

An Open ILS for Free LIS

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We never anticipated the interest in Evergreen, Elizabeth Garcia tells me over a cup of coffee at the Peachtree Center in downtown Atlanta.

Elizabeth Garcia is a librarian who works with the state-wide public information network for electronic services (PINES), a consortium which was formed in 1999 by some 265 public libraries of Georgia. She is employed by the Georgia Public Library Service, a state-agency.

In these days, librarians from all over the USA, but also from Canada, Australia, Singapore and India (and soon probably from other parts of the world as well) are flooding the PINES staff with inquiries about their new technical system.

One of the reasons for the excitement is that Evergreen, as the system is called, is an in-house production.

Librarians use vast and complicated computerized systems to manage all the catalogs, collections, acquisitions, loans, networked activities (such as inter-library loans) etc., plus their own work and organization. In order to be able to implement such an integrated library system (ILS), the libraries usually buy it from a vendor of some particular commercial brand of ILS.



Elizabeth Garcia. Photo MB

However, at Georgia Public Library Service, the librarians got thoroughly fed up with the costly system (Sirsi) they had bought, and this led them to the decision to go for an own system, built by themselves. Thus Evergreen has been developed by PINES under the leadership of Brad LaJeunesse, a young software developer who has worked with GPLS since he finished his studies in 2001. Development on the challenging Evergreen project began in 2004.

Evergreen is written in Perl to run on the GNU-Linux platform. It uses PostgreSQL database server. Yes, you guessed right: Evergreen is completely free and open source software (FOSS).ⁱ

The intellectual freedom which goes with free software (which is licensed under the General Public License, GPL) and the openness of its code give librarians important reasons to prefer Evergreen. *“The decision to use open source software fits philosophically with that of the public library”*, as LaJeunesse summarized the issue in an interview for Library Journal 2005.ⁱⁱ At that time, Evergreen had not yet passed the reality test.

Evergreen is still a Version 1.0 system, Elizabeth Garcia points out. In fact, PINES migrated to the new ILS only in September 2006. Has Evergreen so far lived up to the expectations?

From Garcia I definitively get the impression that it has. And, nota bene, she is not a salesperson or even a software developer herself. She is a library and information specialist (LIS), originally a medical librarian, who has been involved in the testing of Evergreen, and in the design of the details of its user interface. At this stage she knows the system well enough to support the other LIS, who by now are using it over the Internet in their daily work.

Common sense among the LIS had somehow ruled out the possibility that a fully-fledged ILS might be produced in-house and based on FOSS. Andrew K. Pace says as much in his book about libraries, software vendors and the information markets:

“One thing is certain, however, and that is that the full development of a usable and sharable open-source integrated library system remains highly unlikely.[...] open source as a wide-range solution is noble, but not viable.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Well, the Evergreen system gives the librarians ground to believe that the contrary might be true. Which is a third reason for them to take an interest in it.

A wave of inquiries about Evergreen came in February this year, after an announcement from Ex Libris, the corporation which owns an ILS called Endeavour. This widely used product would no longer be maintained and updated, it was said.

We simply had to take some new decisions to meet the new demand, says Elizabeth Garcia. After discussion, it was decided that the team of four software developers who wrote the Evergreen code would set up a separate business company to serve libraries which implement Evergreen and charge them for their services.

Equinox, the new company^{iv}, announced its presence on the ILS market 30 June, just a couple of days before I met up with Elizabeth Garcia in Atlanta.

As a consequence, Georgia Public Library Service will henceforward pay

Equinox fees for Evergreen updates. And new staff must be hired at PINES to do the system administration job of Brad LaJeunesse and the other guys, who are now busy working for Equinox.

If each of our libraries purchased a vendor product independently, it would cost well over 15 million per year. We are able to provide service to all of our libraries for 1.6 million per year. That includes the provision of the ILS to our libraries, support and training, processing of overdue notices and provision of courier services. It is quite a deal, Garcia confirms.

How much or how little money Evergreen will in the end save the library , compared to proprietary systems, remains to be seen. This is not a simple count. However, FOSS-based solutions generally tend to be economically affordable, in addition to being freely modifiable and controllable by their users. That, of course, is an additional reason for librarians to consider them.

Mikael Böök is an international library activist and a founding member of the Helsinki-based Internet service cooperative Katto-Meny.

Endnotes:

- i “ Librarians stake their future on open source”, <http://www.linux.com/articles/58836>.
- ii <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA510787.html>.
- iii Pace, Andrew K.: The Ultimate Digital Library. Where the New Information Players Meet. American Library Association 2003, p 23.
- iv About Equinox: <http://esilibrary.com/esi/home.html>