

Observations by Mike Price (Montana Shared Catalog Information Specialist) following his attendance at
KohaCON in Plano, Texas April 16-17, 2009

What is Koha?: Koha is an integrated library system (ILS) and was the first open source ILS. Koha was created in 1999 by Katipo Communications for the Horowhenua Library Trust in New Zealand. The first installation went live in January of 2000.

The Conference: Around 100 people attended this conference. Of the 100 in attendance, perhaps 15 were directly involved in the development, sale and support of Koha services. 10 or 15 more were already Koha users (Butte Public sent two staff persons), 10 or 15 had recently signed contracts to convert to Koha, and the rest were there to learn about this ILS.

Why do the attendees like open source ILS?

1. Enamored with Open Source. These folks think free stuff is "cool". Whether it is really "free" is open to debate, and many Koha users will tell you to plan on spending at least as much as you do on a proprietary system, if not more. But, technically, there are no license fees, so the software itself is free.
2. Risk management. I found this to be the most interesting reason to switch. The logic goes like this. There are a limited (perhaps even declining) number of libraries available for the purchase of an automated ILS, so the proprietary vendors are able to only convince existing libraries to switch from one ILS system to another. New libraries are not, generally, coming into the market as available new customers. Existing proprietary ILS vendors are consolidating and being bought out by "investment" companies that may not have any real interest in expanding the product or listening to customers to improve the product. As a result of these market trends and uncertainties, libraries are worried that the proprietary vendor they choose may "go out of business" leaving the library high and dry.
3. Cost. Many libraries have switched because of costs. If you have tech staff on site expert in Linux, MySQL, Apache, Perl, PHP, HTML, Javascript and CSS, and you have expert cataloging staff that are very data transfer savvy, then you can download the ILS source code, compile it for your specific environment, load your data and customize the product to your hearts content. All of this without paying anyone but existing staff. However, if your library does not have these resources then you will be working with one of the Koha Solution Providers and paying them to do everything for you. You won't be paying for the license fees for the software, but you will be paying for everything else, in this case.
4. Abhorrent hatred (of proprietary vendors). This undercurrent was everywhere. Much of this hatred was fostered by the termination of Horizon as a viable product. Sirsi merged with Dynix with the intent of continuing the Horizon product line, but then pulled the plug and sent Horizon down the tubes. Other proprietary vendors have met similar fates over the last 7 or 8 years and have left many libraries with nobody to support their ILS installations.
5. Data control. Many libraries want to have complete control of their data. Many older proprietary ILS systems had no facility for extracting the bib records in a MARC format for external processing (submitting to OCLC, authority control, etc.) Any time a library using one of these proprietary systems wanted their data, they had to pay an additional fee to the vendor to have the vendor's technicians extract the data.

Additional information on Costs

There are no license fees connected with Koha. It runs with other Open Source software technologies that are also free of license fees. The Operating System is [Linux](#). The back end database is [MySQL](#). The programs are written in [Perl](#). The web interfaces use Javascript, HTML, CSS, PHP, etc. The web server is [Apache](#). All of these technologies are free for the using. How to use them and support them, effectively and efficiently, is not often free. There are a number of cost models that are being used.

1. Hosted. Library has LibLime host Koha, as is, for use. If the library wants anything changed (web colors, link names, functionality, etc.) they pay for it separately through support contract or development contract.
2. Local installation with no LibLime. Download and install everything on your own.

3. Local installation with LibLime. Have LibLime do the full setup and install at local library. Pay for these services plus on-going service contract.

Development costs can be paid by a single library or shared by many libraries interested in having the specific feature added. There is a Koha North America users group forming called "Kudos". One of this groups main interests is to manage the shared development costs of feature upgrade or improvement projects.

Consortia Development

Koha was written for a single library in 1999. It started out that way, and really hasn't changed much in the ensuing 10 years. Resource sharing, floating collections, library specific CSS, OPAC customization, etc. are not implemented.

Weaknesses noticed, in particular:

There is no way to perform authority maintenance on the bib records.

There is no shadowing.

There are no ephemeral records.

There is limited support for catalog formats other than MARC.

Very limited serials support.

Limited match points on bib loads.

Only three types of records. Bib, item, and patron.

Summary

Koha is here and it is not going away. It is a viable option for many libraries. It is free of license costs and would be attractive in a single library environment where there is adequate staff capable of handling the tools needed to implement and customize the ILS. Is it ready for prime time competition against a Symphony product? No. Will it ever be? Perhaps, someday it will. Stay tuned...