Chapter 7
Thinking Inside the Grid:
Selecting a Discovery System through the RFP Process

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ABSTRACT
Many libraries are in the process of purchasing and implementing Web-scale discovery systems. In order to ensure that the selected system meets the needs of the institution’s users, a thorough and careful evaluation of potential systems is critical. Using the Penn State University Libraries’ selection process as an example, this chapter describes the use of a formal Request for Proposal (RFP) process to evaluate Web-scale discovery systems impartially and objectively. While the RFP was mandated at Penn State, the methodology presented here can serve as a model for selecting a discovery system even when a library is not required to use an RFP. The chapter provides sample evaluation grids, scoring schemes, team guidelines, reference check questions, and other tools that can be used during the selection process to ensure a thorough and complete evaluation.

INTRODUCTION
Selecting a single tool to make the vast resources of a large academic library more discoverable can be a daunting task. Typically, the library will look for a system that will improve access to and discovery of its online catalog and other local and remote resources such as digitized collections, licensed databases, scholarly content at the article level, and library Web pages. Ideally, the system will provide access to the full breadth of the library’s content through a single search box and offer more accommodating search types with innovative uses of faceted searching, word
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stemming, spelling variants, translations, results visualization, and intuitive methods for refining result sets. The system should be so straightforward that students will choose to use it over Google as their starting point for research, yet sophisticated enough to refine the results to scholarly journals or full-text online. Comparing the content, features and functionality of the Web-scale discovery systems currently in the marketplace in order to select one that meets local needs and priorities as well as budget requirements can be difficult. A systematic, step-by-step process of identifying features that are absolutely necessary and those that are desirable, but not essential, makes the potentially difficult task of choosing a Web-scale discovery system easier. This chapter describes a structured approach to selecting a discovery system, and, using the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) Libraries’ RFP process as an example, highlights the specific steps an institution can take in developing a careful and thorough evaluation process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While library literature contains a growing body of work on Web-scale discovery systems, there is limited professional library literature that specifically addresses the use of a structured, methodological process, much less a Request for Proposal (RFP), to evaluate and select a discovery system. Luther and Kelly (2011) identify content, search, fit and cost as factors to consider when selecting a discovery system while Vaughan (2011) breaks down the list of questions to consider when contemplating the purchase of a discovery system into seven sections: General and Background Questions, Local Library Resources, Publisher and Aggregator Agreements and Indexed Content, Open-Access Content, Relevancy Ranking, Authentication and Rights Management, and User Interface. Boock, Buck, Chadwell, Nichols and Reese (2009) and Brubaker, Leach-Murray and Parker (2011), in describing their processes for finding the right discovery layer, compare the features of various discovery systems. Rowe (2010) reviews three products (Serials Solutions®1 Summon™, EBSCO Discovery Services™2, and OCLC WorldCat®3 Local) and provides comparative review scores for them, while the University of Michigan’s Article Discovery Group (2010) created “a list of concrete features and tasks that could serve as a basis for the comparison and evaluation of article discovery tools” which then became the criteria used to evaluate individual tools (Bhatnagar et al., 2010, p. 5).

Library literature does, however, contain numerous articles on the use of an RFP or a structured, evaluative process for selecting other library information services such as a federated search product (Caswell & Wynstra, 2007), serials vendor (Westfall, 2011) and library management system (Calvert & Read, 2006). The value of including input from end users, including faculty and students, in developing an RFP and in evaluating the competing products is described by Ryan (2004). Valuable information on the RFP process can also be obtained from more general articles from the information science field that describe the standard steps involved in the process (Peters, 2011; Clegg and Montgomery, 2006) and review the pros and cons of the process (Schachter, 2003; Schrage, 1996; Wisniewski, 2009).

There is no consensus on the value of using an RFP for selecting an IT service. Schrage (1996) states that “The RFP is a sorry, anachronistic relic that persists more as a function of government practice and organizational inertia than any demonstrable value over time” (p. 45). Wisniewski (2009), in offering selection tips for a next-generation OPAC and in the interest of selecting and implementing the system in a timely manner, implores “Please, no RFP. If you’re in an environment where its use is mandated then so be it, but if not, I urge you to spend your time elsewhere” (p. 56). On the other hand, the Gartner Research Group has found that a properly crafted