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Rick Lugg

R2 Consulting, rick@r2consulting.org

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ATG Interviews Jenny Walker and Oren Beit-Arie

Jenny Walker (Director, Sales & Marketing, Information Services Division, Ex Libris)

Oren Beit-Arie (VP, Research & Managing Director, Information Services Division, Ex Libris)

by Rick Lugg (Partner, R2 Consulting, 63 Woodwell's Garrison, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 603-746-5991; Fax: 603-746-6052) <rick@r2consulting.org> www.ebookmap.net

TOPIC: SFX for Selection and Acquisitions

In our series of articles on the Virtual Approval Plan concept, which appeared in the June issue of ATG, we explored tools that might be used to create links from a library selector's integrated library system (ILS) to a range of extended metadata—and to access those links from the technical services modules of the library's ILS.

WebBridge (designed and built by *Innovative Interfaces*) and *SFX* (owned by *Ex Libris*) were cited as two of those tools, and we thought it useful to deepen our understanding of both products. In subsequent issues, we'll look at *Endeavor's LinkFinder Plus* and "resolution" tools offered by other ILS vendors. — RL

ATG: *SFX* is sold by *Ex Libris*, an ILS vendor. Could you describe the relationship, if any, between *SFX* and *Ex Libris's* other products?

JW & OB: We initially licensed *SFX* nearly two years ago, in February 2000, from Ghent University. We spent the first year doing beta testing with a number of clients here in the US. We went to market with the product in February 2001.

SFX is an entirely stand-alone component, but it obviously integrates extremely well with *Ex Libris's* other products—We do sell it in conjunction with our *MetaLib* product—every *MetaLib* product that we sell includes a fully functional *SFX* server.

ATG: Could you elaborate on that scenario a bit? What does the *MetaLib* component do versus what does the *SFX* server do?

JW & OB: The *SFX* component handles the context-sensitive linking between re-

sources. *MetaLib* is a portal and cross-database search tool. They're complementary systems. I often refer to *MetaLib* as the "front door"—whereby a user comes to a particular system, but doesn't know where they need to look for an item, and *MetaLib* will help them find relevant material for a particular subject area. I portray *SFX* as a "back door" approach, where a researcher knows exactly where they want to search: an engineer goes to *INSPEC* or *Web of Knowledge* and wants to start using that native interface. Then, having found an item of interest, they want to be able to link out to it.

ATG: How many *SFX* servers have been implemented in libraries to date?

JW & OB: We have about 200 customers in 19 countries.

ATG: Many of our readers are familiar with *SFX*, but for those who aren't, could you briefly describe what problem it's intended to solve?

JW & OB: The key issue is that it provides consistent and context-sensitive linking across a range of information resources. Most importantly, the linking services that are offered are determined by the library. The librarian can determine what types of links to provide and where those links resolve. Until now, most of the linking had been provided by information providers, so for each of these resources librarians would have to configure what other resources they want to link to. With *SFX*, the librarian can configure the *SFX* server based on the library's subscriptions and services and then all of the information resources use that configuration. So it streamlines [linking] for the librarian, simplifies maintenance, gives them more control, and from a user point of view, provides more consistency—they will see an *SFX* button in all the different resources, and they'll understand

that by clicking on that, they're going to be taken to additional relevant resources, as decided by the librarian.

ATG: Is it possible to "back out" and return to your starting point, once you've followed an *SFX* link?

JW & OB: Yes—you can link via *SFX* from a source to a target, and having explored one target link, you can always back up to the menu and explore another—and you never lose your original starting point. That always remains on your screen, with the *SFX* menu and the target opening in separate windows.

ATG: *SFX* is typically described as a "reference-linking" tool, working from information resources on the public access side of the library. In envisioning the Virtual Approval Plan, we're more interested in its possible use as an organizing tool for library selectors. Are there features in *SFX* that could support (or be adapted to support) new title selection for books?

JW & OB: The initial focus for our customers has been on providing these services for the end users, but *SFX* is equally applicable for technical services. With *SFX* certain services can be restricted to certain groups only, e.g., staff or specific groups of staff members; the library can define that logic.

ATG: So it would be possible, for instance, for a library to designate certain sources and targets as "for selectors only", e.g., querying publisher sites for *ONIX* data? It would be possible to prevent the public from seeing those sources?

JW & OB: Yes, absolutely—this is what the University of Chicago is doing today.

ATG: Would this require an additional or separate *SFX* server?

JW & OB: Not at all; this can be defined by the logic. The targets are context-sensitive—both as to whom the user is as well as where the link is going. But the library needs to define what are the possible targets services, and then they can restrict certain services to specific groups of people.

ATG: In the June 2002 issue of *ATG* (p.26), Ted Fons of *Innovative Interfaces* argued that the ILS (as opposed to materials vendor systems or *OCLC*) is the appropriate locus for the virtual approval plan. In fact, linking tools such as *WebBridge* or *SFX* would need to be launched from the Approval or Acquisitions module of the ILS, in order to allow convenient creation of purchase orders, de-duplication, checks against holdings, and

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KH: I do find it's really exciting. We really have progressed into a neat new generation of services. It's been 30 years since I worked for a research library in technical services and journal acquisitions. This is such a different world, with such a different set of things we can offer to users. The irony is that with electronic ordering, I personally buy more books now than I've ever bought.

ATG: To me, one of the really telling signs was the idea floated by a number of

libraries to stop checking in their paper journals because no one was using them anyway. Even two years ago, they would have been laughed out of the industry. But it's being taken seriously.

KH: Yes, that's very interesting. Well, I think we've got some exciting times ahead. A couple of years ago, I was saying, "All I want to do is retire." Sort of been there, done that; I'm ready to do some other things. While a part of me still says that, part of me is saying, "Wait a minute; there's so many neat things coming down the road right now. It would be nice to be part of it."

other transactions—after an appropriate title has been identified and evaluated. *SFX services are most typically invoked (at least now) from within an information resource. Is it possible to integrate SFX into this scenario?*

JW & OB: Today SFX is most visible as an end user tool. However, it is also being used as a resource in some innovative ways, e.g., to generate browseable journal title lists and to assist with ILL by pre-checking availability (in one or multiple systems) before offering a request form. SFX can be tightly integrated with other systems and functions to facilitate workflow procedures. An example might be to use SFX to navigate from a citation to check for local presence of the item, to a vendor system to check availability and price and then to presenting an actual order form. This does not necessarily have to occur within the ILS itself, but even if it does it could use SFX to achieve this.

The ILS Acquisitions module is not necessarily the starting point for such a process. The starting point may, for example, be a citation found in WorldCat or RLIN, or simply entered directly by the acquisitions librarian into a Web form that is SFX-enabled.

When we talk about integrated library systems today, we need to define more clearly what we mean. The term emerged from integrating very specific tasks, and many of those tasks had to do with managing print [resources] and managing bibliographic material. Now we've gone far beyond that, and libraries need to manage much more than this. Most of us today have a good sense of what an ILS is, but I think we're moving into an environment where we see the interoperability mechanisms in systems facilitating the integration of other components, and we're seeing the emergence of a range of components that can or needn't be part of the "integrated" library system. We need to take cognizance of the fact that libraries themselves are doing interesting things, and what they look to us vendors for is to provide some of the components—in a sense, we're the "glue" that links various things together.

We're viewing the integrated library system now as integrated in terms of interoperability—you don't have to buy all of the components from the same vendor in order to utilize the system.

ATG: So, as more and more resources become available digitally, the types of transactions that libraries perform will change—expanding or supplanting the traditional OPAC-centered ILS?

JW & OB: [We] think so, yes.

ATG: But in the meantime, libraries operate in this hybrid print/electronic environment, where large libraries still purchase 20,000-50,000 print books a year, and there remains a need to support these transactions—to identify and select new titles, create and track purchase orders, process invoices, etc.

—while also supporting selection of electronic resources. Do you see SFX as a tool that can help bridge this print/electronic environment?

JW & OB: SFX is one of the tools that's helping to bridge the transition from a print to an electronic environment. Other types of products like Ex Libris's MetaLib are also helping to bridge that. But there are other tools that libraries need. We see developments in terms of managing electronic resources...and a lot of the work that's being done in libraries is going on outside of an ILS. Now it may be that some people want that to be part of an ILS and some people don't. As a vendor serving these markets, we have to handle both aspects. People want to do these tasks in very different ways.

ATG: How might SFX be implemented in an OPAC?

JW & OB: In the linking concept of "sources" and "targets," we have to think of an OPAC in both contexts. Most OPAC vendors have a Web-based OPAC that enables a user to link to it as a "target" to check holdings. To date, SFX is being used to link to a wide range of OPAC systems.

In terms of enabling an OPAC as a "source" of SFX links, clearly [Ex Libris's] Aleph is OpenURL-enabled, and we have customers who are now testing the systems from Innovative and Sirsi as a source. We believe that other vendors are already under user pressure to open up their systems.

ATG: What about the technical services modules of the ILS? Can staff-side modules such as Acquisitions, Cataloging, Approval Plan Review be enabled as "sources" as well?

JW & OB: Yes. SFX was designed in a very open way—it's possible to plug in any type of service that you want. With SFX both the architecture and the philosophy are open, so libraries are free to incorporate their own types of services, and to incorporate them into places where they want to do so. In many cases, though, they will be dependent on the vendors to make any required changes.

Libraries can certainly create their own sources and targets. An example is the University of Chicago, where they developed the link to Harrassowitz's OttoEditions. The libraries are not tied to what we provide as part of the ongoing KnowledgeBase service from Ex Libris.

ATG: I'm interested in exploring the University of Chicago/Harrassowitz initiative further, because it's a development that seems to point toward the virtual approval plan. Can you describe the process involved here? What did University of Chicago have to do and what did Harrassowitz have to do to make this link possible?

JW & OB: Although we had some early discussions with Harrassowitz, the fact that this came about was purely between them and the University of Chicago. I believe that Harrassowitz had to provide a syntax that enabled University of Chicago's SFX server to link to the OttoEditions system. [Note: OttoEditions is Harrassowitz's Web-enabled

books database, which allows searching, selection, ordering, and export of bibliographic data.] I don't know whether this was something that Harrassowitz already had and simply needed to define for Chicago, or whether they had to make changes to their system.

ATG: So, in your terminology, Harrassowitz is a "target" in this situation. What is the "source" in the University of Chicago system? Where are staff users working when the need to link to OttoEditions arises?

JW & OB: I'm not sure what is their source is. It would be useful to talk directly to Chicago to determine this.

Hyper-Interview

To clarify this point, ATG contacted both University of Chicago and Harrassowitz. Their comments follow:

James Mouw, Head of Acquisitions and Electronic Resources Officer at University of Chicago: on "what is the 'source' from which users initiate the query and link?"

JM: [Users] can start from any bibliographic source. At the moment, this would most likely be OCLC or RLIN since by the time they're at an entry in our catalog they already know if we have it in the collection or on order.

I see this as a convenient way to go directly to the screen within a vendor database to say "order it" without having to do any rekeying. ... The OttoEditions implementation works brilliantly, by the way. ... This is certainly for staff use only, since it takes the user directly to our internal records. We've had philosophical discussions about turning on things like Amazon for patron use, but decided we don't want to go in that direction.

ATG: Would you consider implementing with other vendors?

JM: The OttoEditions implementation came about by serendipity—it just "seemed right" to try it with them first. We would love to implement this with other vendors...

Danny Jones (Director, Research & Development) and **Katharina Klemperer** (Director of Product Development for North America) from Harrassowitz on "how much work was involved for Harrassowitz to enable OttoEditions as an SFX target? Katharina responded:

KK: The library's SFX administrator had to build a URL pattern specifically for OttoEditions in the SFX knowledge base. We did make some minor modifications to OttoEditions to accommodate linking via SFX; however, it took less than a day of programming time. The tricky part was building a routine that accomplishes both the login and the search, using criteria embedded in a single URL. The SFX link takes the user to a search result.

The algorithm is flexible; the SFX administrator can design the URL to instruct OttoEditions to produce either a long or short display, and either a result summary or a record-by-record display with an order form accompanying each title.

The OttoEditions capability can be used

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with other applications than **SFX**. Any system that can construct a URL can be used to accomplish a login+search in **OttoEditions**, using any combination of search indexes that are available in **OttoEditions**; e.g., author, title, publisher, subject, a variety of ID numbers, date of publication, language, etc.

This capability could be used for viewing form selection slips online. Since **OttoEditions** allows users to search for their form selections, restricted by date and/or subject, a user could conceivably build a script that constructed URLs for selectors based on their subject area. [Interviewer note: Now that's starting to sound like a virtual approval plan!]

End of Hyper-Interview—we now return you to our Base Interview...

ATG: So the tasks for the target vendor are not too onerous... essentially, the library's **SFX Administrator** asks the vendor to provide a syntax that will allow a user to link from **SFX** to that vendor's system—preferably bypassing the login screen and taking the library user to the specific item in the vendor's database?

JW & OB: Right, though sometimes that's a problem, and the target is not able to take the user deep into the application—they might force you to come to a login page. Others have got around that. Some-

times it's a technology issue that prevents them from implementing it.

Initially, when I first started working on **SFX**, when I talked with many information providers, they were clearly very nervous about people linking to their resources. Now, there's a complete sea change—they seem eager to have people link to them, and are constrained sometimes only by required technology changes.

Summary:

What have we learned and what can we surmise about **SFX** and its potential to support the Virtual Approval Plan?

1. **SFX** is based on the concept of sources and targets. In selection and acquisitions transactions, the most useful "sources" are the ILS Acquisitions module, book vendor systems where electronic slips are reviewed, or bibliographic resources such as **OCLC**.

2. The most useful "targets" in selection and acquisitions transactions are likely to be vendor systems (such as **OttoEditions**, **GOBI**, **Collection Manager**, and others); Web-based Out of Print sources (such as **Alibris**); extended data providers such as **Syndetic Solutions** or **Baker & Taylor's Content Server**; full-text sources such as **ebrary**, **netLibrary**, or **ed**; and publisher sites, especially those that contain extensive **ONIX** data.

3. Sources and Targets are chosen and

administered by the library. Any system can be a source, a target, or both. This administration, embodied in the **SFX** "knowledge base," is critical to making the network of sources and targets work together—and in defining the "context" of the user, including permissions and authentications to specific targets.

4. **University of Chicago** and **Harrassowitz** have collaborated on the first **SFX** project that relates to selection and acquisitions—allowing a selector or acquisitions staff member to link from a search result in **OCLC** or **RLIN** directly to the Web order page in **OttoEditions**.

5. Although no implementations exist as yet, there are no barriers to using an ILS technical services module as a "source" for an **SFX** query—providing that module can generate an **OpenURL**-formatted query.

6. It appears to be a relatively straightforward and low-cost process for vendors and publishers to enable their sites as **SFX** targets.

SFX, of course, is only one tool, provided by one vendor. Use of **SFX** for selection and acquisitions transactions is still more an idea than a reality—though we must congratulate our colleagues at **University of Chicago** and **Harrassowitz** for their pioneering work. And there are other tools, which we'll continue to investigate in subsequent issues.