



# *Kickstart Your RFP*

Steps, questions, and advice for kicking your RFP  
process off right and ensuring effective decision-making  
for your library and its community.



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Today, a majority of libraries are using a variety of stand-alone systems or silos to optimize their library's performance. These systems may take on many forms, from Integrated Library Systems and eResource Management Systems to web-based discovery platforms. Supporting all of these systems not only consumes a fair amount of resources, but also holds your library back from greater efficiency.



Therefore, there is a growing interest in next-generation library systems—known as library service platforms, library management systems, or unified resource management systems—all created with the same vision in mind: to **streamline the library experience** from back-end software capabilities to front-end library relationships.



*The ultimate purpose of any RFP should be to identify the system that will best support the needs of your library patrons for many years to come.*

To upgrade to a next-generation library services platform, most libraries must first issue a request for proposals (RFP). RFPs serve many important functions, including:

- Meeting legal requirements due to government regulations
- Securing legal protection for an organization
- Providing transparency in the expenditure of (public) funds

However, the ultimate purpose of any RFP should be to identify the system that will best support the needs of your library patrons for many years to come.

To kick off your RFP, what questions do you need to keep in mind? What are the best solutions for your library type? How can you narrow down your decision? Though we can't cover every permutation, our goal is to give you what you need to know about RFPs to hit the ground running.



# *The typical RFP process*

The typical RFP process involves six steps:

1. Identify your needs
2. Write your RFP
3. Issue the RFP
4. Evaluate the responding proposals
5. Select your preferred vendor
6. Negotiate a contract

Throughout the RFP process, it's important to keep your staff and users in mind. As libraries and their communities become increasingly digital, what system is going to best meet their web-based, often mobile, needs? The system must be so engaging that people will be drawn to add tags, write reviews, give ratings and recommendations, add links to social media tools, and more to interact with other library users. The openness and transparency of a system has become more important than ever before—it must disappear from patrons' perceptions as they interact with others and add community value through user-provided content.

# *Identify your needs*

As the first step in the RFP process, identify not only the current needs of your library and its community, but also any foreseeable needs within the next five to seven years, the length of a typical contract for a library services platform.

Start by asking staff what they do and don't like about your library's current library system. Is anything hindering the efficiency with which daily library tasks are performed? What roadblocks is the system creating? What benefits are there? Is there anything that staff would absolutely like to see in a new system? Their feedback will be crucial in identifying your needs and wants. Plus, their input will aid in their endorsement of the system you end up choosing, furthering the success and adoption of your new system.



Carefully examine every existing process to determine if it still adds value for your patrons. Your library should be able to answer the following three questions for each workflow process:

- Can the activity be eliminated?
- Can the process be simplified?
- Can the process be automated?

Your users' opinions are just as important as your staff's. While it may not be possible to get a definitive list of answers from patrons regarding their exact needs, it may be useful to start with the following questions: How do my users currently obtain access to necessary information and other resources? What web-based resources, such as journals or databases, do they routinely use? How might they be able to find content more quickly and easily? The answers to these questions will not only help you determine what your library's needs are, but also impact how efficiently your library meets those needs.

Finally, ask yourself which technological developments you're most excited about in a new library system. In the past five to six years, important developments have occurred that may impact this decision:



*Many libraries now provide an integrated catalog of library resources—books, journal articles, and more—using a single search engine.*

- **Shared systems:** A number of libraries are replacing their stand-alone systems by migrating to a consortium of other libraries that are sharing a single system.
- **Cloud-based systems:** Other libraries are moving their servers and host computers into the cloud so the service provider performs any number of functions while the library saves money, improving scalability and reducing reliance on IT.
- **Web-based discovery services:** Many libraries now provide an integrated catalog of library resources—books, journal articles, and more—using a single search engine. There is evidence that libraries that have implemented discovery services have increased the usage of journal articles.

In addition, not all discovery services are created equal. Some systems index metadata only while others index metadata plus full-text. Furthermore, some discovery services can't index data from major databases and eResource providers. Which of these developments will aid in the forward momentum of your library?



# Tasks:

- ☐ Begin to communicate with your staff and customers about their needs.
- ☐ Compile statistical information that describes the library (archives, knowledge management) and other areas to be automated.
- ☐ Assess the library's operating environment and identify any constraints.
- ☐ Identify the most important areas to automate.





# *Write your RFP*

In this step, transform your library's identified needs into a series of statements you can include in an RFP.

Today's best RFPs clearly identify the most important capabilities you are looking for rather than developing an exhaustive list of the functions that should be present in the ideal system. When you establish clear priorities, vendors can propose software packages that meet your needs and save you money.



Your RFP should clearly define the scope, requirements, and implementation strategy for the migration.

- **Scope:** How many sites does your library system have? What is your annual circulation rate? How many title and item records are in your database? This information will help vendors quote the right products at the right price for your library.
- **Requirements:** Which applications does your library use most, and which functions are most important to you? What features are a necessity for your library, and which are just nice to have? Incorporate these tools into a specifications list or table.
- **Implementation Strategy:** Why are you leaving your current ILS or LSP? What vision do you have for your library, and what challenges do you face? When do you want to go live with a new system? Include the answers to these questions in the introduction to your RFP so vendors know whether they're a good fit for your library.

Keep in mind that virtually all library systems will be able to catalog based on MARC standards, circulate books to patrons, and carry out other basic library tasks. The more requirements included in an RFP, the longer vendors will need to respond. Instead of writing a 150-page



RFP and risking a 700-page proposal in return, make sure your RFP includes key details such as functional specifics, IT requirements, and implementation expectations. If you're worried about leaving out information, remember that vendors are always willing to answer questions and give demos for any additional clarification.

Identify dates of key milestones and include any necessary boilerplate terms and conditions, as well as data about the size of the library's collections, staff, and amount of usage. Since your IT department will play a major role in any new software decision, it's also necessary to communicate with your IT manager to understand any constraints on what system can be installed. Certain IT departments wield so much power that no system can be placed in the cloud, mainly for security reasons.

Finally, clarify how you would like vendors to respond to your requirements. State upfront how you would like vendors to organize their responses, including whether you'd like responses in the form of a specs table or narrative answers.



Vendors may provide sample RFPs which could also save time, but may be biased in the favor of that vendor. For example, they may omit functionality questions that the vendor would rather not answer. A sample RFP may have also been written for a library with a different size or community, so make sure the sample matches the specific requirements and characteristics of your library.



# Tasks:

- ☐ Write a narrative to describe the library, its size, number of patrons, and the type of system desired by the library.
- ☐ Include the functional specifications along with any IT system requirements.
- ☐ Describe the process that will be followed to evaluate the submitted proposals.





# *Issue the RFP*

Once you've clearly stated the issue date, date to submit questions, and the due date for proposals in your RFP, it's time to issue your RFP to your current vendor as well as major competitors.

You want to ensure that the RFP is distributed widely to every vendor that might possibly respond. Posting your RFP on your city or university's website or on bid sites like [Onvia](#) is another option to increase the visibility of the RFP document.

Additional information should also be included, such as contact information for someone who can answer any questions a vendor might have. These questions should be answered within 24 hours and



*Clarify the format  
in which you'd  
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should be followed by an addenda including answers to all questions. This will not only give vendors the answers they seek, but will also ensure you get the best possible proposals from all vendors. Make the addenda just as widely available as the original RFP: post them on the same websites, and email them to all vendors who have expressed interest in the RFP.

Although any RFP will include a due date for returned proposals, a complex RFP may lead to an extension request from a vendor. If a vendor requests an extension with valid reasons for their request, consider extending the deadline by a week or two. However, it's important to consider how this may affect your overall schedule for a new library system.

Next, clarify the format in which you'd like to receive your proposal. It's normal for libraries to request physical proposals for convenience—they may be easier to leaf through—but an electronic proposal works just as well and is environmentally friendly. Furthermore, clarify whether you'd like your cost proposals sent separately from technical proposals. It's generally best if you have the vendor submit pricing information in a separate document so that price does not influence the evaluation of the system in any way.



Each vendor must determine whether they should invest the resources to respond to your library's RFP, meaning the revenue they will earn if they are selected versus the costs of both preparing a proposal and implementing the system if they are chosen. It may take four to six weeks for a vendor to prepare a proposal.

Before issuing your RFP, prepare a process of evaluating the proposals once received. Whether you'd like to base this process on cost or staff preference, formulating a plan ahead of time will smooth out the RFP process once the time comes for evaluation.



# *Tasks:*

- ☐ Share the RFP widely.
- ☐ Allow four to six weeks for the vendors to prepare their proposals.
- ☐ Determine whether you would prefer to have pricing information submitted as a separate proposal. Ask the vendor to identify all first-year costs and all costs for the succeeding years.





# *Evaluate the proposals*

Using the evaluation process you established prior to issuing your RFP, review each proposal based on its compliance with the requirements you expressed in your RFP. Generally, libraries use the following evaluation categories:

- Technical compliance
- Cost
- Vendor reputation
- Staff preference

Each library is different, so make decisions based on your unique institution. Although all of these categories are influential in a library's decision, one may carry a heavier weight in your own decision process.



*Embrace the “least total cost” approach rather than using the first-year purchase price to rank the vendors based on costs.*

Part of the evaluation process is to determine how important the price of a system is going to be. Embrace the “least total cost” approach rather than using the first-year purchase price to rank the vendors based on costs. [This webinar](#) discusses “least total cost” further. The following list may offer further guidance within your evaluation process.

- Carefully read and rate each proposal using the evaluation criteria. Ask each team member to review and rate each proposal independently.
- Once each member has given his or her review, bring the team together to share ratings with one another. Will the ratings of each team member be averaged? Will you open a discussion until the team agrees on a group rating?
- Develop a list of questions that arise as you read each proposal. While questions may differ depending on the vendor, documenting the questions can lead to a more complete understanding of your team’s stance.

So, which details are most important to you? What plans do you have to fully compare each proposal to the specific goals of your library? Be sure to give each proposal a complete overview to compile a list of your top choices.



# *Tasks:*

- ☐ Read and evaluate each of the proposals.
- ☐ Develop a list of questions about each proposal.
- ☐ Develop a preliminary list of the vendors in rank order of preference.





# *Select your preferred vendor*

You've narrowed the proposals down to your top three or four. Now it's time to select the one you prefer.

Once your library has identified the top three to four vendors, it should schedule an online demonstration of each system. This is an opportunity to determine first-hand how easy the system is to use (the user interface) as well as clarify any questions that may have arisen in reading the vendor's proposal. Before the demo, develop an agenda of what you want to learn from the demonstration, rather than allowing the vendor to dominate the time: Are there any additional concerns you'd like to address? What appeals to you most about this vendor? This agenda may change from vendor to vendor.



Another useful action is to call vendor references and discuss the conversations with your peers. The following questions may offer guidance for these conversations:

- How long have you been with the vendor? This may give you valuable insight into whether the reference is happy with their current vendor.
- Which of their products are you currently running? What do you like most about them, and what do you find frustrating? If these products are the same ones you'd like to implement in your own library, these answers may prove extremely helpful.
- What was the implementation process like? Discovering the praises and complaints about a system's implementation can give further insight into how easy a vendor is to work with.
- What is the size of your library? Determining the library's annual circulation and number of patrons may offer further comparison to how a new system may work in your library.

Use this step to discover any additional information you need in order to make an educated decision. The rest is up to you!



# *Tasks:*

- ☐ Invite your top three to four vendors to demonstrate their system online. Control the agenda and the discussions.
- ☐ Create a final list of the vendors in rank order.
- ☐ Call vendor references and discuss the system with your peers.



# *Negotiate the contract*

Until the final agreement has been signed, your library should not make any public announcement about its vendor of choice. Important topics to cover when negotiating the contract should include:

- Training
- Data migration
- Data ownership
- Cost of extracting data
- Data extraction formats
- Customer support
- Ownership of intellectual property

A legal presence is especially important during the negotiation stage of your contract. Make sure to involve an attorney representing your organization as well as the IT department.



*With a new library system at your disposal, you can now focus on what you do best: meeting the various needs of your community.*

This presence may also prove necessary as you begin using the vendor's software, as libraries are increasingly licensing a vendor's software as a service (SaaS)—also known as a cloud-based service—over a number of years rather than installing the software of a server purchased and maintained by the library. Have the foresight to discuss legal topics—such as data ownership or security agreements—in case this knowledge is needed down the road.

Another important topic that should be addressed in the agreement is the implementation plan, including the migration of existing machine-readable files from the existing system to the new system. This migration effort offers the library the opportunity to clean up its existing data using a variety of techniques.

Finally, the agreement should reference the library's RFP and indicate when the various payments for the system will be made. With the conclusion of this sixth and final step, your library will have successfully completed the RFP process with the confidence that comes from making well-researched decisions. With a new library system at your disposal, you can now focus on what you do best: meeting the various needs of your community.



# Tasks:

- ☐ Ask the vendors for a copy of their preferred license agreement and maintenance agreement as a part of the RFP.
- ☐ Involve legal counsel, if necessary, to review these standard agreements to ensure that they provide sufficient safeguards for your library.
- ☐ Contact the vendor if you have any legal issues to resolve.
- ☐ Keep important legal documents together—the license agreement should reference the library's RFP.
- ☐ Ensure that you review and approve of any press release the vendor may want to release once parties have signed the agreements.



*The RFP process encourages a library to think carefully and systematically about its needs and, more importantly, the needs of its users.*

The RFP process encourages a library to think carefully and systematically about its needs, your staff's needs, and—most of all—the needs of its users. Understanding what capabilities currently exist in the marketplace can—and should—influence the expectations of libraries. It may lead to the conclusion that the library may need to migrate from its current ILS to a more modern system. Remember that every system has a useful lifecycle and that it's important to recognize when a system is moving into its twilight years.

The real value of the RFP is the decision-making process it facilitates for library staff and key stakeholders. Whatever system you select, your library will be affected by this decision for years to come. Finding a new library system is no light task, but these tools will provide you with the information you need to kick your RFP process off right.

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