Too Many Sticks, Not Enough Carrots: Implementing an SWAIS Gateway

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The Pennsylvania State University Libraries became the fifth gateway library in January 1995. The process of making the gateway access available was relatively straightforward and ultimately successful, taking place in a little over three months from the original proposal to its availability on the Libraries Information Access System (LIAS). However, I learned along the implementation road that:

- Internal partners were a necessary part of the implementation process;
- Role of the partners affected the implementation process and ultimately has affected future development;
- Bringing up a GPO Access gateway in an organization such as ours has built in "sticks" that make operating within a partnership arrangement very difficult.

My experience has also led me to conclude that since GPO Access has now offered free access to GPO Access, that changes should be made in how gateway libraries are implemented and conceived, if the program is to continue strong and viable. Essentially, GPO Access Gateways are the right idea. They seek to provide access to low-end users; they use depository libraries to provide that access and the necessary support; and they encourage partnerships to establish a gateway. But within these "right" ideas are some implementation "sticks" that make it very difficult to effectively implement a gateway and to ultimately achieve access for low-end users and increase access to government information overall.

Internal Partners

One of the most difficult "sticks" is the need to develop internal partnerships while having very little that you can bring to the partnership. At the Pennsylvania State University Libraries several key groups and individuals were required to implement the GPO Access gateway via the LIAS Select menu:

Dean of Libraries: approved the proposal to become a GPO Access gateway, decided how many passwords would be implemented, and where the gateway would be listed on the Library's Information Access System (LIAS) Select menus. Her support was instrumental in ensuring that the implementation moved forward quickly and with relatively little delay.

Library Computing Services (LCS): is responsible for the computing resources used by the library. They program and provide technical support for the Library's online catalog. The head of LCS reports directly to the Dean of Libraries. Ultimately, they were responsible for the programming required to make LIAS seamlessly connect to GPO Access and for its listing on the LIAS Select menu.

Computer-Based Resources Services Team (CBRST): works with LCS to ensure that databases are implemented in a timely manner. CBRST staff coordinate the scheduling of staff training prior to the public release of any database, oversee the development and production of user aids in a standard format, and generate library-wide publicity and information about the database.

The U.S. Documents Librarian: is considered the "local" owner of GPO Access; works with CBRST to provide staff training, text for user aids and press releases. The U.S. Documents Librarian also works as a coordinator between GPO and LCS to provide the technical information need by LCS to implement the gateway. The U.S. Documents Librarian continues to serve as the main resource person to answer any technical questions by the staff or public and coordinates future changes in user aids, training, or menu listings.

The U.S. Documents Librarian brings to the partnership:

- Desire to create access to government information through an interface that few people can figure out how to use;
- Little technical help or support from GPO;
- A project that could potentially overwhelm our already limited resources (people, hardware, software).

As a result, any partnership may involve spending a lot of time selling (the idea of an database gateway that is available to the "entire" world, not just our primary users, or even our congressional district), negotiating (whether to implement 10 passwords or 3), and being dependent upon intermediaries (CBRST and LCS, for example, who control computing resources) who don't necessarily have the commitment to providing access to government information that the GPO Access Gateway project requires for successful completion.

GPO Access Sticks

In hindsight, there were three basic GPO Access sticks:

- The inherent conflict between the need to protect the low end user and the need to serve primary users;
- The lack of a user-friendly interface and product recognition;

- The need to rely on a great deal of "local" resources, while GPO essentially served as a silent partner.

From LCS's perspective, GPO was providing access to information available elsewhere (via commercial services and Thomas, which they better understood). In addition, GPO Access included a bad interface (from their perspective few users would be able to use it very well; Thomas was better) and it would take both staff and computing resources, possibly to the degradation of services they were committed to (such as our Z39.50 databases). The only thing the GPO Access Gateway had on its side was that Penn State would be one of the first libraries to use this gateway approach and the Dean of Libraries was committed to the project.

Today, in order to implement a GPO Access Gateway a library must have a high level of support from the library's top management; it must be willing to devote a great deal of staff resources to the effort; it must be willing to commit computing resources beyond those necessary to serve just its own clientele; and it must be willing to implement a user interface that is less than desirable to information they may already be providing access to via a commercial source such as Lexis or Legi-Slate. Only the most altruistic and well-endowed (in staff, computing, and economic resources) will be able to take on this role. On the other hand, GPO could find ways make every library want to be a GPO Access gateway. Ultimately, the access to government information would be better and ultimately, everyone would benefit. In order for the GPO Access Gateway project to remain viable, some of these sticks will need to be converted to carrots.

Changing GPO Access Sticks into GPO Access Carrots

Here are some carrots GPO could offer to GPO Access Gateway Libraries to give some value back to the library:

- Protect the low-end user, but find more creative ways to do so.
- Create "virtual" gateway libraries in EVERY library
- Let every library serve its primary users
- Provide an 800-number for SWAIS dial in access

Libraries need and want to be associated with high-end technology, not bad interfaces and what appears to the user (and librarians) to be outmoded systems. Users have always had to come to libraries to use government information. Is it unreasonable that they come to libraries (or schools or post offices or shopping malls) (especially if there are more of us) to access government information via in-house computers?

More people still have cars and access to public transportation than to a personal computer in most areas in the U.S. That will continue for some years yet. GPO Access in every library should be a GPO goal. GPO needs to recognize that more (libraries, in this case) is better and that an electronic FDLP will extend outward, to what has been called "virtual depositories."

- User Friendly - Product Recognition

- Develop a single user-friendly forms-based interface that EVERY library can link to or install on their own server
- Provide a logo that libraries can use to identify themselves as GPO Access gateways on screen and in the library

Currently every gateway library listed on the GPO Access home page has devoted some level of staff, computing, and other library resources to create a forms-based interface to GPO Access databases. At the very least, GPO should be the consultant on how to develop these interfaces and the source of recommended .cgi files.

However, if GPO's forms interface were better designed, would libraries continue to do this, especially when it means creating partnerships with reluctant technical staff? Apparently, some documents librarians are proving successful at convincing their top management that they can do a better job. That's great, but if the GPO interface were better would these libraries commit their resources in this way? Even if they would, libraries that can't convince their library to commit such resources (or don't have the resources to commit) would have access through a site that wasn't associated with another library. In addition, each library doesn't have to refer their user to another library (it's just not great to tell Penn State students that Purdue's site is better than ours, so use theirs). Also, let documents librarians focus on "teaching" users how to use GPO Access content, rather than on trying to develop the best forms interface. A good interface also begins to compete with services like Lexis/Nexis, Legi-Slate, CQ Washington Alert. If you could tell your director that you could cancel your Legi-Slate subscription, because the WWW could now provide access, you would have "something" to bring to a partnership. If, in addition, GPO would have a single "face" instead of many different faces would libraries be more willing, and users more able, to find its site? Product recognition is part of reaching your market. Thomas is recognizable, no matter how I get to it--is GPO Access?

- Take the "local" out of local access--case being a silent partner
- Encourage EVERY library to bookmark/link to GPO Access.
- Reduce the local "overhead" on development and implementation by providing .cgi files to ensure a standard interface.

Currently, GPO Access gateway implementation is largely a local project. The depository librarian is encouraged to create partnerships, to gain support from top management; guide development; and provide all subsequent support, mentoring, and vision. It's a relationship only the most hardy (some might say foolhardy) document library and documents librarian will undertake.

GPO remains a largely "silent" partner in this process. Just as it did in the days of print and microform distribution, GPO acted behind the scenes to obtain, catalog, and distribute government information. . Yet, if GPO believes that libraries are to provide local access to GPO's centralized archival and storage function, libraries will need to know that what they gain from this partnership with GPO is more access, not just more frustration and expense. GPO needs to stop being a silent partner and to provide access to government information. If GPO does that, and does it well, the libraries will come, as will the partners, the necessary computing resources, and the support.

Conclusion

A mixture of cooperation, coordination, flexibility, and innovation... can extend GPO Gateways--Gil Baldwin

Being a gateway library has been a good experience overall. Being a gateway library gives a depository librarian an opportunity to work with new partners and to provide access to information that many libraries have not ever been able to afford in the past.

However, if the number of gateway libraries is to continue to grow, libraries are going to need a well-designed interface, additional help with the implementation process, and a willingness to recognize that libraries (even depository libraries) have primary and secondary users. In a networked environment, "local access" for the low-end user can be achieved in many different ways. Greater cooperation, coordination, flexibility, and innovation, as Gil says, will find ways to extend the number of GPO gateway libraries and achieve local access for the low-end user.