How effective has Archivists’ Toolkit been at achieving its goals?

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Archivists’ Toolkit (AT) is basically a free open-source application to manage archives. It is a collaboration of the University of California San Diego Libraries, New York University Libraries, and the Five Colleges, Inc. Libraries and is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.¹ The need for one application that covers the many aspects of archival management has been apparent for several decades. The paper “Archivists’ Toolkit: Another Step Toward Streamlined Archival Processing” is the project team’s introduction of AT to the larger archivist community. It is written by Bradley D. Westbrook, Lee Mandell, Kelcy Shepherd, Brian Stevens, and Jason, and repeats almost word for word sections from the more technical documents found on the Archivists’ Toolkit project site.

RLG tried to develop a similar application in 1988 called an Archives and Museums Information System (AMIS). Their plan was to integrate descriptive information, conservation histories, member and researcher data, exhibit information, and event schedules. The project ended in 1993 due to a lack of funding with no functional product.² Archivists’ Toolkit has not tried to extend itself so far or so fast. “It is intended for a wide range of archival repositories,”³ but it did not initially include conservation histories, researcher data, or even exhibit schedules. According to Archivists’ Toolkit’s website the main goals of it “are to support archival processing and production of access instruments, promote data

standardization, promote efficiency, and lower training costs.” Archivists’ Toolkit has generally succeeded in meeting these goals.

The project began in 2006. Since then they have added other features such as user tracking, rights management, and appraisal during Phase 2, with the release of version 2.0. The literature does not reflect how well these features have been integrated. The next big phase will be integrating with Archon, a similar application developed at the University of Illinois. The research does show some comparison between Archivists’ Toolkit and Archon. Sibyl Schaeffer who worked with the project team believes the lack of web-publishing functionality in AT figured in its merger with Archon, which has strong web publishing capabilities. The hope is that when the integration is complete the result will be a stronger product than either of them.

In the beginning, Archivists’ Toolkit was a collection management system. Its initial success has been its ability to track the different aspects of archival management in one program. This lowers cost because it streamlines the many different aspects of archival management. AT eliminates the many programs used to manage archives and consolidates them into one program. In the Archivists’ Toolkit project team’s paper they mention how in many archival repositories many tools are used for the many different tasks. They note how a database is often used

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4 Ibid.
to encode finding aids, but not to track accessions and a text document is often used to create container lists.

This problem is well documented in the archival literature. It is strongly reflected in Lisa Spiro’s “Archival Management Software: A Report for the Council on Library and Information Resources.” One interviewee reported that the initial attraction to AT was they had a lot of tools in place for each aspect of collection management, calling them “data silos.” This presented the problem of having to train people on many different tools to work effectively. More troubling “it was difficult to reuse data because exporting demanded trying to cram it into whatever format the database was using.” This creates a situation where data has to be entered more than once. Still another interviewee mentions their information was “all over the place.”

William Jordan Patty points out the time saving potential of using software that is more familiar to student assistants is only for the short term. In this example the student assistant was creating MARC records using a template in Microsoft Word. For long-term value the records should be created in a “more transferable and nonproprietary format such as XML or MARC XML” which can be done in programs such as in AT or Archon. Having to learn different tools to work effectively also supports the project team’s conclusion that single-purpose tools

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
fundamentally increase costs due to time commitment reflected in training and possibly having to reenter data in the case of export failure.

Finally, Cheryl Gunselman notes interest in AT after completing a preservation assessment project. A student employee entered data for the assessment project in a Microsoft Access database. The treatment records that the conservation lab would need were not able to be generated easily using the Access databases. Gunselman notes that they intend to adopt a “simple, useful, sustainable tool; ideally, it will support preservation recordkeeping as part of a larger management information system.” She then states they are watching the development of AT for this purpose.11

Archivists’ Toolkit helped to solve these workflow problems by providing separate sections in the software where each area can be manipulated independently but also easily integrated. One example is the ability to link subjects to a collection while adding files to that collection. These subjects are then stored in the Subject area where they can be edited or viewed in a separate report. One of the reports AT can produce is a list of collections (or resources as the program calls them) linked to a name. There are a total of 41 reports that AT can produce, including the obvious EAD finding aid but also container lists and box labels.12 This eliminates the formatting advantage these other program may have. A standard database may not print a container list in an attractive format, but by having a

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12 Westbrook et al., 247-248.
separate report for a container list that the individual repository can modify, AT fulfills all the advantages of using a word processor to create the container list.

One of Archivists’ Toolkit’s goals is to “softly force” adoption of content standards among archival repositories, particularly EAD. The “AT User Group Survey Results: Proposed New Features and Functionality May 16, 2008 – May 30, 2008” shows repositories are behind in implementing EAD. Twenty-five percent of the respondents stated the majority of their finding aids are in EAD. Twelve and fifteen percent have some finding aids in EAD, but the largest group at forty-seven have not started using EAD. It is hoped widespread implementation of AT will increase this number.

Sonia Yaco’s article from 2008, “It’s Complicated: Barriers to EAD Implementation” provides a wealth of recent data on why institutions have trouble implementing EAD. A lot of it comes down to technical details or lack of encoding skills, precisely what AT is designed to help with. Only thirteen of her respondents indicated they were familiar with programs like Archivists’ Toolkit and only several of them “feel they should investigate these software packages further.”

Yaco references Elizabeth Yakel and Jihyun Kim’s paper where they found professional archivists do the majority of the encoding. This demonstrates the

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13 Westbrook et al., 233.
need for either more education for archivists to encode or a way to streamline the process and make it possible for other staff to encode. Yakel and Kim also found that “there was no relationship between the number of years since the initial EAD workshop was taken and the number of encoded or published finding aids.”

The answer appears to be in favor of a way to streamline the process such as AT.

Yaco identifies “working in isolation and convincing administrators” as the first problems with implementing EAD. From personal experience I have learned it is easier to implement AT in a small institution that does not have a large IT department and many firewalls. Others have noted the same experiences. In Spiro’s survey her respondents mention that it was easy and seamless. In each case though it did require help from the IT department. Once it was set up the IT staff was able to move it around onto different servers fairly easy and was not an inconvenience to them. This is good because the IT department should only need to be involved during initial setup. If the archivist has some experience with MYSQL databases and AT is installed on a computer that is not part of a larger network, it should not need any IT assistance for setup. AT allows for a lot of customization within the program, another area where assistance from the IT department is eliminated.

The AT User Group Survey has some data on the relationship between the size and accessibility of the IT department and implementation of AT. The largest response group was an institution with a medium-size IT staff that services the archivist’s needs when they can. This was 40% of the respondents. Smaller

17 Ibid.
18 Yaco, 458.
19 Spiro, 94-95.
institutions with limited access to the IT department are just as likely, if not a little more so, to have AT set up compared to a large institution with ready access to an IT department. The smaller institution response rate was 27.1% and the larger institutional response rate was 22.6%. Lastly an institution with no professional IT staff had a response rate of 10.3%. This data is difficult to interpret. Having no access to a professional IT staff limits the use of AT, which is to be expected. The other categories show little correlation between AT use and the size and access to IT staff. What the data does demonstrate it is possible to implement AT in a variety of institutions.

Although one respondent did mention AT requires a bit of IT expertise to get the most out of it, the majority seem to see it as easy to set up. Yaco mentions that some repositories have had success using consultants to for their EAD implementation, but she does not provide any data on how easy it was to have the consultant cooperate with the IT department. It should be expected that it would be easier to implement AT, a well-known open-source program, than to convince an IT department to trust a consultant and his software.

Improving the workflow and simplifying and enabling the use of EAD allows AT to accomplish its other goal of permitting the easy production of access instruments. This is accomplished through the production of finding aids and MARC records. One user commented that they wish they were starting an archives

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21 Ibid, 95.
22 Yaco, 462.
23 “What is AT?”
from scratch with AT. AT’s data entry forces adherence to EAD standards. The finding aids created using the software are easily manipulated across different programs. Legacy finding aids pose a problem and are more numerous than newly created finding aids.

A lot of the literature makes notes of legacy finding aids and how they need to be converted to EAD. This is a significant problem in the archival community. Dennis Meissner explores this issue in the paper “First things first” Reengineering Finding Aids for Implementation of EAD.” Once the Minnesota Historical Society realized their finding aids did not convert well to EAD they decided to restructure them. He states that they were not trying to simply accommodate EAD but create a simpler finding aid for the users who now included web users. AT forces repositories in this situation to accommodate EAD. One user reported that “people say that it’s too clunky, it has too many fields, and you have to separate data into fields—to me, that’s good.” They go on to mention that the restrictions imposed by AT forces people to think a different way about how to describe archival material.

AT can ingest a wide number of formats but often these finding aids are not EAD compliant and AT cannot support some parts of them. Many of Spiro’s respondents comment that legacy finding aids are their biggest hurdle and AT could be a little more accommodating. It was not until version 1.1 that multiple EAD files could be imported at once. Also with version 1.1 a scheme was developed to

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24 Spiro, 94.
26 Spiro, 96.
27 Ibid.
allow user-defined fields in XML files. In the AT survey increasing import and export capabilities in future versions was rated as very important by 81 respondents.

The project team behind Archivists’ Toolkit set out particular goals their software is meant to accomplish. Overall they intend to use technology to consolidate archival management into one program. This program is expected to produce access instruments while promoting standardization and efficiency. The way the software is set up lends itself to accomplishing these goals successfully. In their article they outline future plans to add tracking rights and licensing information for collections and integrate researcher use and tracking, which they did in Phase 2. They do listen to the larger archival community and implement features that have been requested. They are particularly open to input now that AT is merging with Archon. One respondent in Spiro’s interviews summed it up saying, “I haven’t found anything better, particularly for the price. It’s a noble effort by members of our profession to fill a gap. It seems that they’ve gone about it the right way.”

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30 Spiro, 97.
Bibliography


http://archiviststoolkit.org/node/75 (accessed May 29, 2010).


