



CASE STUDY

# MID-CONTINENT PUBLIC LIBRARY

August 31, 2015

prepared by **THE GALECIA GROUP**

# Contents and Contact

## About This Report

This Case Study was written by Lori Bowen Ayre based on conversations and emails with staff from MidContinent Public Library.

## About The Galecia Group

The Galecia Group provides technology consulting to libraries. We specialize in automated materials handling, RFID, self-service technologies and website development and support.

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Introduction	3
Due Diligence	4
Procurement and Initial Implementation	4
Building on Initial Successes	5
Lessons Learned	6
Benefits	6

## INTRODUCTION

Mid-Continent Public Library (MCPL) is one of the largest public library systems in the country. It operates across 35 library branches, circulates approximately nine million items a year and serves over 750,000 people in three Missouri counties. It has been in existence since 1965 with a collection of 3.5 million items.

The MCPL motto is “Access Your World.” The Library is dedicated to offering its patrons a first-class customer experience by providing access to innovation, information, and ideas, and by inspiring the communities it serves.

In 2013, as MCPL planned to build their Woodneath Library Center, they wanted to provide as much access to the latest technologies as possible in the new building. They looked to automated materials handling (AMH) as a way to help customers and staff see how libraries are integrating state-of-the-art technologies in their operations.

## **DUE DILIGENCE**

To learn more, Library staff decided they needed to see an AMH system in action. They identified nearby libraries similar to MCPL in size and services, and then scheduled their road trip to Saint Louis County Public Library's Daniel Boone Branch. The Daniel Boone Branch was the first library in Missouri to migrate to RFID and to install an AMH system. They spent time talking to the people who worked with the system every day, and began to set their expectations for what AMH could do for MCPL.

But that wasn't the end of their work. Staff also did quite a bit of research on other library systems using AMH and RFID, and talked with others in the library community to gather feedback. They soon learned that one of their somewhat unusual requirements for a new AMH/RFID system was that the sorter would need to handle barcodes as well as RFID because the plan was to implement the AMH system before the entire collection could be tagged.

## **PROCUREMENT AND INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION**

After doing their homework, the library put out an RFP and got several responses from AMH solution providers. MCPL identified Bibliotheca as the vendor that would best support their objectives.

The new AMH system was soon installed at the Library Center. Because part of the goal was to engage staff and patrons in their new technology, they installed the sorter behind a glass wall. This way, patrons could watch the library's back office operation and see exactly how the AMH system worked.

It turned out, people loved watching the machine. They didn't just stand at the machine and wait for the green light so they could insert the next item. They watched the entire process to see where each item went. The sorter was a hit.

## BUILDING ON INITIAL SUCCESSES

The roll-out of the AMH system at the Library Center was such a success, MCPL decided to proceed with implementing RFID-enabled self-check-out and security system throughout the system. They identified a Project Manager and gave her the job of implementing RFID and rolling out new self-check machines and security gates at all 31 branches.

The Project Manager quickly formed the necessary teams and implemented the OPPM system (One Page Project Manager) to keep everyone informed of progress and responsibilities each month. The team also communicated frequently by email and texts, but meetings were seldom as a whole group because everyone was scattered throughout three counties busily tagging, reopening branches, and troubleshooting issues.

The IT Team was involved from the very beginning because they were in charge of understanding what could and couldn't be done with the software and hardware.

The Set-up Team had to make decisions about the self-check kiosk setup – wording, payment options, money denomination configurations, and how to have the kiosks work the same as the current library system procedures.

The Implementation Schedule Team decided how many person-hours it would take for staff to tag all the items in each branch, how many tagging machines would be needed at each branch, and how many staff members it would take to get the job done in the 5-6 days that the branch was closed.

The Warehouse Team was responsible for staging the equipment that needed to go out to each branch. The Project Manager packed up the individual parts for each branch and labeled them and provided the warehouse with a schedule of when to stage parts for each branch.

The Facilities Team was responsible for loading the staged equipment and delivering it to the branches the first morning they were closed so it was ready for the vendor's installers. The Delivery Services Department got wrapped into the project too. They were tasked with moving the conversion stations from one branch to another.

Working on 2-3 branches at a time and limiting closures to 5-6 days each, the Team was able to convert all 31 libraries to RFID within four months.

During the conversion of each library, the Teams tagged the collection and set up the new self-check-out and security systems so that after a one week closure, each library would open with a new system totally in place. This helped the Marketing Department because they were able to assure customers that the library would only be closed once and everything would be ready when it was reopened.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The Library teams learned many lessons in those short four months. They learned how important it is to get the IT Team in touch with the vendor at the very beginning. It was important for IT to understand how everything would work and to have one point of contact from the vendor's implementation team so that the roll-out of self-checks and security gates at each branch would be consistent. As it was, the vendor used different installers for different branches so the library IT Team and Project Manager ended up playing a bit too much catch-up after some branches were configured different from the others.

They learned how important it is to discuss minimum and maximum gate widths. On the one hand, they wanted automatic and wider doors for wheelchairs, but they soon learned that wider doors require the security gates to be further apart which makes the gates less accurate at detecting the tags. Identifying that sweet spot and standardizing gate widths is something they'd recommend for next time.

They also learned that library personnel needed to be located close enough to the gates that they can respond to the alarms. And staff needed help knowing how to address the patrons setting off those alarms. To address this, they instituted a training program to teach staff to politely ask customers to come back inside to complete their checkout -- and not just wave them on through "Wal-Mart style." MCPL wants their customers to know that they value library materials and want accurate records as to where those materials are at all times.

Most of the branches moved their customer service desks away from the front door and replaced them with self-check-out kiosks. Staff encourage customers to use the self-checks, and someone is also always available at the customer service desk to provide a staff check-out option for those who are still uncomfortable with the technology or have issues with their accounts. Even so, most of the libraries are now achieving 90% self-check usage. It took a couple of months of staff patiently showing patrons how the new systems work.

One key finding was that patrons feared library staff were losing their jobs with the new technology and this drove some of their reluctance to use it. But once staff assured them that no one was laid off and that this was going to free up staff to help them in other ways, they were more accepting of it. They realize now that making that fact known as part of the early PR campaign would have been very useful!

## BENEFITS

In terms of staff time saved, MCPL estimates that the AMH system at the Library Center has decreased the need for shelving staff by 25% to 30% due to the majority of check-in happening at the AMH system plus the benefit of having returned items rough sorted by the sorter. The AMH system also allowed the Library to start with a smaller shelving staff than they would have otherwise needed.

Not only has this project proven to be entertaining for the public, but it's also let MCPL staff focus on providing more individual help throughout the rest of the branch. MCPL has learned that the more they automate, the more time their valuable staff have to provide one-on-one services. They can now focus more of their attention on those people who really need their attention and guidance.

As to the self-check roll-out, staff report that patrons love the ability to check-out "five to ten items in a one shot" and to get in and out of the library quickly. Patrons that had worried they would lose the opportunity for personal interaction with librarians have found that the changes have enabled staff to serve them even better.