

# LIBRARY COMPETES THANKS TO AGILE DEVELOPMENT OUTSOURCING

One of the nation's largest circulating libraries, the King County Library System, turns to agile development outsourcing to take on commercial rivals such as Apple and Amazon.

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CIO — "Agile" is hardly the first word to come to mind when thinking about public libraries.



Indeed, the King County Library System (KCLS) had been struggling to adapt to its commercial competition as a source of information for the patrons that visit its 46 libraries.

"Libraries are betwixt and between. Our competition is Apple and YouTube and Amazon—companies creating real-time, dynamic ways to find things to read and watch and know," says Jed Moffitt, KCLS's director of IT services. "The have huge IT staffs and world-class IT

applications."

KCLS, one of the busiest libraries in the United States with more than 21 million items circulated, was stuck with an inflexible library-specific information system that no longer met its needs. "As technology evolved for libraries, the systems that replaced card catalogs became a niche market. The

vendors made money selling very rigid software, and it's bad news for libraries," says Moffitt, who previously work for just such a vendor.

A move to customizable open-source library software called Evergeen may have been a step in the right direction, but that created its own set of problems. Every time a change was made, the system "would fall to pieces," Moffitt says. "We didn't have resources to manage it."

A 2011 article in the Seattle Times noted that while the new system freed KCLS from high costs and poor service, for the "thousands of library patrons for whom using the online catalog became painfully slow, who couldn't log on at all or who could no longer pay fines electronically, the switch to the new system has been an exercise in frustration."

## AGILE DEVELOPMENT OUTSOURCING: RIGHT PRICE, RIGHT FEATURES

That's when KCLS turned to Catalyst IT and agile development outsourcing. "Like so many businesses, we're trying to redefine what we do," Moffitt says. "We needed the raw ability to make changes to our information system to do things that are relevant to our community." When KCLS orders 300 copies of the latest George R. R. Martin book, for example, Moffitt would like to be able to dynamically ship those around the system based on demand.

Catalyst's agile development methods—which promised the rollout of new features weekly—were a major selling point, says Moffitt. But so was the price—about half the rate of the seven other providers KCLS evaluated, including Red Hat.

Catalyst's CEO Michael Rosenbaum says his prices are more in line with offshore outsourcing prices because of the way he hires his development teams, which operate out of the company's headquarters in Baltimore, Md., and at a center in Portland, Ore.

Resumes are given less weight than a software algorithm developed by six in-house data scientists to identify high performers that are undervalued in the programmer market. He calls it a "Moneyball"-like system. "We'll evaluate 1,000 applicants to hire 150," Rosenbaum says.

Catalyst also uses analytics to compile developer teams that will fit culturally with their clients. "KCLS,

for example, is not a very technical audience. They may be nervous, skeptical. So we want people who can communicate in a way that's nonthreatening and enables the group to buy in," Rosenbaum says. "That's different than if we're working with a venture capital-based technology company."

Still the outsourcing transition at KCLS, which began last summer, took time. "We had a big, goopy system that's undocumented," says Moffitt. "But Catalyst has teased out how it works to fix the bugs, get pieces of functionality done, and start down a list of soup-to-nuts design features."

The initial two-weeks sprints Catalyst planned stretched out longer, but today fixes and features come every Tuesday. "That's unheard of in library technology," says Moffitt.

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