The Librarian's Desk . . .

Before the Library's 1998 venture into computer automation, a Library Trustee asked me how long the system would last before obsolescence set in. My answer at the time was "oh, only about 8 years." Good thing I wasn't held to that reply, because today I would cut that estimate in half.

The Library installed a new network in February, replacing its 5 year-old hardware and operating system. The project was funded entirely by your donations to the Friends, not by tax dollars. The Friends have provided the funding for each and every one of the Library's computer equipment and software acquisitions, beginning with the purchase of one Apple IIe public access workstation in 1986.

Many patrons have asked us why our Library isn't part of the Minuteman Library Network. The Trustees and I are revisiting the issue of joining Minuteman with an entirely new list of considerations, among them the survey results from February 2004 where citizens ranked the Minuteman service as a highly important one for our future technology developments. We are also concerned about a potential exclusion from regional service imposed on our Library by the surrounding Minuteman libraries. Although our Library is the only one in MetroWest that is not part of Minuteman, we offer a thoughtful explanation, one that is part technical and part economical. I would like to disclose this background to newsletter readers to demonstrate that our decision not to join Minuteman isn't synonymous with being an inferior library. In fact, our service is strong.

The technical part of our decision to install a local system rather than join the wide-area network stemmed from a certain confidence that the burgeoning Internet was about to revolutionize communications. And indeed, that revolution has been realized. When a team of Trustees, Friends, and I first planned and fund-raised for automation in the late 1990s, we were the last Library in the MetroWest area to install computers, and our timing, however accidental, presented the Internet advantage. Our application to become a "Library Connections Partner" with the local broadband provider granted unlimited, free high-speed Internet access. We designed a unique information infrastructure that we still believe is entirely appropriate for a small library: it offers an ability to search our local collection on the Internet with a link from our website to expand the search to neighboring libraries' collections in a tier, without adding overhead.

In addition, we were encouraged at the time to hear of innovations from the State Board of Library Commissioners in developing the "Virtual Catalog." The virtual catalog initiative promised it would no longer matter which software products libraries installed because a common protocol would enable all systems to interact. The virtual catalog's development has been slow but there is some current momentum for expansion, pending the appropriation of state funds.

The economic factor in our decision became evident when we compared the $18,000 per year membership fee for Minuteman in 1998 to the $5,500 per year technical support and upgrade fee in our EOS International software. Today, the annual membership cost for joining Minuteman would be $25,000 per year. Our own system currently costs $5,625 a year. The Friends cannot raise $25,000 a year to earmark for this recurring expense. We would require a significant operating budget increase to be part of the Minuteman Library Network, and budget level-funding has been the Town's only means of attaining its priorities.

If we were to perform another cost-benefit analysis today, certainly the results would be different, because the Minuteman Network has become an expected library standard for area patrons. Yet we'd still have to tackle the issue of the cost, and we would be

talking added value and service in extending our resources more readily to the 664,000 virtual patrons accessing the network. The Minuteman Library Network now runs on the most powerful and expensive library software on the market, Innovative Interfaces International (III) which has made Minuteman a brand name. With the III software, Minuteman's deployment of personal account access using PIN numbers to request and renew materials, the capability to select the library location for delivery and pick-up, and automated email responses and notifications, have proven to be such conveniences for Sherborn patrons that they would like to see our collection merged in the system.

   We have a vision of an open platform of information access, using the web to bring in a variety of information sources, including the Minuteman Network. Patrons can view our collection on our website and use our new email correspondence "Sherborn Connects" to request material from us, or through interlibrary loan, and utilize our website to transact broader searches by clicking on the Minuteman Network or national databases on the tier we provide. However, they say they still prefer the ease of using Minuteman to search all the local area libraries in one search. Indeed, this has caught on to such an extent across all Minuteman Library communities, that transfers of patrons' requests through the network increased in one year from 430,490 in 2003 to 1,037,304 in 2004. The volume of items sent out to loan to the network libraries would impact the way the Sherborn Library operates on a day-to-day basis.

   At the advent of automation, organizations were touting the efficiency in the reduction of personnel, elimination of redundant paperwork, and libraries made the same argument, including projections that collection resource sharing would cut down on the unnecessary duplication of the acquisition of books. A decade later, those initial trade-offs have come undone. Of course, this observation is made in retrospect, but I think anyone who has worked in an automated environment would agree with me on this: the volume of work has increased significantly because of speed. Speed has raised expectations and made us impatient as individuals, and to keep up with this demand our workforce requires more hires, whereas most organizations are still operating on the downsized principle. The plethora of information at our fingertips continues to beg our response. Libraries, too, require more personnel, more funding, and more collection resources to keep up with this demand.

   The arguments that the smaller libraries made a decade ago to join the Minuteman Network happened when managers still believed a savings would be recognized by downsizing and consolidating by implementing technology. Certainly, computers at home and at work have brought marvels to our age, but technology has taught us new industrial lessons as the beheld awe for computers has faded and the notion they would increase personal leisure time is somewhat questionable today. More of us are regarding a computer as a utility that made itself essential in our lives like telephone, radio, TV, which later required their own antidotes, and the PC is streamlining all these inputs to the one device so we may hurriedly multi-task to the beat of the beeps. As the author Diane Ackerman theorizes in An Alchemy of Mind, computers are an annexation of our brains. We want the same instant reaction without having to grind gears to get at the ever-growing contents. Such integration and ease are products of the commodity of convenience: it may be necessary for citizens to admit they value convenience a great deal and will foot the bill to buy it at the Library.

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