

OPAC Red Eye Special Discussion Group

NAAUG Annual Meeting, M.I.T.
June 15, 2004

Approximately 35 people attended a discussion group on the ALEPH 500 OPAC facilitated by Bob Gerrity of Boston College.

In the hour-long session, the topic of discussion continued the topics covered at the OPAC discussion held at the 2003 NAAUG annual meeting. The initial question posed this year asked what happened to the plan to redesign the OPAC. In Iowa, Ex Libris employee Ezra Schwartz indicated that he intended to begin working on Web OPAC redesign since he was finishing his work on the designing of the GUI interface. Since Ezra is no longer with Ex Libris and no Ex Libris employee attended this year's discussion that question remained unanswered. The group did mention several issues that should be considered by Ex Libris in regard to the design of the web OPAC.

Compliance to standards to and beyond the minimum requirements of WC3 and Section 508 received attention in the OPAC discussion group, as well as in other presentations and plenary sessions over the course of the 2004 NAAUG meeting. Requiring a certain level of compliance is a specific improvement that could be achieved.

Another point discussed was that most sites tended to borrow and use the same JavaScript work-arounds to improve functionality, and these functions, like linking from the title on the brief results screen to the full record, could be designed into the OPAC out of the box.

The use of COBOL programming in the OPAC tables was another issue. Some of the parts of the OPAC are quite dated and the consensus was that Ex Libris should look into updating and adhering to standards in the programming. It was suggested that Ex Libris would probably not spend time changing the programming until a prospective client site demanded those changes be made.

The issue of a lack of flexibility in the Web OPAC design was also mentioned as a problem. The need to dig through several levels of the OPAC to get at desired information is awkward. Sites have no control over the flow of the screens and what page links to another page. We should not have to install JavaScript programs, like the in/out script, to make the OPAC work smoothly and intuitively for the patron. This point lead the discussion into the issue of usability studies. According to Owen Stephens (Royal Holloway University of London), Ezra Schwartz had done some interesting usability studies while working on the redesign of the GUI interface. Usability studies should be done on the OPAC so Ex Libris can focus on what the real problems are.

The general impression is that the OPAC is an area to which Ex Libris is not giving much attention. The effort needed to update and improve what is essentially an older, out of date product, built from bits and pieces of accumulated programming and tables is more than Ex Libris seems prepared to work on. There is much more time and effort put into fulfilling contractual obligations than improving the existing product for existing customers. The enhancement process does not work for the larger issues. Small enhancements can be worked on but the larger problems, such as the underlying structure of the OPAC, are not addressed, or have been declared as "too fuzzy" a request by Ex Libris. Strategically it would benefit Ex Libris to be looking at coming trends in standards such as FRBR, and be prepared to accommodate these requirements rather than react to them.

Finally a discussion was held regarding further communication about issues involving the OPAC. While it was decided that a separate OPAC listserv was not desirable, attendees were encouraged to share their tips and tricks, and any interesting ideas on the NAAUG list. An interest was expressed in perhaps a separate listserv for a discussion of an instruction list to share ideas on teaching the ALEPH OPAC.

Connie Holberg, Recorder
SUNY Jefferson Community College