

Supporting the Support: Involving Unqualified Staff in the Automation Process

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The focus of this paper is the involvement of support staff in the automation process in a library. The management at a Central University library in North East India, taking a bold step, decided to do just such a thing and found to its pleasant surprise that it was the right move despite the risks encountered. The author interviewed staff at different levels in the library to find out what happens when support staff are allowed into the 'hallowed' area of automation. As it turns out, the librarian and other officers are reaping the good fruits of their decision and the phenomenon experienced in this library can serve as a model for others.

0 INTRODUCTION

The need for the involvement of all library staff in the automation process is a given although this may be interpreted differently in different libraries depending on the leadership. The new system will affect all levels of staff but a lot of the literature suggests that it is the support staff that feels the changes the most'. The impact may be either positive or negative whether you ignore or involve them. The better option is to involve the support staff in the automation procedure and confront the risks as they come rather than complicate matters even more by excluding them.

According to Manifold (2000), there must be wide involvement of library staff in the selection and use of new generation systems as well as focus on communication among all parties. He further makes an important point upon which many library staff will happily agree, "Staff members," he pleads, "need to feel that this is their system, not just the system they have to use. They need to know that they are crucial to the success of the system everyday, not out of some agenda of egalitarianism or empowerment but because it is the indisputable truth." Crowe and Light (1994) and Olsgaard (1985) also stressed on staff involve-

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ment in order both to choose the best possible system as well as to save consulting fees.

Horsefall (1992) reiterates that it is important for management not just to automate the library but that staff must be kept informed about the progress of the implementation process in order to avoid feelings of alienation and powerlessness over the change process; staff must be able to actively participate in the implementation process; besides the initial training staff receive in the use of the system, they also need access to appropriate levels of training as and when required. Failure to provide ongoing training may result in lack of interest, frustration and inability of staff to realize the full potential of the system to meet their or the users' needs. The provision of quality and timely support to staff who are having difficulties with the system allows staff to feel confident that they can use the system to its full potential.

It is all the more important now for all library staff to be involved in the process of selection (of new systems) and migration (to that new system). "All library staff," reminds Thompson (1985), "does not refer only to professional librarians. It refers also to the support staff whose knowledge of day-to-day processes often far exceeds that of their professional supervisors."

Jones (1989) was one of the first researchers to focus on support staff (whose voice was yet to be acknowledged up until then) through her survey of support staff perceptions in three university libraries in the USA. She followed it up ten years later with a survey using the same sample group.

Palmini's (1992) is another study that surveyed the impact of computerization and its relationship to job satisfaction amongst support staff in Wisconsin academic libraries.

It is clear then that if the management does not humanize the system but tries to 'automate the person' instead, it is courting trouble (Austen, 1987). After all, "if you don't let people grow and develop and make more decisions, it's a waste of human life. Using the technology to its full potential means using the man to his full potential (Zuboff, 1988).

1 THE STUDY

The North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) Central Library in Meghalaya, India, recently went through a major upheaval in its more than thirty years of existence, as part of its on-going attempt at complete automation. The automation procedure started in 1989 when the library received rupees two lakhs (at approx. Rupees fifty per dollar (\$1 = Rs. 50) from INFLIBNET (Information and Library Network -an autonomous inter-university centre of the University Grants Commission - UGC). The work was supervised by two operators who entered data using the CDS/ISIS package. In 1995, the library received rupees one crore meant for complete automation from the UGC. The library, purchased some 486 model

computers which for some time were placed in different sections. No real work was done and the whole purpose of automation was defeated. These computers have long since become obsolete.

It was in October 2001 that the management got down to business and finally started work on automation. The work was intensified between 2002 and 2003 and at the time of writing this paper 'Data Entry' is the buzzword being uttered by the library staff after every two sentences. The library has put the target date for completion of the automation process as the 31st January 2004.

The beginnings were strenuous and frustrating. Two staff members were sent for training in the handling of the LIBSYS package. The other staff were given training by experts from LIBSYS. This was short term and lasted only a few days. It was left to the trained staff to help their colleagues step by step. The process is being carried out to replace the library's manual system including the work in the reprography and binding sections. The different sections are being connected through a Local Area Network.

The present scenario involves the use of the LIBSYS 4.0 package for all operations, AACR II for cataloguing and the Library of Congress CD 3.3 version for subject headings. The CDS/ISIS files were painstakingly converted into LIBSYS format and the AACR I data into AACR II format. The library is using the 18th edition of DDC although for complicated cases, they also refer to the 21st edition.

The programme had three stages:

1. Installation of the package;
2. Training of staff; and
3. Implementation of module.

Routine operations and retrospective conversion of approximately 2 lakhs books are being done simultaneously. The time allotted for retrospective conversion or 'data entry' as everybody is calling it, is 9.00-11.00 am and 3.30 pm onwards. The work can extend upto 9.00 pm and a university vehicle has been assigned to ferry the staff home. The work is voluntary and from amongst the approximately sixty-five staff members, about thirty are actively involved in data entry. This includes the support staff as well. The senior staffs are excluded from data entry as they are occupied with overall management and supervision. A small group is involved in editing work. The management has put the payment for data entry at one rupee per entry (card), one rupee for editing and one rupee for subject heading. Presently, both manual and computerised operations are being carried out although the ultimate aim is to minimize manual work.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study tried to find out how an integrated automated library system

affected the support staff of the NEHU Central library. The author spent time talking with staff at various levels. Some input from the author's personal observation of the activities in the library is also included here.

21 REASONS FOR INVOLVING SUPPORT STAFF IN THE AUTOMATION PROCESS

Perhaps, the first issue that has to be dealt with here is the involvement of the support or unqualified staff in data entry. Getting these untrained or unqualified people in the retrospective conversion of records was a big and bold step on the part of the management or the officers in charge of training for and implementation of automation. It was taken against the backdrop of cynicism in various quarters. It was never an issue with the management who had taken the decision after a thorough discussion. Their aim was to exploit the potentiality of every individual - they decided that there would be no status or qualification bar. Individual limitations were expected but the challenge was met head on. A few months down the line, the people at the helm of affairs can say with confidence that they had taken the right step. The support staff did their senior colleagues proud. After the initial reluctance due to technophobia, with motivation from their qualified colleagues and the incentive (payment), they started showing their potential and enthusiasm. The work of some has surpassed the expectations of the officers in charge. Sincerity and perfection have come from the most unlikely sources. The main reasons for involving the support staff in data entry are:

1. The group D staff in Meghalaya are different from those in other states of the country. They are all educated and are fluent in the English language. The minimum qualification of most is matriculation. Many are graduates. With a little help, such people can confidently work with a simple package like LIBSYS since it involves only the entering of data from catalogue cards.
2. Even if an outside agency had been given the responsibility, problems would have arisen. Besides the cost would have been too exorbitant.
3. Typical problems faced by the library (local variation) can be understood only by its own staff.
4. Their involvement gives them a feeling of self worth and the realization that they are contributing in some way to the overall development of the library.
5. The support staff also become future assets for the library. Their involvement in automation can perhaps dispel the negative image that users had been having all along.

22 RESULTS OF INVOLVING SUPPORT STAFF IN THE AUTOMATION PROCESS

The support staffs' own opinion is that the officers in charge have done the

right thing in involving them. They admit to their initial reluctance. This was due to their fear of new technology. However training helped. While the training given by LIBSYS experts was useful, it was the personal attention given by their trained colleagues that boosted their confidence. Initially they made many mistakes, not being trained in cataloguing rules. With time and help, the mistakes have lessened. A majority felt that they have acquired new skills from automation. In some sections, automation has replaced the duties of the staff as a result of which the services of these staff members are being utilized in other sections.

Presently, the library is buzzing with activity and it is interesting to observe how all the computer are being used. In fact it is a matter of first to come first to use. The staff members compete with each other to get hold of a computer while their colleagues hover around to get their turn. They are enthusiastic about working even on Sundays and holidays.

221 Impact on Interpersonal Relations

If there is one interesting outcome of automation (particularly data entry) in the NEHU Central library, it is that data entry has served as some kind of equalizer between the qualified and the unqualified staff. Some unqualified staff have the advantage of speed in typing as a result of which they have long bypassed their qualified colleagues in the number of records entered.

The support staff do admit to their inadequacy in the knowledge of cataloguing rules as a result of which they made many mistakes initially. Though members of the editing team had to deal with these mistakes in the beginning, they agree that with time and help, the mistakes have greatly diminished. Besides, they admit, mistakes are made even by the most qualified staff as the package is not perfect. From all accounts it is evident that the two groups have been working closely together and resentment on both sides if any is minimal.

Another interesting outcome is that a lot of the conversation among staff members is revolving around the automation procedure. While the word 'data entry' itself is repeated practically after every second sentence, conversation also revolves around the problems being faced and finding the solutions -colleagues giving tips to each other.

222 Impact on Client relations

A great fear for most library staff when implementing an automated system is the decline in client relations (Bergen, 1988). This has been admitted to particularly by the staff working at the circulation desk where staff-user relations is maximum. The need to concentrate on the computer screen has definitely minimized interaction between the staff and the users. Another fear is that "client relations will suffer because of the system picking up more infringements, making [the staff] stricter," (Horsfall 1992). This has also been admitted to. The problem

arises especially with the faculty with whom the staff has had to become strict. Earlier, the system was flexible enough to allow the faculty to get issued more than their quota of books. Even though the LIBSYS package allows for a certain amount of flexibility in this area (forcible overriding of rules), it has become difficult for the staff to be lenient with the faculty. Much to their reluctance and embarrassment, they are having to become stricter with the faculty.

Automation has also facilitated the provision of more user services. For a start, indexing of articles from select journals has been initiated. The OPAC too is becoming a part of the regular information seeking behaviour of the users. The user orientation programme that was started before the automation process is now incorporating IT aspects. For example, while earlier, the orientation involved instruction on the use of the card catalogue, it now also includes instruction on the use of the OPAC.

3 PROBLEMS

Involving even support staff in the automation process is all very well. One however has to be prepared for the baggage that comes with the involvement. "The truth," warns Manifold (2000), "is that implementing a new system generally exposes many cracks in your process, no matter how careful you have been. Adapting to the new system can and probably will be hard for at least some of your staff. Some time-honoured procedures and policies will no longer work, and the staff will have to learn entirely new ways of doing business. Some of the new ways are likely to be more difficult and some features they relied on are likely to be missing. It is essential to prepare your staff for this likelihood so that they can be ready to adjust their thinking, even on what they may feel are fundamental issues. In the short term, the system is likely to be cumbersome, seemingly loaded with bugs, and requiring all sorts of unpleasant and unwanted changes in processes and policies. At least the first few months and possibly the first year or more are likely to be a time of loss rather than gain. If everyone knows and expects this, they will be much more accepting of the new system."

Introduction of automation into any organisation is no mean task and as the people in charge have admitted NEHU Central Library with its history of failure understands this more than others. They are aware of and admit to their limitations. Problems were expected and encountered. Major upheavals were felt in all areas. Automation has changed the quality of work of people, their attitudes and their future. Some of the major problems encountered due to automation in the NEHU Central library were:

1. Resistance from staff - this has been dealt with in earlier paragraphs. It was quite difficult for the people in charge to mobilize the workforce in the beginning. When the staff did get involved after much motivation, they made many mistakes. It was left to the editing team to do the corrections.

2. There were also the expected physical problems particularly among the staff at the circulation desk. The eyes were most affected.
3. Automation has also affected the staff psychologically. Some admitted to a feeling of inadequacy due to lack of training and qualifications. This slowed them down and also led to the making of many mistakes. At the circulation desk where the staff are expected to perform like clockwork, this is all the more apparent. There is a feeling of anxiety and nervousness as they fumble with the keys while a long queue of users is waiting. The problem has lessened with time and practice.
4. The system dictates how work should be done. While earlier, the staff could work at their own pace and according to their own flexible rules, now they are controlled by the system. "I realize now that the other name for automation is 'discipline'," said one senior officer of the library. For one, the library staff are having to become more strict with their users much to their embarrassment and the users' resentment. Neither will the system accept any information against its rules. A single comma or full stop out of place and one is in trouble. While all this is actually for good, it has in fact had a negative human impact.
5. While the over all response from users has been favourable, there is a minority of faculty members who have opposed the step taken by the library. Overlooking the positive outcome of the automation process on the library, these have made it their business to continually criticise the library for its shortcomings. The staff feel that while constructive criticism is always welcome, when criticism comes with vicious intent, it has to be questioned. According to the staff who have been the victims of such criticism, this kind of attitude is demoralizing. While they are fully aware of their limitations, they also feel that people should realize that perfection does not come in a day. They feel that faculty and library staff should complement rather than oppose each other.
6. Since manual and automated activities are being done simultaneously, the staff admit that routine work is slowed down.

It cannot be denied even by a casual observer however that automation has impacted the life of the library, especially that of its staff -perhaps for the better.

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