In Comparison:

SERIALS AUTOMATION SOFTWARE

By Barbara Schultz-Jones

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Library automation systems are designed to benefit the information needs of the patron and the management needs of the host library. These benefits can be extended to serials management. While most libraries carry subscriptions to periodicals, librarians may not have considered organizing them within their library automation system.

Or, they may be considering a change to their library automation system to add desired features and functionality, and realize that serials control is an essential part of their operation. This organizational need can be met with an automation product that offers the ease of serial management through a separate serials control module or as part of a fully integrated system.

Checking in new issues of print magazines and journals, knowing whether or not to claim an issue, routing copies to groups of readers, and cataloging subscription items are all part of managing a serials collection. With serials automation software, the library catalog can include periodicals, newspapers, and other types of subscriptions. The subscriptions can be managed in terms of acquisition, receipt, routing, and vendors. A serials management system also allows for the simplified check-in of serials, anticipates when issues are due, alerts staff when issues are late, sends customized claims notices to vendors, prints unique routing lists, and generates a variety of performance reports. The result is improved information access for users, better control of library resources, and more time available for patrons. Let's consider three such products.

The Products

Alexandria (COMPanion Corporation in Salt Lake City, Utah; operational on Macintosh or PC; Windows 98+) is a fully integrated library automation system. The subscription management feature is designed to run within the full Alexandria system and is not intended for use as a standalone module or as an addition to another library automation system. The subscription management feature is included in the system at no extra cost. It includes the ability to catalog a range of subscription mediums on receipt; track their cost, frequency of delivery, and routing to patrons; manage the acquisition process; and generate reports. Subscriptions are automatically inventoried when an issue is received and are immediately searchable. A routing slip is printed if the issue is intended for distribution within the school or host company. Budget management is facilitated through the system's history of basic subscription information and complete reporting of the past year's subscription activity.

The **Mandarin M3** Library Automation System (SIRS Mandarin, Inc. in Boca Raton, Florida; PC; Windows 95+) offers an optional Serials and Acquisitions Module to the Mandarin M3 Core, or the fully integrated package in the Mandarin M3 Complete. The module could work as a standalone module, but cannot be added to another library system. The M3 Library Automation System is a native MARC database and search engine that was designed specifically for use in libraries. The design reflects the standard Windows format that is familiar to users of Windows systems. The Serials and Acquisitions application is directed toward tracking and purchasing by automating serials receiving, routing, claims, reports, and acquisitions. Bibliographic and holding records can be created for subscription items, and catalog records can be imported to add catalog items to purchase orders.

Surpass Serials (Surpass Software, Calhoun, Georgia; PC; Windows 95+) is a serials module that can be used as a standalone module, as a serials module linked to an existing library system, or as an integrated part of the Surpass library automation system. The module manages a variety of subscriptions and each issue of a subscription. In addition to ease of entry and receipt of serials, vendor performance is tracked, claims notices are customizable, routing lists can be automatically generated, and a variety of reports are available. The module provides the option to generate MARC records for holdings. If your library automation system is Surpass Central, Serials uses the patron information from your Surpass database, and can

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automatically add and delete MARC records for serials. If you use a different automation system or no automation system at all, Serials runs in standalone mode, and does not automatically add or delete MARC records in your library automation system. It will, however, create standard MARC records that you can export if required.

Features

Ease of Use One of the key measures of the effectiveness and value of an automation system is the ease and convenience with which a user interacts with the system. For users familiar with a Windows operating environment, the Mandarin M3 system provides the familiar Windows format and menu bar. Large toolbar buttons, positioned directly below the customized Windows menu bar, identify the unique functions of the automation system with a representative graphic and text (*see Figure 1*). This provides easy access to the serials functions.

Alexandria utilizes color-coded windows to identify the functional viewing and operations areas. This feature can be helpful to distinguish your location within the system
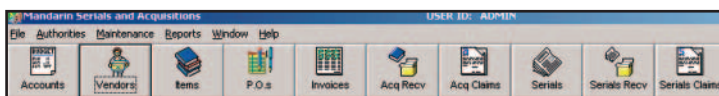

Figure 1

because of the number of window options that exist. However, navigating through this series of options can become confusing, particularly while learning the system.

Despite the Windows platform for technical operation, Surpass relies on a variety of tabs to move the user to the different areas in the system. This "tabbed interface" keeps the menu options visible on the screen. For users who find the drop-down menu format frustrating because it hides menu options from view, this is an ideal presentation. Opening,

minimizing, maximizing, and closing windows is not necessary. The system is easy to learn and easy to navigate.

Searching Access to information is a fundamental design aspect for any automation system, and using a search function to locate information is no exception. The value of a search function depends on how effectively information can be retrieved. The search functions in the serials modules range from limited to expansive. Surpass Serials and Alexandria have limited options to search and browse in the subscriptions area. Mandarin M3, on the other hand, has a robust search function that allows for ISSN, title, and keyword entries with Boolean operators as an option. Search strings with truncation are also possible. The Search button is clearly marked and easy to find in the Serials module.

Help When a group of school librarians was asked to identify the features that they considered essential for a serials automation system, they all included system support. They defined system support in terms of assistance to set up the system, training, ongoing technical support, and reference help within the system. Reviewing the support features external to the system is beyond the scope of this article, but these items have been identified in the accompanying table.

The Help function is included in all three systems and is structured to provide ongoing assistance when the system is operational. While print manuals are available, the inclusion of the Help feature is essential to the efficient use of any automation system. The Surpass Serials Help feature is excellent. The feature is context sensitive, so you are not

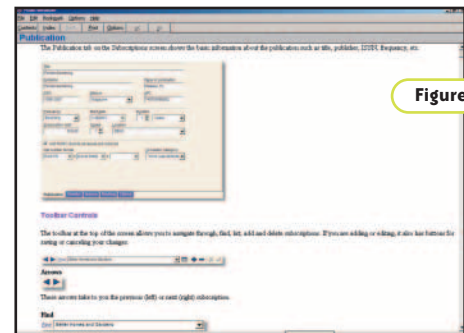required to scroll through unnecessary information or search the index for help with the area you

Figure 2

are questioning. And, because the help function opens in a separate window, it is possible to align the help window alongside the area where help is needed. The graphical presentation of the context help is of primary importance. The display duplicates the screen you are using and illustrates the completed fields while the text describes the action that is required (*see Figure 2*). Visual learners will appreciate this assistance. If the user requires information beyond the immediate context, he or she can use the menu bar at the top of the open Help window to easily access the table of contents, index, or "find" area to search by keyword. This Help feature is a model for automation systems.

Receiving The process of checking subscription items into an automation system should not be time consuming. With the Surpass Serials module, you have the option of using the UPC barcode to help you receive issues. When you are in the Receiving section of Serials, just scan the UPC barcode of the issue, and the system will automatically find the publication by matching UPC numbers. In addition, the Surpass Serials module has the ability to create and export MARC records for a subscription issue when it is received. The records can be exported to any other system that accepts MARC records as the basis for a cataloging or circulation system. The feature is optional, so

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libraries that do not circulate their periodicals are not required to use this feature. None of the systems has the facility to produce labels for the subscription items.

Subscription Management Tracking a subscription collection by controlling the receipt of subscription issues, knowing when issues are due to arrive, being alerted to late issues, processing claims notices, and managing vendor information are all part of subscription management. The system with the most comprehensive range of automated management features is Mandarin M3. A Serials Claim Button on the toolbar immediately displays the status of overdue and claimable issues. This makes subscription management easily accessible. A series of four default claim letters are available as the claim cycle progresses. These letters can be customized. An excellent feature of the Surpass Serials claims process is the option to send claims notices by e-mail.

Routing The routing feature enables the library to direct subscription issues to interested library users as soon as an issue is received. One or a number of patrons with a common characteristic, such as location or interest, can be assigned to a subscription item's route. The item is automatically circulated upon receipt, when the routing list is printed. All of the products provide the ability to establish and manage routing groups, and automatically print the routing lists on receipt of an issue. However, the control aspects to this function are met in different ways.

The Alexandria module associates a responsible patron with each routing list and checks out the item to that patron for a specific routing period (*see Figure 3*). This ensures that the item is tracked in the system and that someone is responsible for directing the item back to the library. If your

magazines tend to spend a lot of time en route, this is a beneficial control feature. Surpass Serials provides the option to identify a specific person as the last person on the list to receive the issue. When the routing list is printed, this person will have the words "return to" inserted before his or her name. If the "return to" person is a member of the library staff, a measure of control is accomplished. Both Alexandria and Mandarin provide an "instructions" or "notes" area on the routing forms so that special terms of circulation or information for the recipients can be added.

Reports Being able to view or print a variety of reports enables a library to quickly summarize system
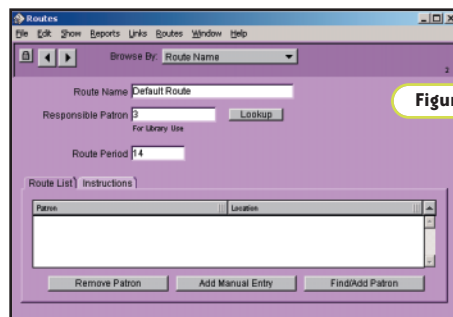
Figure 3

details, answer questions about the status of subscriptions, and provide information about subscription holdings.

Report capabilities in the Surpass Serials system are user friendly and comprehensive (*see Figure 4*). The system provides a wide range of reporting options with the added advantage of being able to easily see the description of the report alongside the report name when making your selection. The reports area is featured prominently along the sidebar with convenient tab options along the bottom. Ease of use and a good variety of selection options make this an excellent reporting function.

While the Alexandria system allows you to create a "quick report" of subscription information, it does not

Figure 4
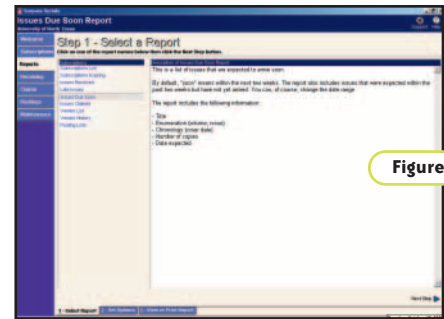
immediately display the report. Instead, you are required to tab back to the Subscription Report area to view the available reports and then select the report you just created. This is not intuitively obvious and is time consuming.

Summary
Serials automation systems offer many efficiency advantages for serials control. Because serials management could be considered to be a cross-section of a library's operation, analyzing the various areas to ensure that the system meets those functionality requirements is important. As with any automation system, there will be room for improvement, but undoubtedly, the systems that are available provide powerful tools for managing subscriptions. Ultimately, the decision to purchase a serials automation system will depend on the specific requirements of the host library in terms of the system's compatibility with the technical operating environment and users of the system. These needs must be considered carefully and prioritized accordingly.

While all the products offer a simple solution to serials management, Mandarin M3 performs with the widest range of options. For small libraries, the option to add Surpass Serials as a standalone module is attractive, while small libraries with Macintosh systems will find Alexandria to be an excellent choice. ■

Barbara Schultz-Jones graduated in December 2002 with an MLS and is currently pursuing post-graduate studies at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas.

Of special interest to grades…   K-5   6-8   9-12

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SERIALS AUTOMATION

Software	Alexandria	Mandarin M3	Surpass Serials
Company	COMPanion Corporation	SIRS Mandarin, Inc.	Surpass Software
URL	http://www.goalexandria.com	http://mlasolutions.com	http://www.surpasssoftware.com
Computer Platform	Macintosh or PC Windows 98+	PC Windows 95+	PC Windows 95+
Price (without site license)	$4,000 (full system)	$1,500 (serials and acquisitions module	$475 (standalone module)
Annual Support Cost	$400 (full system)	$230 (after 1st year)	$71.25 (standalone module)
Acquisitions	Re-order alert Budget tracking	Calculates budgets, balances encumbrances, and transactions as each acquisitions transaction is performed	•Not Available
Record Management	Unlock record to modify	Modify function under Serials Maintenance	Subscriptions Tab— add and edit
Receiving	Receive Subscription button	Receive entry bar	Receiving tab Receive Issue dialog Scan UPC barcode or manual entry
Cataloging/ MARC records	Catalogued on receipt	Added automatically when order for item is placed Create and add later	Generate automatically and export (optional)
Reserve an Issue Option	Yes	Yes	No
Routing	Establish and manage routing groups Option for automatic route slip printing Assign responsible patron Notes area on routing slip	Establish and manage routing groups Option for automatic route slip printing Instructions area on routing slip	Establish and manage routing groups Option for automatic route slip printing Designate "return to" person
Reports	Vendors, orders, items, serials, custom Renewal date, missing subscriptions, usage statistics View or print	Accounts, vendors, orders items or serials View, print or export to file (CSV, RPT, XLS, HTML, ODBC Text, Word, RTF, Lotus 1-2-3)	Subscription list, subscriptions expiring, issues received, late issues, issues due soon, issues claimed, vendor list, vendor history, and and routing lists View, print or export to file (Web, RTF, XLS, PDF)
Subscription Management	Inventory on receipt Subscription History Log Vendor tracking Variety of subscription mediums	Automated receipt schedule with forecast Notification of overdue items Allows purchase orders to be received in part or in full Items can be returned to vendor for exchange, credit or refund Wide variety of subscription mediums	Vendor information screen Select report options Variety of subscription mediums
Claims Notices	Not available	Customizable	Print or e-mail automatically (optional) Customizable
Help Feature	Index Access Search keyword/phrase find function Contact technical support group	Index access Search keyword/phrase find function User's Guide access	Context-sensitive User's Guide access Index access Search keyword/phrase find function
Security	Identify access level and choose password protection Lock/unlock the records	Customizes and limits user access privileges by function and level of access Security profiles Password protection	Not available
Training	On-site, Interactive Online, In-House or by Telephone Priced per day or per hour	On-site Priced per day, plus expenses	No information available
Technical Support	24/7 Toll Free E-mail Web site forum	24/7 Toll Free E-mail	24/7 Toll Free E-mail Web site forum
User's Guide	Print edition	Print edition and thorough Help feature	Print edition and thorough Help feature