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The implementation of information technology projects in Polish research and academic libraries in the early 1990s: questions of scope and effectiveness

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Abstract

Reports the results of an inquiry directed at Polish academic, research and scientific libraries. An appraisal of the current IT infrastructure, degree of advances in automation in libraries, and utilization of the electronic sources has been carried out, based on the completed questionnaires received from the libraries in question. It has been recognized that the best developed IT infrastructure is to be found in the academic libraries and that they are well prepared for automation. The situation is much worse in the special libraries of the research and scientific institutes. Half of the libraries in the latter group are not engaged in any preparation for automation, mainly owing to a lack of financial resources. Also, they do not provide readers with access to sources in an electronic format. Points out that a relevant consistent programme for the implementation and utilization of IT in Polish libraries has not yet been prepared.

Introduction

The aim of this brief study is to describe the extent of information technology (IT), and the ways in which it is currently used in Polish research and academic libraries. It is not our intention to present an in-depth analysis of the automation process currently taking place in Polish libraries, but rather an account of the state-of-the-art together with comments and notes. This sketch, therefore, attempts to provide an overview of the current state of the implementation of IT in the academic sector of Polish libraries.

We believe that the study reflects the current state of the implementation of new IT projects and strategies in Polish libraries, and hence allows us to make an attempt to evaluate the current potential for Polish research and academic libraries to provide access to scientific and research information. The data gathered also allow us to define the most probable directions in library developments in the years to come. The study may also be helpful in making choices which may modify current developments so that they proceed in the most desirable directions.

The study examines data relevant to 125 libraries which were gathered by distributing questionnaires by post in 1995. The questionnaires were sent to 179 libraries, and 125 completed questionnaires were returned to the authors. Such a high response rate resulted from the fact that the inquiry was carried out under the aegis of the Polish Foundation of Propagation of Science (PFUN) which has a strong influence in Polish library circles. However, it also testifies to the sense of duty and responsibility on the part of the librarians in the libraries in question.

We are deeply indebted to all respondents, who, in spite of their work pressures and other surveys, were willing to complete the questionnaires and send them back to the authors. The information gathered in this way was analysed in the autumn of 1995 and the findings made available to the PFUN. We are convinced that the results of the inquiry will prove to be particularly helpful in restructuring the state's research information system, in which the research library is its strongest and most important component.

Preliminary assumptions

Some of the items in the questionnaire dealt, directly or indirectly, with the ways in which IT was used in libraries.

The following information was gathered:

- titles of databases and the ways in which information was provided by computer-supported distribution media (the number of workstations, duty hours, ways of payment, number of actual instances of making information accessible, costs of purchases);
- the library computer network specifications, ways in which it is used and the number of relevant regular posts ascribed;
- investments in IT (current and intended);
- the place automation occupies in the awareness of general problems in the library;
- the place automation occupies in the proposed solutions to these problems.

The libraries had been originally divided into five groups:

- university libraries;
- libraries of institutions of professional higher education (medical academies, higher schools of economics, academies of music, universities of technology, academies of fine arts);
- central libraries;
- special libraries (notably those of the institutes and various units of PAN (Polish Academy of Sciences);
- public libraries with the special status of a research library.

University libraries

The completed questionnaires were returned by eight university libraries (11 distributed). All of the libraries have made some of their information sources available through various distribution media; 44 titles of databases have been made accessible in this way. The most frequently mentioned titles are: *EconLit* (three), *Przewodnik Bibliograficzny* [bibliographic descriptions of Polish publications] (four), *Humanities Index* (three), *Library Literature* (two), *ERIC* (three), *Sociofile* (four), *Choice Reviews* (two), *Art Index* (two), *Life Sciences Collection* (two), *Philosopher's Index* (two), *CD MARC NAMES* (3), *CD MARC Bibliographic* (three), *CD MARC Subject* (three), *Springer Complete Catalogue 1842-1994* (two), *Polska Bibliografia Prawnicza* [bibliographic descriptions of Polish law publications] (two).

The majority of the databases are of a bibliographic nature. Factual sources comprise about 20 per cent of all the titles. Monographs or full-text images of a periodical are almost non-existent in the response. Computer

networks are primarily the distribution source in four libraries (the average number of workstations is nine, one library claimed to have an infoserwer with 20 terminals for networked CD-ROM databases, and in stationary facilities. The facilities are open to the users for 47 hours weekly on average, and are mostly made available without any fees being charged – only one library charges users from outside the parent university (6.55zł [1 Polish zloty = 100 groszy] for one hour of searching and 37gr for a computer print-out in A4 format).

To acquire the electronic sources the libraries spent from 2,000 to 33,800 zlotys (zł) (17,750zł on average) annually. The number of registered users ranged from 40 to 14,000 with 2,232 being the average.

All the libraries have local area networks at their disposal (one does not have its own LAN and uses the university network), and have access to the Internet. One of the libraries indicated that it used CDS/ISIS for cataloguing, one used BIBL, and one SOWA – since 1993 (110,000 records – 55,000 titles in the computer catalogue); two libraries had installed the integrated library system VTLS. The average capacity of the network used by a library is about 70 workstations (the smallest being 15, the largest 100).

As for the investment in IT carried out in 1995, only one library refrained from doing anything in the field. The rest bought equipment (three libraries), installed a supply network for computers (one), refurbished the room housing the server (one), was connecting the library building with fibre-optic cables (one), or branch libraries to the already existing network (one). One library was developing its acquisition module and circulation module, one was developing its own integrated multi-user network information system; one was expanding the internal computer network.

Automation had not been taken into consideration in investment plans except in the case of one library. One library intended to make its CD-ROM databases available on the network; one was planning to purchase a new server for its local network, and another was considering buying a new server for connection to the university network and the Internet to facilitate access to their databases for outside users; one was planning to complete the automation of the lending department; one was planning to integrate a number of its departmental libraries (about 30 per cent of the total) with the main library and the

fibre-optic network; two others were considering further development of their automation.

Two libraries considered the implementation of automation to be the cause of their most difficult problems; one found it difficult to complete computerization, another the proper and efficient implementation of automation. Among the most serious problems reported were: a lack of money for automation, for example for purchasing a large powerful server to make possible access to the local holdings from the outside (three libraries); a lack of funds allocated for purchasing the relevant amount of computer equipment and suitable furniture. One library mentioned too little flexibility on the part of its staff to meet the requirements demanded by computerization.

The automation of libraries within their networks was considered to be the third important element in attempting to resolve the problems of Polish research and academic libraries. The most important one was the question of space utilization and workstations, followed by salary structure problems. Changes in management were considered to be the fourth important problem.

Libraries of institutions of professional higher education

A total of 12 completed questionnaires were returned by libraries of universities of technology (14 distributed), nine by pedagogical higher institutions (ten distributed), eight by medical academy libraries (ten distributed), six by academies of music (eight distributed), six by agricultural university libraries (eight distributed), five by libraries of academies of physical education (six distributed), two by libraries of higher schools of economics (five distributed), and one by an academy of fine arts. Questionnaires were not returned by two libraries of merchant marine academies.

Of those responding, 42 libraries provide readers with access to their information sources on computer-supported distribution media (seven libraries do not have them at their disposal). There is a total of 90 titles of databases in the collections of the libraries in question. An average library has six titles available (24 have from one to five titles; the largest number being 23 in one library).

The most frequently mentioned titles are: *Medline* (nine libraries), *Compendex Plus* (seven), *INSPEC* (six), *ISSN Compact* (two), *Springer Complete Catalogue* (two), *Elsevier*

Science Publ. (two), *Environment Abstracts* (four), *ICONDA* (six), *Sport Discus* (two), *BIBLIO* (three), *SYMPO* (two), *Toxline* (two), *SIG* (two), *Agro-Librex* (two), *SPACE-ACCESS* (two), *Polska Bibliografia Lekarska* [bibliographical descriptions of Polish medical publications] (four), *Przewodnik Bibliograficzny* (eight), *Current Contents Engineering, Computing & Technology* (three), *AGRO* (two), *AGRICOLA* (three), *FSTA* (two), *ASFA* (two), *AGRIS* (five), *CAB* (three), *SPOLIT* (three), *Excerpta Medica* (three), *Ulrich's Plus* (six), *Agroline* (two), *SPACE PRECES* (two).

The libraries spend on average about 24,300 zlotys annually on purchasing electronic sources. They are, in general, made available free of charge to users. Ten libraries charge a fee to users, including three which only charge users from outside their parent institution. The fee charged varies: one library reported that it charges 2zl for access to the database plus 10gr for one page of a computer print-out and 1zl for 100 records downloaded onto a diskette; another library charges 4zl for 30 minutes of work (there is a 50 per cent reduction for users from the parent institution). In addition, computer print-outs are charged at 7gr a page, and 5 gr for one record, downloading – 2gr for a record. One library charges 10zl for a request submitted for searching and 10gr for a record. However, at another library, access to a database is charged at 5zl and a record is charged at 10gr. Another library charges 1zl for 30-minute searching and 15gr for a printed page (users from outside the parent institution are charged 5zl and 3gr, respectively).

In all 15 libraries (i.e. about 30 per cent of the group) do not have any computer network at all. Those which have networks at their disposal make use of 20 network terminals on average. Ten libraries have access to the Internet. Seven have the library system SOWA, three SOB, two APIS, two UNIKAT, two OPUS, three LECH, one MAK, one VTLS, one TINLIB and one ALEPH.

Seven libraries reported that in 1995 they had been making investments in automation in general. Ten were expanding their computer networks, three were installing networks, two were cabling their buildings. Others noted as current expenditure in automation the following: server purchase; purchase of the computer program APIS; equipment replacement; implementation of the TINLIB system;

increasing the number of terminals for users; expanding access to UNIX; installing access to STN; automation of the lending departments; automation of branch and departmental libraries; access to the Internet and the creation of their own databases.

As for the main investment plans for 1996, the libraries in question were considering the following: further development of automation (ten libraries), network expansion (seven), equipment purchases – including memory capacity development of the server (11), purchase of a CD-ROM tower. Other plans included: access to CD-ROM databases in the network, cabling replacement for that of the Ethernet type, software replacement (two), purchase of new modules of the UNIKAT system, networking (three), connection of the local area network to metropolitan networks (three), purchase of Dynix Horizon computer integrated system, creation of a multimedia workshop, installation of a module for lending and circulation department, creation of OPACs, and the construction of the catalogue.

A lack of funding for automation was identified as being the main problem faced by the libraries (11 libraries). Among others were: the lack of a permanently employed computer specialist, the lack of funds for regular library posts for computer specialists (one), shortages in equipment (hardware) (four), meagre funds for purchasing databases (two). The process of the implementation of a computer library system was reported to have delayed getting books to library users. The libraries pointed out that the restructuring and reorganization of work and the management problems which followed the introduction of automation to a library had caused many difficulties. The libraries also complained of problems with the employment of a library network administrator. Other problems mentioned included: the expansion of computer catalogues, lack of access to the Internet, mediocre hardware, damage to existing equipment, and the lack of an appropriate dictionary which would help to create a computer database.

Public libraries with the status of a research library

Completed questionnaires were received from 11 public libraries that hold the special status of being a research library (13 distributed). Five do not provide readers with access to information sources through computer-

assisted distribution media. The rest provide access to 26 different titles of databases. The most frequently mentioned was *Przewodnik Bibliograficzny*, which is bought by all the libraries with computer-supported information media. *Temida* was mentioned twice and *Lex* three times.

All the titles are made accessible for users without any fee being charged with the only exception being *Wer Liefer Was*, for which is charged 4zl for one hour of searching, and one library's own bibliographical database – 5gr for the provision of a record and 5gr for its print-out.

In 1995, three libraries made investments in the field broadly defined as automation: one was buying hardware, one was cabling its building, one was creating a local area network for five terminals, and one was developing its computer database.

In 1996, two libraries planned further automation, one was considering the purchase of hardware, one was planning further development of its computer network, one was planning the expansion of the already existing network to 25 terminals, and two were considering the initial stages of automation.

Among the most difficult problems mentioned in the answers to the inquiry, four libraries pointed to a lack of financial resources and appropriate funds for automation. Also mentioned were: difficulties with the construction of LANs (one), lack of a trained computer specialist who to the meagre wages offered (one), and problems with automation in general.

The management of the libraries considered the automation of libraries within the library network as being the most important way to solve the problems currently besetting Polish research and scientific libraries. Other solutions mentioned were: "an increase in the number of new databases" and "new extensions to already existing library buildings".

Special libraries

This group included libraries of the institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN). Completed questionnaires were received from 53 libraries (75 distributed). Almost half of the libraries from the group, i.e. 25, provide readers with access to computer-supported distribution media. The rest, i.e. 28 libraries, do not have any IT facilities at their disposal.

Among the titles of databases in electronic form, 15 were databases purchased, while

seven had been created by the libraries themselves (among them two library catalogues). The most frequently purchased databases were: *Current Contents: Agriculture, Biology and Environmental Sciences* (six libraries), *Medline* (five), *Current Contents: Life Sciences* (five), *Current Contents: Physical, Chemical and Earth Sciences* (five), *Springer Katalog* (three), *ASFA* (two), *Life Science Collections* (two). In addition, *Current Contents* without a specified detailed subtitle was mentioned three times. On average, one library spends about 6,200zł on purchasing electronic sources annually. The smallest sum allocated to such sources was 1,500zł, the largest amounted to 20,000zł.

All the sources are made available during the opening hours from Monday to Friday without any fee being charged. On average, there are 450 registered users of this kind each year in one library. Owing to the fact that most of the libraries do not record the numbers of requests for the IT facilities at their disposal the actual number may be even higher, perhaps even doubled. However, some of the libraries informed us that in 1994 the sources had been consulted only 20 times. On the other hand, there were libraries which claimed that they had recorded 1,500 uses in the same period of time.

Of the libraries in question, 31 do not have a computer network. The rest have local area networks but only two claimed that they had access to the Internet. Three libraries used MAK, two CDS/ISIS, one LENDIS and one Data Trek. Five libraries did not supply the trade name of the system they used but mentioned that they had been using a computer system of some kind.

Five libraries were conducting different projects relating to automation in 1995, three were planning such projects, one was developing its computer network, one had purchased a computer, one was building a local area network, and another one was creating computer catalogue. As many as 31 libraries neither were involved in any works nor considered any investments in automation.

As for the main investment plans in 1996, the libraries indicated the following (ranked according to the number of occurrences): automation (seven libraries), further development and upgrading of the network (two), computer hardware purchases (three), the creation of own databases covering lists of publications of university research workers. Almost half of the respondents (25 libraries) had not intended to make any relevant investment in 1996.

Among the most difficult problems, the following were quoted: a lack of allocated funds for automation (two), automation as such (two), halting the process of computerization, choice of the computer system, retrospective conversion of the catalogue, and a lack of trained staff to work with computers.

The most effective way to solve the problems besetting Polish libraries was to be found in automation within the existing computer networks, followed by an increase in the number of information sources purchased.

Central libraries

Five central libraries responded to the inquiry. All of them provide access to sources in electronic format (33 titles altogether). Only one title was mentioned twice – *Przewodnik Bibliograficzny* – in two instances. All the sources are made available without any fee being charged. Only one library charges its users at a rate of 5zł for access to a database and 10gr. for a record.

Only two central libraries have a computer network. In 1995, one library installed computer facilities in its Information Section and Circulation Division; one made some hardware purchases; one bought a library system, provided extensive training for the staff and was cabling the building; one did not make any relevant investment. One library was planning to buy an integrated library system in 1996, one intended to convert existing databases into a new system, and one was not considering any investment in 1996.

The librarians of the central libraries considered automation within the library network to be the most effective solution to overcoming problems in Polish libraries. The automation of separate smaller libraries was also mentioned, followed by the recognition of the necessity for a change in the organizational structure of libraries.

Obviously, the numbers given in the present account will have changed at the time of going to press, but they demonstrate the tendencies, directions and the pace of the changes currently taking place in the library sector in Poland. They also allow us to make certain comparisons with the situation of libraries in other countries.

There are several aspects of the present situation which should, we believe, be taken into consideration when trying to make an appraisal of the current state of automation in Polish libraries. They are first, the actual state

of automation; second, the state of information technology infrastructure; and third, the possibilities of access to foreign databases, both remote access and those used locally.

A general remark would be that the university libraries and other libraries of institutions of higher education have already been taking steps forward in automation, or this is imminent. Automation is understood here to mean the implementation of a huge and powerful integrated library system[1]. It seems that the majority of the libraries responding to the survey will reach the first stage of the implementation of their respective computer systems in the years 1998/1999. Retrospective conversion of their catalogues will, however, still remain a serious problem. The benefits enjoyed from automation will not, at that stage, be so easily identifiable. Automation will probably assist in the provision of services provided by overworked lending departments, which are working under a particular strain, but the effects in processing departments, as well as acquisition departments, will still be insignificant. This can only be changed by the creation of a large library network directed and dedicated to mutual co-operation. The leading role in the all-Polish network should be allocated to the National Library in Warsaw and the central libraries, and they should be viewed as the libraries which would take on the main responsibility for the preparation of the holdings and co-ordinate the acquisition policy for information sources in the country. The existing IT infrastructure in libraries and the considerable improvement in the expansion of computer networks creates real possibilities of building such a system. One should not, however, overlook the obvious hindrances evident in the many organizational problems as well as in, at least to certain extent, available financial resources.

Small libraries seem to be in an even worse position. The vast majority of them do not have any computer equipment, and have no access to wide area networks. For financial reasons, any advances in introduction of automation to such libraries is highly improbable in the near future. It should be stressed that the automation of such units – leaving aside the benefits of the use of the computer as an office facility – would not bring advantages comparable to those in large university libraries. We ignore here, of course, such instances where a small library holds a rare collection and when information about it

should be included in an all-Polish computer network.

The prime target then should be that small libraries ought to be included in the national computer network as soon as possible, and should thus gain access not only to Polish, but also to foreign resources.

Access to foreign databases is another problem. In principle, all libraries of the institutions of higher education and about a half of special and public libraries already have access to these resources[2]. Sadly, the possibility of Polish libraries accessing commercial databases is virtually non-existent. Only few libraries have access to such databases[3].

To sum up, it is necessary to point out that Polish libraries (at least those of universities and other institutions of higher education) though well prepared for automation with regard to its technical aspects, are still far from being able to implement IT in a consistent and uniform way. But it is also worth noting that integrated library systems do not exclusively represent the use of information technology in libraries. It also includes other electronic media resources, acquisition policy and processing of holdings on a co-operative basis, inter-library lending systems and document supply systems. The most favourable combination of all these elements needs deeper analysis and further studies. Time was when the sole presence of the computer in a library was perceived as something extremely up-to-date and progressive. This view is long gone and forgotten.

Notes

1. At the beginning of 1995, 64 per cent of all libraries in Great Britain were using computer systems. Among all university libraries the number was 86, and in public libraries 62; 82 per cent of the libraries described as libraries of the research bodies were computerized (Lee, 1995).
2. By comparison, in Great Britain at the beginning of 1995, 75 per cent of university libraries, 41 per cent of public libraries and 77 per cent of the libraries of various research bodies, had CD-ROM facilities at their disposal (Lee, 1995).
3. In the UK, 85 per cent of university libraries have access to online commercial databases, 25 per cent of public libraries and 92 per cent of the research and scientific libraries (Lee, 1995).

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