Aeon Flux: Transforming with Technology

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Abstract

Libraries frequently turn to new technologies to improve the user's experience. This could be something as simple as a macro that speeds up data entry for catalogers to implementing a new discovery system. New technologies can result in a positive transformation for the organization or unit, but the process of implementing a new technology across an organization can be challenging.

The Kenneth Spencer Research Library, the special collections library at the University of Kansas, has implemented Aeon, an online circulation system that not only gets rid of the need for paper call slips, but also facilitates data-driven management decisions for all areas of the library. Aeon has improved our users' experience and transformed our workflows. This case study will address the reasons why we chose Aeon, how we developed new workflows, staff training and our plans for encouraging more data driven decisions.

Unique Needs of Special Collection Libraries

Special collection libraries must balance the need to make materials available for researchers against the responsibility of ensuring the security of the materials. The Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (ACRL/RBMS) provides guidelines regarding security and theft in special collections. The guidelines recommend a variety of security measures including a closed stacks/non-circulating environment. Instead, special collection libraries should establish a secure reading room where patrons can be observed at all times to ensure proper use of the materials and to prevent theft. The guidelines also recommend that libraries retain permanent records of patron registration information like name, address and institutional affiliation, legal acknowledgment of having read and understood the library's policies, and documentation of the materials the patron has used (RBMS Security Committee, 2009).

The Kenneth Spencer Research Library (Spencer), located on the campus of the University of Kansas, wholeheartedly endorses the spirit of the guidelines found in "ACRL/RBMS Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections" (RBMS Security Committee, 2009). Spencer has always strived to ensure the security of its collections; however, the manner in which we safeguard our collections has changed quite a bit over the years.

Aeon

In April 2010, Spencer staff attended a demonstration of Aeon, a software program developed by Atlas Systems specifically for special collection libraries. The software promised to not only manage our check-out of materials, but it also includes the ability to track the patrons using our reading room, classes, and tours. Especially beneficial for our needs was the promise of query tools to easily retrieve a variety of statistics. The system seemed to have something for everyone. By the fall of 2010, contracts had been signed, and Spencer selected the first day of Fall 2011 classes, August 18, 2011, as the "go-live" date for Aeon. A cross-functional implementation team of library staff from public service, processing, and integrated technologies was formed to achieve this goal.

Training

Implementing Aeon required that some workflow decisions be made as part of the initial setup of the system while other decisions could wait until after staff had a chance to participate in hands-on training. To ensure a smooth transition to Aeon, Atlas Systems staff came for an on-site visit. They met with several small groups of staff throughout their visit to learn our current workflows and explained how these workflows could be

performed in Aeon. The small groups covered a diverse range of topics like reader registration, photoduplication, open URL for finding aid requesting, and integration with our Luna image database. These small group meetings, plus a couple of webinars, were sufficient training for the implementation team to make the decisions necessary for the initial setup of the system.

A test instance of Aeon was made available so that we could start customizing the interface for our needs. As part of the implementation process, Atlas Systems provided onsite, hands-on training for staff at a time of our choosing. Once the test instance was made available, we needed to choose when to train the staff. Should we wait until August to train staff so that it would still be fresh in their minds on day 1, or should we have the training earlier to give staff plenty of time to practice? We chose to have the training in June to allow plenty of time for the staff to practice around their summer vacation schedules.

The two days of hands-on training were comprised of several different sessions based on the functionality of the system. For example, there was a session on patron management and a session on event management. Public service, preservation, and processing staff were able to choose the sessions that applied to their functional areas. The library remained open during the training so multiple sessions of basic classes were provided so that everyone had a chance to attend.

Staff members were encouraged to practice in the test environment as often as they liked. Unfortunately, most of the staff did not take advantage of the practice window. Instead, for the most part, staff waited until the system went "live". To accommodate this training preference, we developed step-by-step instruction sheets for the major functions of the system and offered one-on-one mentoring for service desk staff on their first day on the desk post-Aeon. If we had to do it all over again, we would have chosen a training time closer to the implementation date.

New Workflows

Prior to implementation of Aeon, maintaining the security of the collections was a time-consuming, multi-step, paper-based process. For example, first-time users of Spencer were required to come to complete a registration card, present photo identification to a staff member, and read over our reading room rules. Their signature on the card indicated their acknowledgment and agreement with the terms and conditions of our reading room policies. These registration cards were retrieved from our files on subsequent visits by the patron. A complex system was developed which included storing current cards nearby for easy retrieval and storing cards used infrequently or never again in another part of the building.

Another example of a complex paper-based process was our check-out procedure. Materials in Spencer are not checked out in the traditional library sense. Patrons cannot take materials home; instead, the items are brought to them in our reading room for their use on site. To request an item, the patron was required to fill out a 3-part carbon paper call slip. They would need to write their name on the call slip, along with the author, title, call number, and volume/box number of the item they wanted to view. One copy of the call slip would remain on the shelf where the item was housed; another copy would accompany the book/box while the third copy remained at the staff desk to keep track of what materials were checked out. When the patron was finished with the item, one copy of the call slip was retained for security purposes.

The main purpose of these paper tracking mechanisms was to ensure the ability to provide access and security for Spencer's collections. Additionally, these forms could be theoretically mined for usage data which could be stored in yet another system. In practice, reviewing the registration cards and call slips for statistics was too time-consuming and only performed infrequently over sample periods if at all.

Going from a paper-based, manual process to an online system required that we rethink all of our processes. We needed to ask ourselves questions like; what information did we need to continue to collect, were there processes we could stop doing, etc.? Most of our processes that involved interacting with patrons were analyzed and changed to work within the new electronic environment.

Patrons can now prepare for their library visit in advance from their home computer. We have request links in our online catalogs and finding aids that will take users to the Aeon login page when clicked. Returning users can log in while first-time users will be sent to a page containing our reading room policies and regulations. At the bottom of the page is a button clearly labeled "Accept Terms and Conditions" with additional text that says, "By pressing this button you acknowledge and agree to all of the terms and conditions above." Once this button is clicked, new users are sent to the registration page. We were able to customize this page to solicit the patron information we determined was important for our security and statistical purposes. For example, in addition to the basic name, address, and phone number fields, we also require that patrons choose their user status, for example, Faculty, Graduate Student, Independent Researcher, etc. This information is needed for our statistics reporting and can now be easily retrieved from Aeon at the end of the fiscal year. Since the patron registration information is now stored online instead of on cards, we were able to reconfigure the reception desk and free up some prime user space.

Our check-out procedures have also changed for the better since Aeon. Aeon tracks materials through various queues based on built-in algorithms rather than everything having to be routed by an individual. The names of these queues can be changed to status terms that work for your library. When a patron completes a request form for our materials, the request (called a transaction in Aeon) arrives in the New Request queue. Students or staff print off the call slip for the item which moves the transaction to a queue we call Being Paged. The call slip is an 8 ½" by 11"

piece of paper with the call number, patron's name, and title listed twice, side-by-side on the document. We cut the call slip in half and leave one copy on the shelf to indicate the book is out and keep the other copy with the book or box. The student then uses Aeon to route the transaction to the Checked Out queue. When the patron is finished with the material, the transaction is routed to the To Be Shelved queue. Once the item has been re-shelved, the transaction moves to the Completed queue. Spencer staff and students have individual staff accounts in Aeon so that their names are associated with each transaction they perform. The tracking information comes in handy when a patron requests the item before it has been re-shelved. We can easily ascertain where the material is located and retrieve it for the patron.

Circulation workflows are not the only processes improved by Aeon. Paper log files were filled out by staff when materials were routed to preservation. The logs were annotated to indicate who sent the item to preservation, why the item was sent to preservation, and the date. When preservation staff returned the materials, they would annotate the log to indicate it was back in the building. In Aeon, we have a queue called Checked Out to Preservation where we route materials needing preservation treatment. This allows processing, preservation, and public service staff to easily tell when something is in preservation lab without having to leave their desk. Information about what preservation treatment is needed for the item can be recorded in the note field in the transaction record. A request slip is printed from Aeon which accompanies the item throughout the process. We customized this form so that it includes any notes found in the transaction record. This way, preservation staff can easily see what treatment is being requested without having to look the transaction up on the computer. When preservation returns the materials the transaction is routed to the To Be Shelved queue.

Data-Driven Decisions

Aeon keeps track of all transactions, user information and information about events.

Because this information is stored electronically, we can easily access this data at our desktops and use it to make decisions about our everyday workflows. Statistics in Aeon can be generated on-the-fly in the client, by linking Aeon with Microsoft Access or by using canned reports set up on our hosted report server.

Any staff member can run on-the-fly searches directly in the Aeon client to retrieve information about transactions, users, or events. The results can be narrowed down using filters on columns similar to what can be done in Excel. The results can then be exported as an Excel spreadsheet as needed. These on-the-fly queries are especially useful for our stacks maintenance activities. For example, when a patron requests a book that cannot be found on the shelf, a query can be run based on the call number to ascertain who had the item last, who retrieved it from the shelf, whether it was put on hold for someone, or when it was returned last. This information can then be used to track down items that were shelved incorrectly. Our stacks maintenance staff member was able to find a missing book by using Aeon to find all the books re-shelved on the same day as the missing book. She double-checked the shelving of these materials and was able to locate the missing book among the other books shelved on that day.

Spencer is comprised of three main collection areas: regional history, special collections, and university archives. The call numbers for materials in these collections have a prefix that corresponds to the collection area. For example, RH precedes call numbers in our regional history collection. Using an on-the-fly search, staff can create a search to determine how many items were checked out during any time period. They could then narrow the results of this search based on the call number prefix to see how many items were checked out in a particular collection area. This type of data is very useful for telling the story of Spencer in annual reports, staff evaluations, and when working with donors.

The canned reports provided by Aeon on our hosted server are very useful for collecting our annual statistics. We report the number of visitors to our reading room along with the status, for example, graduate or undergraduate, of our users. The provided user reports in Aeon allow us to quickly retrieve this information, and we can also include information about where the patron is from. For example, we have had researchers from Australia, Germany, and Tokyo.

The canned reports also provide a method for reviewing our circulation statistics. One of the transaction reports allows us to see how many items were checked out per day. Another transaction report provides a frequency count of the number of times a particular call number, title, or author has been checked out. This report has the potential to inform us of which collections may need additional processing. We follow the "more product, less process" approach set forth by Meissner and Greene (2005) for several of our collections, especially in our regional history collection. We can monitor these collections via the frequency report to determine if/when a collection needs additional processing to improve access and ease of use.

We can also run custom SQL queries using Microsoft Access. There are some fields that are not available for searching in the clients, like the attendance count for classes. Since all fields are accessible in the Access tables, we can create a custom report that provides the name of the class and the number of participants. Additional custom reports can be created to assist with cleaning up patron input data. For example, even though we prepopulate the state/province and country fields with KS and USA for Kansas, we still see a multitude of variations like, KS US, or Kansas United States.

Conclusion

Implementing Aeon has allowed us to take advantage of the same technologies available in our general collection libraries while still allowing us to keep information necessary for the security of our collections. We took advantage of the opportunity to review processes to determine what we could stop doing and tried to develop efficient and easy to remember procedures for staff and patron interactions with Aeon. The ability to get data about anything stored in the system is a very useful tool that allows us to

participate in library planning activities confident in our data.

Though some patrons are hesitant about registering for an account, when told that they will be able to see an electronic list of everything they have ever requested, they enthusiastically sign up. It is particularly helpful for researchers and instructors to be able to review a list of the materials they have used without having to keep track of quirky call numbers. Staff members like Aeon for a variety of reasons, including the elimination of the paper/pencil processes, the ability to quickly retrieve information about users, check-outs and classes, and the ability to populate the call slip automatically with bibliographic information from the online catalog record. We do encounter some challenges with both patron and staff use of the system, but overall we are pleased with the outcome.

References

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