Achievements and Perspectives in Library Automation and Modernization

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Abstract
The paper presents the library automation and modernization process of the Loan Department of the "Lucian Blaga" Central University Library. Being an important and highly frequented section of the library (as many readers prefer borrowing the publications to using them in the reading rooms), this department required a good and flexible organizational structure. To achieve this, an open access system was created. The main stages of the reorganization process, started in 1996, were: selecting the most frequently used books and preparing them for the open access shelves; the organization of the selected books on the shelves (a systematic-alphabetical arrangement close to the Cutter type arrangement); the changing of the Vubis database for the more efficient Aleph library software in 1999 and the computerization of the loan process. Though the financial support accorded for the reorganization of the Loan Department was small, the personnel's efforts increased considerably the efficiency and popularity of this library section.

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1. Introduction
The central problem of today's society is how to manage changes that occur in all domains of social, political, economic and cultural life. The general concept that the library is only a depositary of information is wrong. The library, first of all, is a modality of finding and disseminating information.

The modernization and automation of libraries is a vast and complex process that affects the core of the library notion itself. Automation implies a revaluation of the entire institution, the revaluation of its role and functions, as well as adaptation to a great change.

Such a process of automation and modernization took place in the case of the Loan Department of the "Lucian Blaga" Central University Library. A considerable part of the collection was introduced in the database (OPAC–Aleph) and in addition the way in which users could access books also changed. Being a highly frequented section of the library (with an average of <u>300 readers/350 volumes/day</u>), a good and flexible organizational system is essential, taking into consideration that the number of seats in the reading rooms is limited and the readers' demands greater and greater.

An essential step was taken in this direction by creating an open access room. This, together with the possibility of computerised search (OPAC) answered a great part of the users' demands and needs, such as:
    – access to a wide range of documents;
    – rapidity in localising and obtaining the information (in this case the publication).

2. The stages of reorganization

a) The reorganization of the Loan Department began in February 1996 by a rigorous selection of the collection from the closed stacks. It was necessary for the librarians of several departments to participate in this action which consisted of operations such as:
   – selecting books for the open shelves, the aim being to cover all the domains;
    – transporting the publications from the closed stacks to open access room;
    – making coupons that would replace the books in the closed stacks;
    – selecting publications that were to be removed from the inventory and all the other operations related to this activity;
    – moving the books, over 100000 volumes.

Initially 3800 titles, respectively 17000 bibliographical volumes were selected and they were introduced to Vubis database that was used at that time. As a next step the volumes were prepared in a way that would help the users to find them on the open shelves (fixing the classification and the shelf numbers, sticking the barcode and the self-adhesive labels with the shelf numbers on the volumes etc.). Practically, the retro-conversion of the library collections started in that moment. The reading lists recommended at the university courses and seminars served as a basic criterion for this selection. The collection thus selected is continually renewed as newly purchased books are permanently added to it.

b) In order to find the books on the shelves a systematic-alphabetical arrangement (close to the Cutter type arrangement) was applied. This is a quite efficient system. The shelfmark is a combination obtained from the first three numbers from the classification (maximum 3 numbers) followed by the first three letters of the name of the author or of the title of the publication, depending on the headline from the bibliographical description. The shelfmark was made as short as possible in order to render easier the finding of the publication. To this shelfmark a certain colour was attributed according to the domain the publication belonged to.

In order to facilitate finding the publications on the shelves a plan of the room was posted at the entrance, showing the existing domains and the colours attributed to them. Indicators were also placed on the shelves where the materials belonging to each domain were.

Image of the Loan Department with open access
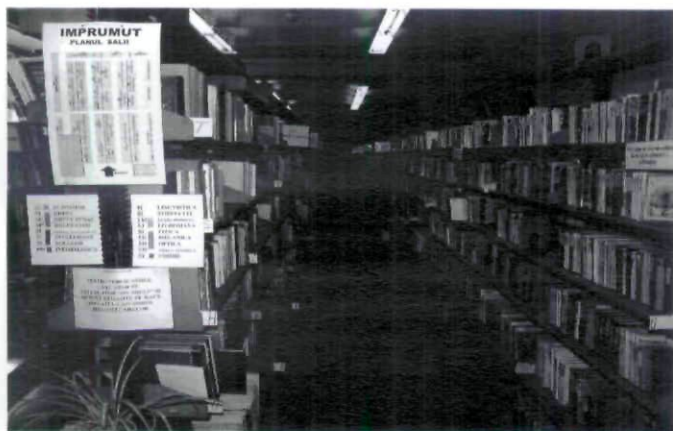
c) In 1999 a new software was purchased. Our librarians started to convert the Vubis database existing at that moment into the more efficient Aleph library software. Certain difficulties arose from this conversion as some of the fields from these two softwares did not perfectly overlap and the publication descriptions did not appear according to bibliographic requirements.

Nowadays 17000 titles in 40000 volumes are at the users' disposal in an open access system. These were selected so as to cover all

the fields of study. These titles can be found in the OPAC–Aleph database with a detailed bibliographic description, including the shelf number, the number of exemplars, whether the publication is available or not and the date when the publication is to be returned (when it is the case). The loan is computerized; it is done in the Circulation module of the Aleph by making the link between the user's barcode and the barcode of the borrowed publication, the barcodes being read by the scanner. The publications that remained in the closed stacks of the section can be found in the traditional alphabetical catalogue (on index cards). Users wishing to consult these materials must complete a loan request form; the publications will be delivered by the librarians.

3. Present functioning of the section

a) Opening hours: Monday – Friday: 9–19, Saturday: 8–14. From 2001 the one hour midday break (13–14) was given up in order to provide for users continuous access to information.

b) Library staff: librarians with secondary studies work in two rotas, two of them in each turn.

c) Equipment: 2 computers and 2 scanners for the staff, 1 computer for users.

4. Comparative statistic data

In the following table, I tried to present a comparative analysis of the main activities with the public. I used statistic data from three years as reference points: 1996, the year when the reorganization began; 2000, the first year when all the registrations were made in the new Aleph Circulation module; and 2004, the last statistical year; the year when the loan period was reduced to 15 calendar days.

Synthetic table

Activity / Year	1996	2000	2004

Collections - stacks
    - open access
    shelves
	239 544 vol.
	16 858 vol.
		131 149 vol.
		36 286 vol.
			129 419 vol.
			40 000 vol.

New publications - titles - vol.	876 1 499	1 245 2 286	244 399
Readers	15 048	23 154	67 891

Loans - stacks
    - open access
    shelves
	11 668 vol.	13 260 vol.
		32 600 vol.
			1 191 vol.
			
			76 013 vol.

Returned books	12 588 vol.	35 853 vol.	71 184 vol.
Summons	352	381	351
Cancelled loan records	4 395	6 348	9 197
Staff number	6	7	4

Analysing the data presented in the table, we may observe:
– the actual situation of the collection in the closed stacks and on the open access shelves;
– that in 2004 the number of the new publications added to the collection was 75% less than in 1996, though the number of users increased massively. This can be explained by the lack of funds allocated for book acquisition. We hope that in the near future we will be able to purchase more copies for the Loan Department as it is a highly solicited service, most of the users preferring to borrow the publications to consult them in the reading rooms;
– the significant increase in the number of readers who frequent this library section; in the year 2000 this number doubled and in the year 2004 it was 4.5 times greater than in 1996;
– there was a 2.17 increase in the number of publications borrowed from the open access shelves as compared with the year 2000, while there were requested 9 times less publications from the closed stacks of the section; therefore the existence of the open access shelves is completely justified;
– twice as many graduating students cancelled their loan records than in 1996, which indicates the increasing number of students in the university centre;
– half as many librarians are employed in this section than in 2000, though the services offered by this section are continually increasing and their quality must remain exemplary. According to the norms ratified by the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth regarding the number of positions for speciality staff compared with the circulation of documents

(1 position for 15 000 documents/year) and the statistics of the loan section from 2004, the personnel of this department has to cope with a workload that exceeds regulations by 173%.

5. Making more efficient the user–librarian relationship

In order to maintain the quantity and quality of the work and to take into consideration the suggestions made by the readers, the collective proposed to improve the user–librarian relationship. We hope that this will make the current and future activities related to the work with the public more efficient.

Achievements:

– double registering of loans (loan request forms and computer) has stopped and computerized recording has been chosen. This is safer and faster, so in this way we shortened the time in which the reader obtains the publication. Loans are registered on paper forms only in the case when the publications are requested from the closed stacks of the section;

– a piece of paper is stuck on the back of the title page or on the cover of each book for noting the date when the publication is to be returned. This modality of registering was suggested also by our readers, following the model existing at the French Cultural Centre and other libraries having a loan department;

– in order to answer the readers' solicitations the retro-conversion of the publications from the closed stacks will be continued depending on the bibliographic requests. Thus the publications frequently asked for are transferred to the open access shelves and the readers can obtain them in the shortest possible time. Unfortunately, we are not able to move all the needed publications to the open access area because the reading lists of the students are modified every year;

– as the small number of purchased copies was insufficient for the high number of requests, it was decided to reduce the loan period from 30 to 15 calendar days;

– the new publications will continually be processed as soon as they enter the loan collection in order to avoid any discrepancy that might occur between the moment when the shelf number appears in the general collection and in the loan collection;

– in order to recover the publications after the loan period has expired, summons are sent twice a year: in February (the holiday after the winter examination session) and 15–30 July (the holiday after the summer examination session);

– in order to assure the health of librarians and users as well as to protect the publications it is important that the publications and the room should be preserved according to hygiene requirements, taking into consideration the specific aspects of this library section;

– in order that our efforts of introducing the information into the database and establishing the open access system are fruitful, we must continue to instruct the users and to familiarize them with the databases.

Perspectives:

– we could try to offer to the readers a reservation service, but we do not know whether it would be an efficient service or not, as the borrowed publications are solicited in the same period (session, papers etc.); moreover, this would require some material investments that the library does not have;

– for the time being there is no security system that protects the publications placed on the open access shelves, the publications being protected only by the librarians' vigilance. Their number being minimal, they have no time left for the supervision of the room. The only viable solution to prevent the purloining of publications from the shelves is an adequate antitheft system:

  – a video camera system;

  – an antitheft system with a magnetic gate and a deactivator system.

All this enormous work required for establishing and making efficient the room with open access shelves was done solely for the benefit of our users, to increase satisfaction in the library services. These changes in the organization and functioning of the Loan Department visibly improved our activities both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Unfortunately, the process started almost ten years ago was mainly based on the librarians' effort, the material and technical investments being limited to two work terminals and a computer on which the databases can be consulted.