finding the Perfect Fit

In over 30 years of operations, the Library put in place dozens of homegrown systems to address their many unique requirements resulting in a complicated web of applications that was increasingly difficult and expensive to support. In 2000, the British Library decided to review the market in search of one commercial library management system to meet its needs.

The specifications were straightforward—the Library required a system with broad functionality that would support its large volumes of data and transactions and perform exceptionally well out-of-the box. It was important that the system be robust enough to support the Library's current collections as well as the demands generated by over 12.5 linear kilometers in new acquisitions each year.

Among the British Library's special requirements was a need for sophisticated language support. With materials in every language of the world, the Library needed a system that could catalog and display any character set.

"One catalog that we installed had over 800 characters," explains Roger Butcher, Aleph program manager for the British Library —it was quite important that our ILS could handle large numbers of characters in a standard way."

It was also imperative for the new system to integrate seamlessly with in-house applications that the Library chose to maintain. For example, the Library's status as a copyright institution warranted a decision to maintain the legacy application for circulation. "Given that there aren't many other libraries that do what we do, there were some special developments we needed," Butcher said.

Most importantly, the system had to meet demands for massive data conversion and migration with virtually no downtime for users. "We wanted a system that would minimize the risk of failure," explained Butcher. "After exploring other options and finding that they wouldn't work, we needed a reliable solution."

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Putting it all Together: The Aleph Solution

Following a rigorous tender process and several onsite demonstrations, the British Library selected the Ex Libris Aleph Integrated Library System. The flexibility, ease of use, and broad out-of-the-box functionality of Aleph met British Library specifications. Yet, it was Ex Libris experience and track record with large library implementations that made the partnership particularly inviting. "Ex Libris fit the bill on all accounts," said Butcher. "The likelihood was that if we wanted some functionality, Ex Libris may have already done it for someone else—we didn't feel we were the biggest fish in the sea."

Ex Libris and the British Library devised an 18-month implementation plan to replace 16 legacy systems representing 40 catalogs with a single Aleph system. The installation process was complicated, requiring precise conversion of unique data sets to ensure the clean migration of millions of records. After a sophisticated de-duplication process, the British Library's new Aleph system contained 26 million unique records.

As with every system migration, training the British Library staff was just as important as the data conversion. Prior to installing Aleph, the disparate systems had a silo effect on staff—librarians knew how to use particular systems, but could not perform outside of them. The Aleph ILS streamlined workflows and broke down the walls between departments and groups, providing a universal platform that helped staff members collaborate more effectively. Ex Libris trained sixty core members of the British Library staff on Aleph, and the Library staff went on to train over 1,300 additional employees.

Another critical installation component was the integration of Aleph with the remaining legacy systems. Utilizing Aleph's open architecture, Ex Libris worked with the British Library to develop an interface that would enable these applications to operate seamlessly within the new ILS environment.

Most notably, the installation remained on course with the original plan. The project was completed on-time and on-budget. Throughout the process, the British Library was closely supported by the local Ex Libris implementation team, backed by a team located at Ex Libris corporate headquarters in Jerusalem. Roger Butcher commented, "There were times when we thought the people in Israel didn't sleep! They were always available when we needed

them, and would be on the other end of the phone at whatever time we called, day or night."

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Better Services Today, an Infrastructure for the Future

The transition to Aleph was a resounding success, with tangible and lasting benefits for both British Library administration and users. One standard solution now replaces 16 proprietary systems, supplying staff members and users with a unified view of all traditional Library holdings--books, maps, journals and printed music.
Leveraging the broad remote search capabilities and fast turnaround material delivery time afforded by Aleph, the Library is now well equipped to engage the business community. Roger Butcher commented: "Aleph didn't bring together more material, but rather brought it together in a better way. The step we took with the Aleph ILS was a big one and it created a united view of our stock that is very useful."

Since choosing Aleph, the British Library has become an active member of the Ex Libris user community. "The ability to ask questions of other members is very useful to us—so much so that we actually held the 2005 international user conference at the British Library," said Butcher.

The British Library's successful adoption of Aleph has enabled the Library to free up resources to focus on core initiatives. And as it continues to grow and face new challenges, the British Library will continue to see Ex Libris as a partner in addressing its needs in the twenty first century.

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