

Finding the Perfect Fit

A Customer Conversation:
Alma at a Smaller Library

We spoke with two very experienced librarians about the path that took them to Alma and Primo. Along the way, we developed a new appreciation for the challenges that smaller libraries face.

At Royal Melbourne Hospital, Duncan Pilcher serves as Systems Librarian alongside Van Duong, Electronic Resources Librarian. Both have been with the Health Sciences Library for more than 15 years. Over that time, they have struggled to deliver a range of services that are more like an academic library with the resources of a smaller specialist library, trying various combinations of systems before finding the right fit.

You're a smaller library that's using Alma and Primo, and there's a perception out there that Alma is too "big". What was your experience like?

Duncan: A lot of people, when we told them we were going to Alma went, "Ohh," because they felt overwhelmed by that. Whether that's a correct perception or not, that is their perception. We are lucky we have dedicated staff that could focus on learning it. Van and I are dedicated to electronic resources and systems management.

You've both been doing this for a long time, too. What systems were you using before?

Duncan: We were using Spydus from Civica. Spydus had the online catalog for searching physical collections and we would catalog databases in there to a certain degree, but that was clumsy. We put ebooks in there and treated them like physical books, and put URLs in the descriptions that could be clicked on. So that was clumsy, too. Every time you wanted to upload massive collections purchased from vendors, there was a lot of cleaning up MARC files, importing MARC files, making sure they were working correctly — massive amounts of time spent just to get them in.

Sounds like a lot of work. What about other systems?

Van: We were using a system where I managed the links manually, and after that we went to EBSCO A-Z.

Duncan: And from the discovery side, when I came on board we were using Horizon, with its own built-in discovery layer/catalog, then we got access to the EBSCO discovery layer through a consortium. It was useful to use the EBSCO layer because they could integrate their discovery layer with their A-Z. We'd always struggled to have a universal view for the different cohorts we serve.

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Duncan Pilcher, Systems Librarian

Different cohorts? What do you mean by that?

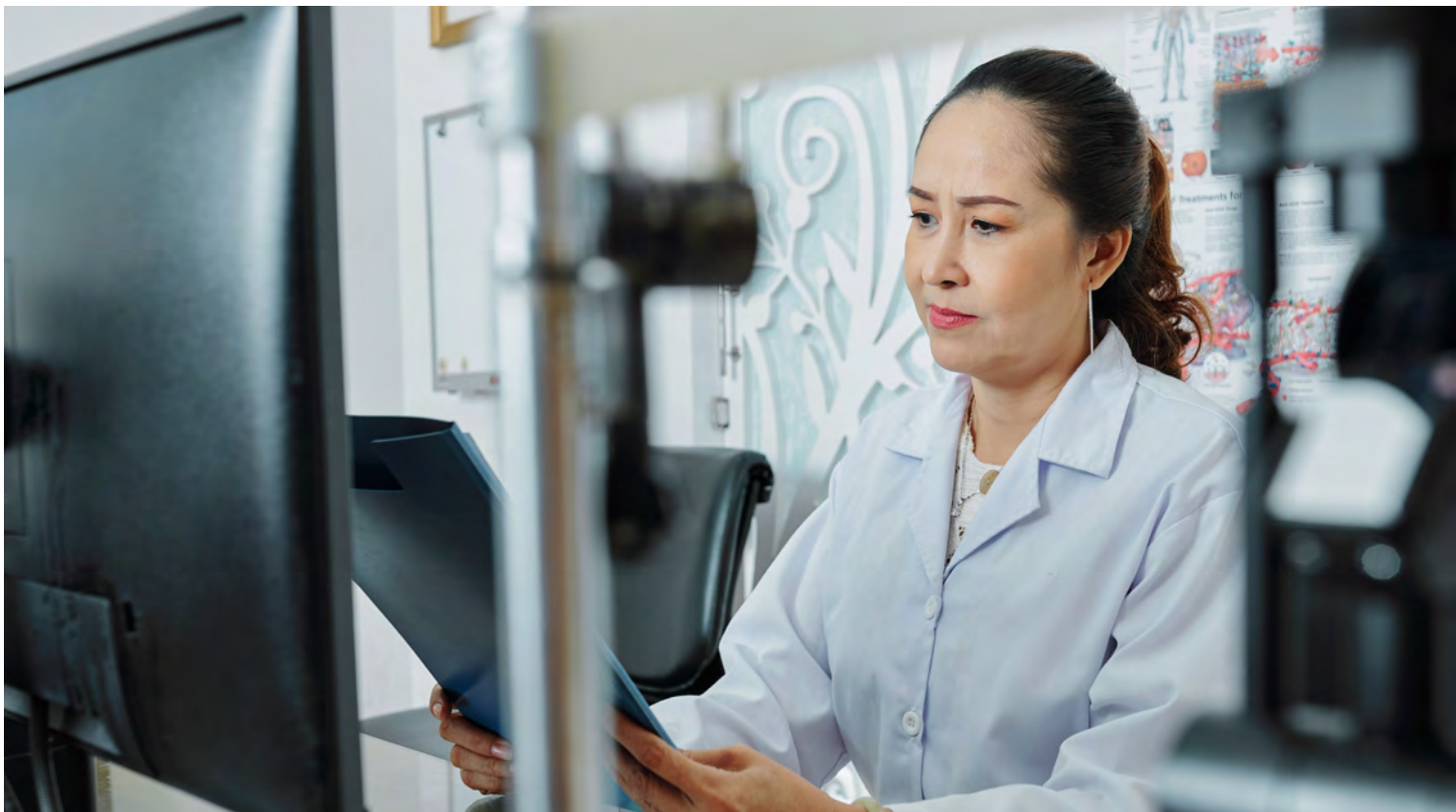
Duncan: We serve the Royal Melbourne hospital, the Royal Women's Hospital, and the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre which are all located physically together in what they call the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Precinct. We also have a contract to provide library services to Victorian Mental Health. They're clinicians from state services and they're spread out all over so they're predominantly remote.

Van: We're kind of unique in that we're one library service serving different legal entities.

Duncan: Yes, and some of our collections are subscribed to only certain cohorts because of budgetary limitations. We had one discovery layer, sitting on top of three instances of A-Z, and when you did a search you found Journal X and it would say "OK, Royal Women's can have it, Royal Melbourne can have it, Peter Mac can't." Then EBSCO changed their journal platform and they could no longer do that kind of integration so we moved to SFX.

And what did you do for discovery then?

Duncan: We did eventually land on Primo, the original Primo, not Primo VE. And then we started using that side by side with the catalog in Spydus, but we were using it primarily for accessing journals. So, it was the first time we had an ability to do good article-level searching.



This has really been a journey for you two.

Duncan: This might be just my personal observation, but the library systems we could access and afford were never tailored for the way we need to manage resources. We were never able to make that leap into library management systems which were much more integrated. I think we were fishing around in hopes that something would come along that could bridge that gap.



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Van Duong, Electronic Resources Librarian

And that’s where Alma comes in?

Duncan: We don't have a huge budget compared to, say, a university, but we were approached by someone from Ex Libris, we spoke to a salesperson, and ultimately the price was right.

So now, you have Alma and Primo.

Duncan: Well, we're now in Primo VE that is more integrated with Alma. When Ex Libris sold the package to us, they said, “This is the package. It's all together. You just move straight to VE.”

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Duncan Pilcher, Systems Librarian

What’s it like now compared to the old days?

Van: I don't have to log in three times to fix something. I don't have to log in to do my changes, log out, go to a Peter Mac login, do my changes, log out, and constantly do that. Having one interface really streamlines things. I’ve got a clearer picture of what everyone’s got. I can see it all.

Duncan: We like the integration that Alma offers. We've divided the cohorts using the campus concept within Alma, and then assigned resources either solely to one specific campus and its own instance of Primo, or if it's a resource available to everyone, we publish it in all the instances. Also, we particularly like the integration between the electronic resource collections and the physical collections, instead of having to run them in two or three different systems. With Alma able to do the ebook collections as well, adding a new collection used to take me weeks the old fashioned way but now Van is doing it far quicker as part of her workflow.

Seems like you finally found the perfect fit. What would you say other libraries of your size who think Alma and Primo are too big and complex?

Duncan: I don't think Alma is too big and complicated for us.

Van: I would say, "Look at what it can do for you — what do you want out of the system?" and then concentrate on those areas. We were looking for certain requirements and Alma met all those criteria.

Duncan: Don't get overwhelmed by the number of options. You can bite it off in more manageable chunks and I have found the support team does a good job of helping, from the implementation to maintenance. I would certainly recommend Alma and Primo to libraries similar to us because it benefits us to be in an academic type of system, rather than a school library type system. If it fits within the budget, take a serious look at it.

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Royal Melbourne Hospital Health Sciences Library

The Health Sciences Library is medical library based at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and providing services to staff at the Royal Melbourne, Royal Women's Hospitals, the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre and Victorian Public Mental Health.

The library provides specialist collections covering a wide spectrum of content including general medical, allied health, women's health, cancer and mental health; as well as education and research.

In addition to providing a physical collection, dedicated study and training space, the library also offers a significant collection of online resources and services for our patrons to access 24/7 even if they are working remotely.

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