



GLINT

GOVERNMENT LIBRARIES INFORMATION NEWSLETTER

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

It's that time of year again!

This year's AGM will be held on Thursday, 6 April 1989 at 4.00pm at:
**Department of the Marine,
Leeson Lane, Dublin.**

As you are aware from our Newsletters the Group is involved in many activities affecting Government libraries and we want to hear as wide a cross-section of views as possible.

That means we would like at least one representative from every Government library - 34 in all.

About half of these are actively involved in the Group at the moment.

Group activities include:

- meetings, training, visits to libraries, computer demonstrations, social events;
- production of publications including GLINT;
- liaison with the Information Management Advisory Service of the Department of Finance, the Government Supplies Agency and various groups concerned with library and information matters.

PARTICIPATE - COME TO THE AGM

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DEPARTMENTAL PUBLICATIONS

The Government Libraries Group was represented at a meeting between the LAI Government Publications Group and the Stationery Office (now Government Supplies Agency) last year.

One of the issues raised was the difficulty experienced in monitoring publications issuing from Government Departments which are not published through the Stationery Office and hence not listed in any catalogue.

The Stationery Office representatives said that in future they would list any such publications sent to them for sale, but they would not be in a position to monitor any other publications which might issue. They suggested that the GLG might be able to do so.

The publications in question include annual reports, policy document sector reviews, standards, statistics, etc. They range from general issue publications through restricted distribution to 'confidential' reports. Generally they would be intended for limited distribution, though not necessarily confidential. They might be distributed at conferences or in response to queries. They are often reported upon in the media (even the confidential ones on occasion). However, while they might be widely circulated within a certain circle, libraries might not necessarily become aware of them unless specifically asked for them, or through a media report.

Despite the difficulty which the GLG would face in monitoring and issuing a catalogue of such publications, we think it is highly desirable that it should be done. We therefore contacted the Dept. of Finance requesting their support to ensure that all such publications would be lodged in the Library of the relevant Departments. We are pleased to say that such support was readily forthcoming and a circular (E109/104/88) was issued by the Dept of Finance on 31 January 1989 requesting all Departments to co-operate.

We now hope to issue an annual catalogue of

Departmental publications and would ask you all to send details (a list or extra catalogue card) to Mary Doyle, Librarian, Dept of Agriculture and Food, Kildare Street, Dublin 2.- Tel: 789011 Ex 2163. Obviously confidential reports would not be included in any public catalogue. If you have any queries please contact Mary Doyle.

CHOOSING A SMALL SYSTEM

- A Librarian's point of view by Aisling Judge

The purpose of this article is to outline the steps involved in choosing a microcomputer system to suit a small library or information unit. It is aimed at those who have little or no knowledge of computers so I have tried to keep jargon and technicalities to a minimum.

BACKGROUND

1. Nature of information

The kind of information stored in a library, and the way it is used, makes completely different demands on a computer system than office/administrative information does. A well run office holds masses of information, neatly classified and filed away so that a select number of skilled and trained staff can retrieve it with the minimum of effort.

Office software mimics this situation, using labels to index the information which is 'filed away' in the smallest space possible. Only the 'labels' are searched when trying to locate an item, which gives extremely fast results and can be very effective providing the labels are well chosen.

A library also holds vast quantities of information, most of which is normally classified in a logical fashion - but there the similarity ends! Retrieving the information cannot be regimented because the searchers are generally not only untrained in the skills of information management, but frequently do not know exactly what they are looking for. I refer, of course, to the library users, not the staff! Manual retrieval systems have tried to imitate office systems out of necessity, choosing 'labels'

such as Author, Title, and subject headings, for identification and training the users to search through catalogue cards, rather than the shelves of books, when looking for a particular item. But the limitations to such systems are well known to all who either work in or use libraries.

New technology offers a more flexible approach to searching for information, allowing the database to be viewed as a giant card catalogue. But, unlike with real cards, it would now be possible to search for an item without knowing the exact title, or the precise spelling of an authors name. Neither would the searcher need to be able to read the cataloguers mind to know which subject headings the item has been filed/indexed under. The beauty of a computerised database is that all significant words in the record of an item can be indexed and searched for.

When choosing a library system only those which offer such a flexible approach should be considered. A lot of software exists which, while excellent for automating an office, are too highly structured and restrictive for library needs. Go for packages which offer 'free-text searching' and 'variable length' fields or records (these terms will be explained below). Many software sales personnel are not familiar with the distinct needs of libraries and may try to discourage you from such packages on the grounds that they take up too much space (computer memory), or that you will have no need for such complexities. **THEY ARE WRONG!** But it will be up to you to explain clearly the problems involved in storing and searching for textual information. To do that you must:

- a) have a clear knowledge of the problem in your own mind
- b) understand the basic principles of a computer - how it stores and manipulates information

2. Structures

It is not necessary to be a computer programmer, or to understand the electronic complexities of the machine, but you must become familiar with cer-

tain aspects of programming in order to select a program to suit your needs. So there follows a brief glossary of the terms and jargon involved.

Database - a collection of records all sharing a common structure

Field - each record consists of a number of fields, holding particular types of information and identified by a label or tag, e.g. Author, Title, Classification number, etc.

File - blocks of information, whether it is a program, a database, or perhaps a letter prepared on a wordprocessor, is usually stored as a file, each with a unique name which identifies the nature of the information it contains. Document, or 'text' files can normally be created, edited, or deleted quite easily. Program files are usually protected to prevent either accidental or deliberate tampering. It is the instructions contained in the software which determines how the files can be used.

Operating System - a collection of programs which comes with the computer hardware and which controls how it works. The operating system (OS) also oversees the operation of any software packages run on the computer. Different types of computer use different operating systems e.g. IBM microcomputers use MS - DOS or PC - DOS, while Apple computers use CP/M. Some software packages can be adapted to be used with various operating systems, but most are written for use with only one type of operating system.

Program - a series of instructions written in code telling the computer what to do

Record - the basic unit of information in a database, loosely comparable to the 'main entry' catalogue card

Software - the general name for a collection of programs designed to perform certain tasks e.g. Database management, Wordprocessing, Accounting, Communications

Subfield- where there are multiple authors or keywords, for example, fields may be subdivided.

PREPARATION

What do you have?

1. HOLDINGS:

A survey of the existing contents of the library to be computerised is a very good starting point. This will give you basic information regarding the size of the existing collection, the range of subjects covered and the different formats in which the information is stored. It should also be possible to get an idea of the growth rate of the collection.

2. SYSTEMS:

If no manual systems exist and the library is being set up from scratch, it is very important that some basic framework is established and allowed to operate for some months before embarking on computerisation. By looking at the existing systems, you will be able to identify key needs in giving the service required by your users. It is easier to see gaps in an existing service than it is to visualise possible flaws in a prospective service.

3. SERVICES:

Draw up a list of the services on offer from the library. Identify just who the services are aimed at, the number of users and their locations. Next, work out who has been providing the services to date and who is likely to do so under the new system.

Pay particular attention to the way in which you already put information into your systems. Is it all done manually, a bit at a time? Or do you get chunks of information from external sources, such as catalogue cards from Head Office, or microfiche from a centralised location, or perhaps even references downloaded onto floppy disks from commercial online databases? You may be producing your information internally in batches using a wordprocessor, or through an automated ordering system.

Then look at how you output information to users. Usually this is a combination of hard (typed, printed or photocopied) and soft (verbal or electronic) formats.

Finally, ask yourself if you want to continue to use these particular methods of input and output, or are there some methods which you cannot change, which are out of your control? Equally, there may be new methods which you must adopt - to fit in with your departments accounting system, perhaps.

4. STAFF:

It will be easy enough to list the existing staff, if any, taking note of the training, qualifications and grading of each member, as well as their particular areas of responsibility. Future staffing requirements can then be estimated. Take care not to overlook the possible need for extra clerical staff on a temporary basis to cope with the initial stages of setting up an automated system.

5. WHAT DO YOU WANT?

1. Aims:

There can be various reasons for computerising any system, some of them may be mutually exclusive. So it is important to establish the exact aims and priorities behind the decision to computerise. Do you wish to improve the efficiency of the existing service, or to expand the range of services offered? Is labour saving a priority, or cost-cutting?

2. Goals:

Decide at this stage what the final outcome of computerisation is to be. You may simply wish to have a computerised catalogue, and if so, for who? For trained library staff? For specialist users? Or is it to be used as a Public Access catalogue? You could decide to install an integrated system which will incorporate all housekeeping, budget and circulation aspects of the library.

Other options could be to gain access to external systems via online communications, or to allow others access to your holdings through a computerised phone-link. Do you intend being part of a

shared system, a network, or to remain as a closed, stand-alone system?

Which option or combination of options you go for will depend on the particular circumstances applying to your library. However, as a general rule, try not to set your sights too low. Avoid, if possible, taking decisions which could prevent further expansion in the future. Look beyond simply trying to automate your existing systems or you could build - in unnecessary barriers to getting the best out of the new system.

3. Notes:

Write everything down! As you are examining the existing situation ideas will come to you for ways to improve it, possibilities for expansion or other advantages desired from a new system. Taking notes at each stage will prove invaluable in the end. It will help keep your feet on the ground once you are exposed to the fast moving world of information technology.

At this stage you will be able to construct a CHECK-LIST. Use this to compare the features of different packages to your needs, and to compare packages to each other.

SELECTION

As a general rule, it is wiser to choose your software before your hardware, otherwise you might find yourself facing unnecessary restrictions in the choice of software.

1. Take your time:

Don't be tempted to rush at this, or to be pressurised into going for the first likely-looking system available. Technology moves fast today and it's often wise to wait for the next development if this stage isn't quite what you want.

2. Look around:

Pick your colleagues' brains unashamedly! Don't be afraid (within reason) of taking up their time with your questions. They probably did likewise when choosing their own systems and, no doubt, you will happily return the service to others when

you are the proud owner of your new system. Seek out others who are also on the hunt and swap notes.

3. Read:

Especially library and computer journals. Look out for the latest developments and case histories, reviews, or trials of systems. The last few years has seen the publication of a couple of excellent catalogues of computer software, and perhaps the most comprehensive listing for library packages is Hilary Dyer's directory (see reference). Other sources are summarised below:

- Advertisements and journal reviews
- Directory of Library and Information Retrieval Software for Microcomputers; (Dyer, H.)
- Library Technology Centre
- Aslib Information Centre
- Microcomputers software guide (Dialog)
- Vine

4. Be critical:

(a) of owners and users - but not too loudly! Remember that another's needs may not be yours, and that another's resources are certainly not yours. Look out for underutilisation - many systems are more flexible than may be initially obvious. Most people will not be eager to admit to having bought a lemon!

(b) of advertisements

Watch for what they don't say - never assume anything unless it is specifically mentioned as an aspect of the system. Even journal articles and reviews may have a sales bias or may be written by the supplier.

(c) of sales demonstrations - LOUDLY!

These can be persuasive, so do your homework before attending and come armed with specific problems from your own situation. Ask lots of questions. Don't be blinded by technicalities but DO collect technical data, you'll realise its importance later.

5. Be open-minded:

Your original ideas may undergo big changes as you become more aware of the options available. Avoid unnecessary restrictions which may cause problems in the future. Ask your staff (if you have any) for their opinions, in fact consult with them at all stages. They will have to use the system, after all! But don't lose sight of your original needs and objectives - that's what your checklist is for.

PURCHASE POINTS

1. Price - real and hidden costs

Don't worry initially about money. Decide what you want first, based on the features offered, up to the point of making a short list. Then look at prices. Often equipment budgets are larger than expected, even in these recessionary times.

Beware of scaled-down versions of packages originally designed for Mainframe or Minicomputers. Their prices may not have been scaled-down to match! Cheap may mean purport-built rather than shoddy. Allow for the hidden costs of training, backup facilities (extra hard disks, etc.) and service contracts. The latter are usually in the form of optional annual contracts with different fees for varying levels of support.

2. Usability:

User-friendly may mean inflexible, but you don't have time to learn to be a programmer! Good on-screen HELP is invaluable. Look for a system that offers a sample database to play with. Check the manual (buy a copy if possible) for readability. Better still, buy an evaluation version of the program if you have the hardware to try it out on.

3. Backup:

(a) Hardware - Buy from a reputable dealer or agent, preferably based in England or Ireland. Examine the service contracts and investigate availability of parts.

(b) Software - Both manuals and programs may be upgraded in the future. Make sure you'll have discounted or free access to these. Training and help, usually by telephone, should be provided free for the set-up period. After that a support contract should be available, at a price.

4. Future needs:

(a) Hardware

Go for an established brand of computer, preferably an IBM compatible. Alternatively, choose a make that is compatible with your firm's inhouse system (if any), or those of other libraries you may wish to link up with.

Check that the Random Access Memory (RAM) is large enough to hold the program and the data which it will be handling. The software will normally specify how much RAM is required, but it may be wise to go for an even bigger capacity to allow for future expansion or the use of more powerful programs. Memory expansion cards are available which slot into the computer, but not all makes can use them.

Data storage will be on hard disks in all but the smallest of libraries. In fact, I wouldn't recommend anyone to use a system entirely based on floppy disks as they fill up very quickly and can make even the smallest database awkward to search. Hard disks are much faster and cheaper in the long run.

A tape streamer may need to be purchased to allow back-ups of the contents of the hard disk on to magnetic tape. This is more efficient than using floppies. Allow for future expansion - can you attach to a modem, a printer, an extra hard disk, or even a network?

Finally, be sure that the computer you buy can avail of all the major software packages - some IBM Compatibles are more compatible than others. Those with MS-DOS or PC DOS operating systems are usually a good bet.

(b) Software:

The speed of indexing and retrieval may slow down quite a lot as the number of records being processed increases. Some deterioration in speed is inevitable but the variation between programs can be considerable. So make sure the package you choose will be able to cope with the projected increase in the size of your library.

Compatibility is also important when transferring data from one program to another. The ability to create and use ASCII files is invaluable for this purpose. If you buy a single-user version of a package, find out if it is possible to upgrade to the multi-user or network version.

6. Security:

(a) Passwords

A system of passwords is vital - preferably one which you can define. It should be possible to restrict users to searching, allowing only staff to create, edit or delete records.

(b) Backup Copies

Copy-protected software may be a problem. It should be possible to make copies of the master disks before loading the program for the first time. Then use the copies to load and keep the originals in a safe place in case of problems. It is usually necessary to return the master disks to the supplier when ordering upgrades and damaged disks would not be accepted. Machine failure, electrical problems or human error can wipe out your database in a split second, so a simple method of taking backup copies of all your data files is essential. Some programs are designed with automatic backup routines which operate each time you exit from the program. To avoid accidentally copying bad data onto a clean copy, a manually controlled system is better.

THE SET-UP

You have successfully negotiated the purchase of a microcomputer system for your library and now sit

poised at the keyboard, disks in hand, ready to set it up. **DON'T PANIC!**

REMEMBER TO :

- take security copies of the program disks
- read the manual, especially the installation instructions
- if you get stuck, call for help from other users or the supplier BEFORE switching off the computer
- write your queries down and document problems in detail, including sample printouts

GOOD LUCK AND HAPPY HUNTING!

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TRAINING WORKSHOP

- Maedhbh McNamara

Three members of the Government Libraries Group attended a workshop run by Oracle Information Sources "An Introduction to Library Work" which was designed to provide the basic skills and knowledge necessary to set up and run an information centre. Seventeen participants were in CERT building in Lansdowne Road, mainly staff from libraries of public bodies but with a sprinkling from private organisations such as Guinness and the Rehabilitation Institute.

The morning began with a problem census. Certain problems emerged as common to various participants, for example, inadequate classification systems and recall of stock which had been lent out.

The first session Selection and Acquisition of Materials, was a foretaste of the whole workshop. The instructors, Claire Devlin and Anna Gethings, aimed to deliver as much hard, practical information as participants needed, in a short time as possible, with recommendations on such questions as the best subscription agents and materials. An overhead projector was used, but printed copies of the

acetates were supplied, freeing participants to concentrate on the overheads without having to take notes.

During the next session Organising your Collection, the main methods of classification were discussed in the light of the different types of collection. The organisers made specific recommendations when asked for advice on a particular library.

A Dissemination of Information session followed with lucid guidance on reconciling the two aims of ensuring that the library is used to the full extent and maintaining a complete collection without gaps.

In the practical session Inquiry Handling, a professional actor role-played clients' requests to six participants in turn. These had been scripted to highlight certain skills, from elucidating the precise nature of the enquiry to setting limits on unreasonable demands. Some of the situations role-played were painfully familiar! Each role-play was discussed afterwards by the whole group, while Claire and Anna suggested methods of upgrading each skill. The day ended with half an hour on helping users help themselves.

The second day began with a practical session on Information Sources and Search Strategy. Anna and Claire had brought a large selection of reference material and also drew on the CERT library. After listening to an overview of sources, including EC sources, participants were posed a series of search problems and checked the directories and bibliographies for the answers. Again, Anna and Claire provided specific guidance on sources for particular libraries.

Noelle Breen from Eolas was guest lecturer for On-line Sources of Information. In addition to the overhead projector, she used a film to illustrate the link-up between the users and suppliers of on-line information. This session was continued for interested participants after the workshop ended and a

follow-up demonstration at Eolas was organised some weeks later, again based on queries supplied by participants.

In the session Computerising your library the question of developing an in-house system or buying an off-the-shelf package was explored and much advice was given on the reality of preparatory work, number of screens and costs of software. Mary Penny of CERT presented a case history of creation and computerisation of CERT's information centre, an honest account of the organisational difficulties encountered on the way to computerisation.

The workshop ended with a session of advice on where to go next and an invitation to contact Claire and Anna with future questions.

In addition to the overhead projector notes a number of technical papers were provided, with material for further reading. This constitutes a condensed training resource for future reference. Anna and Claire had certainly put into practice their own advice of making their workshop attractive and easy to use, offering a wide range of services, with emphasis on good design and helping the users to help themselves. In short, this course was very useful and informative and good value for money.

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WANTS

Bound Volume of Statutory Instruments:

1965 Vol. 1&2
 1966 " "
 1967 " "
 1968 " "
 1969 Vol. 2
 1970 Vol. 2
 1971 Vol. 2
 1972 Vol. 1&2
 1973 Vol. 1&2
 1974 Vol. 1
 1975 Vol. 2
 1976 Vol. 1
 1977 Vol. 2
 1978 Vol. 1
 1979 Vol. 1 & 2
 1980 " "
 1981 " "
 1982 " "
 1983 " "

Bound Volumes of Acts

1965 1970
 1966 1971
 1967 1972
 1968 1973
 1969 1975

Please contact:

Claire Hannon,
 Librarian,
 Department of Energy,
 25 Clare Street,
 Dublin 2.
 Tel. 715233 Ext. 302/304

DISCARDS

Biatas, 1976 - 1979

An Cosantoir, 1976 - 1984

Garda Review, 1967 - 1982

Irish Skipper, 1976 - 1984

The Listner, 1980 1984

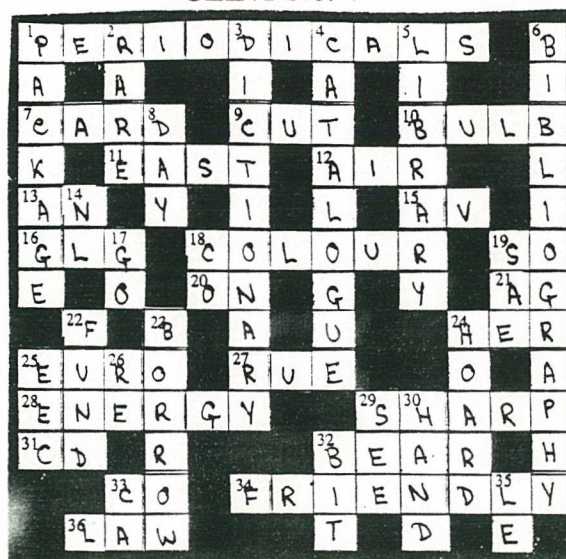
Monthly Digest of Statistics (HMSO), 1981 - 1984

If you wish to obtain any of the above please contact:

Maura Corcoran, Oireachtas Library.
 Tel. 789911 Ext. 412

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Solution to the crossword which appeared in
 GLINT No. 4



*Our congratulations to Tim Kelly, librarian of
 the Commission of the European Communities
 Irish Office, who sent in the winning entry!*

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