Ex Libris Customer (1978-2005) Questionnaire

Version: Patrick Hochstenbach – April 22, 2017

What is your name and the name of the institution(s) where you worked with Aleph (and/or other Ex Libris products)?

I'm Patrick Hochstenbach and worked at Ghent University Library and Los Alamos National Laboratories with Ex Libris products.

When did your site install Ex Libris software and when did you start working with it?

Ghent University Library started in 1997 with the installation of the Aleph 500.9 system as one of the first in Europe. My first job at Ghent University library was to help to do the systems administration part of the Aleph installation: managing the DEC Alpha system it was running on, Oracle administration and those things.

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 the Unix/Linux systems administrator and programmer at the library. I just finished my master in physics in the Netherlands and searched for a temporary job to be near to my girlfriend in Belgium. Ghent Univeristy needed a programmer/administrator so I applied for the job. At the time Herbert Van de Sompel the library was doing some very impressive things it was a great time to get into digital libraries.

One part of my job was also to manage the SilverPlatter ERL server. I found this amazing to run tens of CDROM databases on a university network. Herbert was quite busy this into formalise a theoretical basis for scholarly communication and information retrieval. His work energy was amazing and very inspiring to try better than my best to find software solutions. In the very first year I was involved in programming the new website of the digital library, integrating the SilverPlatter databases, Aleph systems and publisher websites into a web based digital library system Herbert called the "executive lounge - consultation chain".

With these experiments, Herbert soon found out that the solutions to go from A&I databases to full text, from references in full-text to A&I and catalogs where quite cumbersome and not scalable (this was part of the basis for his PhD program). In 1998, I started the programming part with Herbert's lead on a solution that would be called with a sexy working title *SFX (Special Effects)*. It was very exciting work atmosphere. Constantly discussing, brainstorming with Herbert and thinking of experiments and trying out ways to improve our tool. I remember very well the first demos we gave in Belgium and hearing the amazed reactions in the audience. In 1999, Herbert went to the Los Alamos National Labs to continue his PhD. We set up demos for Los Alamos, ALA, LITA and it soon became a small revolution and Ex Libris became very much interested :). In 2000, Ghent University sold the software to Ex Libris and it was ready to conquer the world the hands of a great team in Boston and Tel Aviv. We worked very hard into making it into a product. Many hours with Herbert, Oren, I remember to get SFX in into a better and better shape and working on standards in what would become OpenURL.

Were there modules which you felt were particularly good, distinguishing Aleph from other vendors' versions of the same module?

When I started working with Ghent University I only had experience with the Aleph system and did know very little about other tools. What helped me very much in our experiments with the *Consultation Chain* and the *SFX* software was the openness of the system. To be able to access to the Oracle databases and adept the web templates was an immense bonus for our projects. We were in control of our own data. This is what made and makes Aleph superior to all other products.

Also, Ex Libris was for us the company you could talk to. It was so easy for us to get hold of the technical teams and explain us how the system worked. We could visit Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and experience the energy of the company. All was so flexible to adept the Aleph code to our needs.

Who were Aleph/Ex Libris' main competitors?

Ghent University moved in 1995 from DOBIS Libis to a new system. At that time Vubis, Sirsi Unicorn, Horizon, VTLS and Ex Libris were in the running.

As for linking services you had SilverPlatter SilverLinker, but it only worked within their own platform. You couldn't use it for reference linking and had a big problem with administrating the correct and local appropriate links to full text (the "Harvard problem" as described in our SFX articles). There was nothing else on the market but SFX.

Comments on the role of user groups (ICAU, NAAUG, SMUG, etc.)?

In the Netherlands and Belgium was first the DEBUG (pun on "the Dutch and Belgian User Group") which was fun to participate in and of course a much cooler name than the current *Vlengel* ;).

Were there particularly interesting/valuable Ex Libris staff that you remember?

Oh yes, of course Lieve Rottiers (but she is from Ghent !), Dana Sharvit, Oren Beit-Arie, Yohanan Spruch, Jenny Walker have a warm place in my heart.

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?

Well, it started for us on a DEC Alpha system back in 1997 but I wasn't sad to move to a Linux environment after 2000. The cost of maintenance was so much lower. There is so much documentation, user groups, tools on Linux.

Are there particular interesting, fun, or odd things that you remember?

Too much for this questionnaire ;). But in the appendix I'll send some good old photos of the Aleph installation we did in 1997 with well-known Ex Libris faces!

If your library has stopped using Aleph, when did that happen – and what was the successor system?

After SFX and OpenURL project I worked for a few years at Ghent University and moved to the United States and worked at Los Alamos National Labs with Herbert on OAI-PMH Static Repositories and the Adore framework. Then I worked for Lund University and now I'm currently back at Ghent University working as digital architect at the library and creating open source tools for libraries: Catmandu (http://librecat.org/Catmandu/) and LibreCat (http://librecat.org)