Ex Libris Customer (1978-2005) Questionnaire – Theo Engelman

[Feel free to say as little or as much as you like. Do *not* feel that you need to answer all of the questions. *Thinking of the 1978-2005 time period….*]

1… What is your name and the name of the institution(s) where you worked with Aleph (and/or other Ex Libris products)?
Theo Engelman, Utrecht University Library

2…When did your site install Ex Libris software and when did you start working with it?
First installation of Aleph 11.5 was in autumn 1998. We went live with version 12.1 in November 1999.
First installation of SFX 2 was in autumn 2003. We went live with the system in March 2004.

3…What was your job title, or, more generally, what did you do?   Were there particular projects you were involved in?
At that time I was working on the IT department of the library as general application administrator and instructor, organizing also the libraries IT helpdesk and the generic library IT and network. I was part of the implementation team of Aleph from the start .

4…Were there modules which you felt were particularly good, distinguishing Aleph from other vendors' versions of the same module?
Not exactly. The main quality of Aleph compared to other vendors was its state of the art client-server and robust architecture that allowed the application administrator more opportunities to work independently from system administrators. In our previous mainframe based GEAC system application administrators were not able to do any parametrization or changes in configuration of the system, all this work was depending on hard core system administrators.
Also we were used to daily system disruptions and were astonished by the performance and stability of the Aleph server. System failures were so sparse that our staff were experiencing the first year as 'in heaven', later becoming used to it of course.

5…Who were Aleph/Ex Libris' main competitors?
PICA, the Dutch library IT consortium later acquired by OCLC

6…I think that two early decisions were very important:
- support of standards: the MARC and MAB formats, and, later UNIMARC
- the early use of Unicode, the ability to handle multiple languages and scripts – Hebrew and English from the first and, very early, Danish/German/Italian – laying the groundwork for making Aleph a system which could be implemented in virtually ***any*** language
- Others?
- See my answer at 4

7…Comments on the role of user groups (ICAU, NAAUG, SMUG, etc.)?
We joined ICAU from the start and we benefitted a lot from the customers discussion lists and the conferences. We also attended to system seminars at Tel Aviv, Cyprus etc. which we valued as very important to build our knowledge and experience.

We never joined SMUG although we used SFX since 2004. But we collaborated with the Dutch SFX/Metalib user group and formed the Dutch and Flemish Ex Libris User Group (Vlengel, www.vlengel.org) in 2006 when ICAU and SMUG merged into IGeLU.

8…Were there particularly interesting/valuable Ex Libris staff that you remember?
Sure!
I still have very warm and good memories of Noam Kaminer who was project leader of the Aleph implementation team in 1999. Later on when I became more active in IGeLU I met Noam a number of times at conferences and in his job as head of global support. I still miss his kind personality and his good sense of humor.
Marina Spivakov is one person I remember since she was the technical lead during our Aleph implementation and I was very impressed by her skills and expertise.
Also I remember Yossi Loss who managed to develop and implement the first version of PLIF loader based on the students file of our bursar as we were used in our previous GEAC system.

9…It seems that, with ALEPH 500, the choice of a Linux / Oracle environment was important -- but maybe most of the competitors' products also operated in this environment?
No way, there were no competitors on the Unix / Oracle environment that could meet the functionality, scale and robustness that Aleph offered in 1999 and onwards.

10…Are there particular interesting, fun, or odd things that you remember?
Marina Spivakov was able to develop and implement a new method of handling returned items by Aleph like we were used to do in our old GEAC system. It was very important to us that an item on return would be immediately on transport to its home library without the need to do more than one action. Marina was able to implement this workflow in Aleph within one week! She introduced the special sublibrary transport patrons that were used to loan the item when on transport, and the pick-up sublibrary to receive requested items immediately putting them on the hold shelf upon return. I will never forget that.
From the SFX implementation in 2003 I will always remember our trainer James Culling and his famous line:
"I like to lower your expectations and then raise them again" when he was explaining us the options and limitations of SFX.
I was also very impressed by the relatively easy implementation of our first SFX installation. Within 6 months from first installation and training we could offer the functionality to our staff and users.

11…If your library has stopped using Aleph, when did that happen – and what was the successor system?
We are still using Aleph, planning to start a tender for the successor system in Q3 this year.

12…If you moved to a different library, please describe briefly your history since that time.