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# Retrospective Conversion : Guidelines for Libraries and Information Centers

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## Abstract

*The paper elaborates the term Retrospective Conversion and states the need, objectives, and scope in libraries and information centers. It discusses the methods and steps for conversion with emphasis on planning, important questions in planning framework, documentation and pre-conversion issues to ensure consistency and quality standards of the information in the process. States problems and basic guidelines and a few points to key success in retrospective conversion.*

**Keywords** : Retrospective Conversion, Planing, Methods

## 0. Introduction

Now a days, libraries and information centers are automating their activities and functions to meet the users' increasing needs efficiently and effectively. The first major bottleneck is the *Retrospective Conversion* of existing catalogue into machine-readable form. It may take years depending upon the size of the existing collection of the libraries or information centers. Smaller and new libraries have an advantage over the larger and established libraries because of the lesser quantity of data for retrospective conversion.

## 1. Retrospective Conversion

The word "Retrospective" indicates that the process is only for already existing records, and the meaning of the word "Conversion" refers to the form and format of the records changing something from one form to another. Thus, retrospective conversion in library and information center means "changing already existing catalogue from existing traditional form to a machine-readable form.

Retrospective conversion, according to ALA Glossary of Library & Information Science, has been defined as the process of converting the database of a library holdings from non-machine-readable form to machine-readable form and that are not converted during day to day process.

Harrod's Librarian's Glossary defines retrospective conversion (information retrieval) is a partial or complete conversion of an existing catalogue into machine-readable form as opposed to converting records created currently.

From the above definitions, it can be concluded that retrospective conversion is:

1. conversion of bibliographical information of library holdings;
2. from non-machine-readable form to machine-readable form; and
3. that are not created during day to day process.

It can be accomplished in a number of ways, and the choice of the best method(s) for any library or information center depends on the type and size of the collection, budget available, quality standards

desired, time constraints, and staff, etc. Though essential and one time activity, it is a time consuming and costly undertaking for a library.

## **2. Need**

The conversion of database of library holdings from non-machine-readable form to machine-readable form is a pre-requisite to implementing an automated system. This database would become the foundation for other library activities such as on-line public access catalogue (OPAC), circulation, catalogue maintenance, resource sharing, etc. These records provide the means of generating statistics and other information that is needed to improve the existing services and introduction of new one.

## **3. Objectives**

The objectives of retrospective conversion are

1. to create a database for the automation system
2. to maximize access to the collection
3. to improve the services
4. reduction in time for searching of a document
5. to improve library internal procedures: the integration of acquisition and cataloguing through automation and streamlining of other technical services
6. to maximise returns on automation expenditure.

## **4. Scope**

To achieve the desired results it is necessary to have a good understanding of the relationship of each aspect of retrospective conversion process. Decision made on one part of the project will have an impact on others. Thus, once it is decided to initiate the retrospective conversion project, it is essential to determine the scope of the project by:

1. stages/phases and schedule of process;
2. deciding what areas of the collections will be converted;
3. prioritizing the order of conversion;
4. desired speed of conversion;
5. by whom and how the conversion is to be completed; and
6. project costing and budget.

It is better to ensure that everyone involved in retrospective conversion project should understand the scope, goals, and objectives of the project. Staff participation is most important non-cash input for the success of the project.

## **5. Planning**

For successful retrospective conversion project, there is a need for sound and detailed plan tempered with realistic expectations. The plan should:

- i) clearly identify the objectives;
- ii) carefully document procedures (paying close attention to efficient workflow);

- iii) specify standards to be used;
- iv) identify reporting requirements;
- v) identify the necessary staff training; and
- vi) plan for regular monitoring of quality and schedule.

If in-house conversion is to be done, each staff member on the project must clearly understand his/her tasks and responsibilities, the proper sequence of activities, and the standards to be enforced. If the conversion is undertaken through a vendor, care must be taken to ensure that the contract has no loopholes, and that sufficient legal safeguards are included to protect the library in the event of serious difficulties with the vendor. In this regard libraries can prevent many problems by requiring progress check-points and periodic tests of the quality results.

Retrospective Conversion is never easy. It can be done successfully, with minimal problems, if expectations are clearly understood at the outset, and if planning and documentation precedes the actual conversion. Once the project begins, success can be best assured through regular and frequent monitoring of progress and quality towards as per plan documents.

The plan and schedule for the conversion project must take care of all the parameters of the conversion project. These parameters have multiple dependencies as follows:

- Budget = f (number of records, fields, quality, and rate)
- Quality = f (manpower quality, supervision, and planning)
- Manpower = f (number of records and speed)
- Manpower Quality = f (wages and training)
- Supervision = f (quality and speed)
- Speed = f (manpower, quality, number of fields)
- Period = f (number of records, fields, speed).

If anyone of these variable is changed it may affect several others. It implies that a single variable cannot be changed with affecting the related parameters. The above variables mean:

- Budget : Total budget of the conversion project.
- Quality : Standards and freedom from errors of records on OPAC.
- Manpower : Number of persons working on the conversion project.

## 6. The Planning Framework : Important Question

The following considerations provide a logical progression and suggest a series of checkpoints to guide library administrators in developing a basic framework for retrospective conversion. First librarians should examine four basic assumptions of the library automation:

1. provide patrons with a broad range of services in a timely, reliable, and cost-effective manner;
2. allow the staff to complete necessary tasks with less efforts, rather than more;
3. requires a database of bibliographical records in order to function; and
4. the rate of expansion of library automation services is dependant on the allocation of resources and the growth of the bibliographic database.

Given these assumptions, librarian should address these important questions:

1. what minimum set of records must be converted to establish a database that will support enhanced, labour saving services;
2. what functions can be supported by library automation to achieve the desired level of services?; and
3. how should resources be allocated most economically to achieve a balance retrospective conversion and the range of automated functions to be acquired?

By working through these assumptions and questions, librarian can develop an approach to automation that links retrospective conversion and library automation, so that these can be managed as a single integrated effort.

## **7. Preconversion Issues**

### **7.1 Record Format**

To ensure that first conversion is the last conversion of the library or information center it is important that the bibliographical information of the documents should be converted into standard format.

### **7.2 Fields in the Database**

It is time to decide that what fields are to be included in the database and what not. Current practices for recording the bibliographical information may need modification when added to the machine-readable form. Decision should be taken after considering the users' present requirements and future needs.

### **7.3 Source for Bibliographical Information**

Will the accession register, shelf list, or public catalogue be the source to record the bibliographical information for conversion? The choice should be based on that source which has accurate and complete information to meet the requirements and quality standards.

### **7.4 Priorities of Conversion**

Determine priorities of the areas of conversion so that more important areas of the holdings may be converted first in machine-readable format.

## **8. The Problems Behind Retrospective Conversion**

Retrospective conversion is troublesome primarily because of the following facts:

1. with traditional techniques, retrospective conversion is very expensive;
2. typically it is multi-year project; and
3. since it is often considered such a lackluster or boring subject, the topic generates little managerial interest and involvement.

Despite the unfortunate reputation retrospective conversion has acquired, its importance cannot be overemphasized. The database resulting from a retrospective conversion project may long outlive the first, second, or third generation of automated systems installed in a library. Over the years, it can be very

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difficult to try to live with a poor database that is the result of budgetary or staff shortages. As Barbara Markuson has commented, "Librarians never have enough money to do the job right the first time, but libraries have enough money to do the job over again a second time."

## **9. Basic Retrospective Conversion Guidelines**

The success of a conversion project is closely tied to a number decision. First, the library staff must decide whether to undertake a partial or full conversion, and whether the conversion will be done in-house or through an outside agency. A library must make decisions of equally critical importance regarding the completeness and consistency of records. It is inevitable that converted records will differ qualitatively, to some extent, from new catalogue, because converted records are derived from local data that are limited by previous cataloguing practices. Nevertheless a library's catalogue database is long term investment, and machine-readable records should reflect information that is as complete and accurate as possible.

## **10. Documentation**

A well-written documentation unveils the strengths, to the contrary, a poorly written documentation unravels the weakness of the project thus documentation is crucial for the successful retrospective conversion and automation. If changes in the procedures are necessary, add them to the specifications. To ensure an efficient workflow, a manual may be prepared for the members working on the project, which will lead to consistent practices in the conversion.

## **11. Methods of Retrospective Conversion**

There are number of ways to convert the catalogue into machine-readable form. Best method for a library or information center depends upon the available resources at hand.

### **11.1 In-House Conversion**

In in-house conversion, the conversion is completed by the existing library staff that leads to high quality and control, as the staff understands the users' needs, quality requirements, and the objectives of the conversion well. But it has some disadvantages as:

1. it disturbs the routine work;
2. increases work-load; and
3. more time is required for completion of the project.

### **11.2 Outsourced In-House Conversion**

In outsourced in-house conversion, the conversion is completed by outside contracted persons within the library premises. The thing that should be taken care is that the persons doing conversion should be competent.

- Advantages

1. easy to meet quality standards as conversion is done under the supervision of the library staff; and
2. less disturbance the routine work of the library.

- Disadvantages

1. Temporarily additional space is required; and
2. higher cost of conversion.

### 11.3 Outsourced Off-site Conversion

In outsourced off-site conversion, the process is completed by an agency away from the library or information center. The advantage of it is only that the process is completed within the time frame with less impact on the library's routine work. But it has following disadvantages:

1. conversion cost per item will be more
2. library has least control during the process
3. shelf list/catalogue may probably have to leave the library

One possible solution to the above is to provide photocopy of the title page of each of the document but it incurs additional cost and labour intensive.

## 12. Steps in Retrospective Conversion

### 12.1 Filling of Data Input Sheets/Worksheets

Current practices for recording the bibliographical information may need modification when converted to the machine-readable format. Thus, as per requirements Data Input Sheets/Worksheets may be printed so that all the required information may be noted forgetting no field and repeating none. Those who have good knowledge of cataloguing, scope, goals, and objectives of the project must design the Data Input Sheets. The person employed to fill up the Data Input Sheets must have good knowledge of cataloguing and must be aware of what information has to be recorded and what not. These Data Input Sheets/Worksheets must be checked by Library Staff to ensure that correct and required information has been recorded to meet the quality standards.

### 12.2 Entering Data into Software

After filling the Data Input Sheets/Worksheets, the information is keyed in the Library Automation Package. This can be done by one who has basic knowledge of computer and is good at typing. Here, the knowledge of cataloguing is not required but it will be good if he is made aware of cataloguing rules to reduce the mistakes.

### 12.3 Editing of the Database

After keying the bibliographical information into the software, the database must be checked for errors and edited by a responsible person to achieve the quality standards. This process must be repeated into a loop till the required precision is not achieved. Type graphic spelling mistakes make the catalogue problematic for search.

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### 13. Key to Success

The key to successful retrospective conversions is careful and meticulous planning. There are several actions on the part of a library can take that will contribute significantly to the success of the conversion project. These measures include:

1. careful planning
2. close examination of each method of the conversion, taking into account the library's budget, time, and manpower constraints
3. weeding of titles and copies that have marginal value. Since it is expensive, it makes no economic sense to convert materials that are of little or no worth.

### 14. Conclusion

Retrospective conversion is the process of converting the existing catalogue of libraries and information centers from non-machine-readable to machine-readable database form. The best method for conversion for a library or information center depends upon the type and size of the collections, time, quality standards, and manpower, etc. To achieve the desired results, it is necessary to have good understanding of the relationship of each aspect of conversion process. Planning and proper documentation of procedures and achievable milestones for monitoring will lead to consistency in the conversion. The database thus created would be able to achieve the objectives and will reflect the image of the library or information center as well as of the institute.

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