

Automating Collection Information

This issue of ArchivesInfo intends to get your feet wet in the world of automation. If you have been itching to get online, but feel overwhelmed this should help you figure out where to start. If you are automated locally, but want to make the plunge onto the Internet, this may motivate you to put your planning in motion. The goal of this newsletter is to make you think about digitizing to increase accessibility to patrons and potential audiences.

The reality is that if you are not automating, you are getting left behind. You are missing a prime opportunity to reach out to your public. There is a danger that if you do not automate, you are moving your institution closer to obsolescence. Just search Google for the terms “museum” and “closing” to see the dangers out there today. Positioning yourself on the Internet with a strong web site that describes your collections gives you a leg up in modern society.

The written tools that have become standards to provide access to our archival collections are called “finding aids.” These form our base for automating our materials. Our goal in creating these finding aids is to make a collection’s contents clear. Finding aids that include descriptive inventories, collection guides, and indices work as a detailed network of in-

formation providing multiple access points to information. Today, automated systems can integrate the beneficial aspects of each tool and can make information about our collections more accessible to the public.

Professional archival automation systems support our standard methods of arrangement and description. They retain the integrity of our physical organization by record groups and series. (See our May 2009 issue online for more information about arranging collections) Professional archivists will “process” a collection before users are allowed to access it. This involves looking through the collection, ensuring that materials are organized, and recording the content of boxes in a descriptive inventory. By fully processing the collections according to archival standards, the archivist familiarizes himself with the holdings and can best create tools that make collection accessible, relating different collections to each other, emphasizing highlights, and noting details that may assist someone researching a particular subject.

Automated finding aids make the process of cross-referencing topics easier and allow users to more easily locate the materials they seek. A database allows users to search for terms and will display any indexing information that includes those terms. Automated indices provide easier access to materials through flexible searching capa-

bilities using queries and offer more widespread distribution of information via network and online systems.

When undertaking an automation project, an Archives should first think about digitizing finding aids to provide broad access to collection information. These automated cataloging records, like their written descriptive inventory counterparts, provide an overview of information rather than access to the actual documents. These cataloging records can also be linked to the documents themselves, when appropriate, through scanning projects. The process of digitization of actual records is time consuming and should only be undertaken for especially useful whole collections or for samples of material within a collection. (Many archives choose to scan their photo collections as a preservation method and to offer greater access to this highly sought material.)

When choosing an automation system, one should take care to find something that works in compliance with standards that have been set over the last two decades. Archivists have created standards such as EAD (Encoded Archival Description) to accomplish an end goal of sharing information about collections on the Internet.

Beyond the outreach advantage of using the Internet is the fact that it provides unlimited space for the handling and access of information. Not only can archivists fully describe their collections online by automating completed finding aids (which can sometimes be hundreds of pages long) they can also link to

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digital copies of original documents for the public to view. Access to archival information can be easily located using standard Internet search methods, namely search engines and links from one source of information to another.

It is important in an automated world to comply with standards. Conforming to standards ensures that your information is easily accessible in the current environment and that it can be easily migrated to new technologies as standards change. If you create your own databases without regard to standards, you may not be able to easily convert information to the next wave of technology. If you are on board with everyone else, you can rest assured that will be able to access the assistance



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For more information about ArchivesInfo and for access to past issues of this newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com



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you need as everyone else completes the switch over too.

There are systems with simplified interfaces where one can enter data and have the computer spit out the necessary jargon without the user ever having to know any coding, so potential users should not be scared away. There are also fairly inexpensive systems that can get you up and running. Include their inclusion in your budgeting if at all possible. If you don't have a computer in your institution, budget your resources to get one or inquire if there is anyone in your community who might want to donate one. A three-year-old computer may be obsolete in some households, but may suit your purposes perfectly.

This is a bandwagon you want to board. Overcome fears by reading up on the subject or working with a professional to assist you. Make it a priority to find the money and time to automate your information so that you can reach a broader audience. Putting yourself out there will help others recognize the benefits of your institution and make them want to support you. Right now you want to be as visible as you possibly can be. (I'll save the benefits of blogging, Twitter and Facebook for a later issue.) Happy archiving!

The following web sites provide information about automation

[American Archivists, Cyberculture and Stasis](#)—a leading archivist's cry to adapt to our changing world

[American Archivist Special Edition on EAD](#)— If you want to learn more about the complex world of EAD this is for you

[Archivists' Toolkit](#)—NYUs take on implementing this free archival automation system

[Museum Computer Network](#)—group assisting museums with their automation needs

[Past Perfect Museum Software](#)— a leading software product in the museum automation industry

[Spellbound Blog](#)—fascinating blog primarily focused on archives and computers

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