Why Now is the Time to Move to a Collaborative Web Based ILS Platform

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Why Now is the Time to Switch to a Collaborative Web Based ILS Platform

The Camden County Library System seeks to meet the recreational, informational and educational needs of its customers within its eight public libraries and one community college library in New Jersey. The system contains over 450,000 holdings and circulates over 1 million items per year to their user base of roughly 323,000.

A conversation with Christopher Slone, ILL Coordinator / ILS Team

The Challenge

More and more libraries are finding that their proprietary, client based ILS products are no longer fulfilling their needs. Locked down systems that provide little in the way of open collaboration and interoperability are losing ground to more progressive, lightweight platforms that are open to working with other third party systems and provide unfettered access to the libraries' own data. Flexibility is key in this new era of library technology and as we see more and more consolidation within the market, libraries are losing control over what systems they implement and who they can procure these solutions from. Such was the case with the Camden County Library System and their Millennium ILS.

What are the Frustrations of a Client Based System?

The cost to manage a traditional client based system is much higher than utilizing an open source web based product supported by a reputable company. Libraries using client based systems currently need to direct staff to manage hardware and in many cases create workarounds for products that were developed decades ago and no longer meet the technological needs of libraries or their patrons. Chris Slone, ILL Coordinator and ILS Team member elaborates:

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“Our previous ILS was very often frustrating. It was designed for academic libraries, but even as more public library systems started to use their programs they were slow to accommodate our needs, such as making it easy to add multiple copies of the same item. Even at its best it was decidedly static, so any changes that we wanted to make were difficult to execute and could only be done if the company was contacted by one of a select few people. This meant that from the very beginning the story with our previous system was one of finding ways to work-around the built in functions in order get to the information we needed or to have our records display correctly.”

Lack of flexibility can be another major roadblock to the progress of a library’s technological goals. When a system becomes too silo’ed the staff may have little opportunity to manage their collection or update their public facing catalog. This was the case with the Camden County Public Library:

“The system was so rigid that it didn't even allow you to delete titles or purchase orders easily, and this difficulty in managing and cleaning up our information led to our catalog becoming cluttered with old data” stated Slone. He continues: “The public catalog was similarly untidy and was completely different from the staff interface, leading to a separation between how staff and patrons used and understood the library catalog. The inflexibility of the system also led to the OPAC becoming outdated with little hope of improvement. By the time our contract with the vendor was almost up, and we begin to look for a replacement, the ILS and the OPAC were obsolete, costly, and becoming unstable. In the last year of using the system the company seemed more interested in pitching their newer, more expensive ILS to us rather than resolving the problems that we were reporting.”

Pre-Migration Jitters:

Once the decision is made to migrate to a more progressive, open, web based platform, libraries understandably have certain reservations going into this significant change in workflows. According to Slone:

“We were afraid that a lot of manual re-entry of data, especially for our bib-level holds, was going to be needed and that the mapping of the information from the old ILS would be difficult due to the fact that much of what was coming over was not very clearly formatted. An ILL module was a major need for our system and it seemed to be unaddressed by any other library systems using Koha. Additionally, there were concerns that our staff would not realize how different the new ILS would be and that the learning curve would be a real challenge. We feared that there would be a sizable interruption to service for our patrons because of the above issues and that there were other problems lurking out there that we didn’t even think about.”

Post-Migration Enthusiasm:

When working with a reputable support company like ByWater, migration issues are typically identified and resolved well in advance of the go live date. It is important for your support company to be diligent with these requests during the migration process so as to build confidence and strengthen buy-in with the rest of the library staff. This will ensure a smooth go live, promote enthusiasm during the process and lay the foundation of trust needed for a long and productive relationship. Chris talks about his experience in working through migration related issues leading up to go live:

“In the end the majority of the complications related to these problems were anticipated and taken care of by pre-migration preparation. For example, we were able to work with ByWater to integrate a third-party ILL solution into Koha and we were able to figure out how to have all of the 8,000+ bib holds uploaded in a single batch, saving us days or weeks of work! Ultimately, our staff took the changes in stride and worked through any issues quickly and collaboratively. Other problems have cropped up, but they have been resolvable without too much stress and ByWater has continued to work to resolve any issues we have.”

Unfortunately, in many cases, the way in which client based proprietary systems migrate new libraries has changed very little from the way things were done over a decade ago. Chris elaborates on how Camden County’s experience stacked up against previous migrations:

“Our last migration was close to fifteen years ago, and at that time we did it in stages by switching over different aspects of the system one by one. The result was quite dramatic and it created problems that required months to correct, such as an abundance of duplicate records and noticeably inconsistent data.”

All migrations have their speed bumps and challenges with data translation. What is important to the staff and end user experience is how the company who supports your product handles those challenges. Sloan continues:

“With Koha we brought up every module at once, which was a little stressful going into it, but we didn't have the same degree of issues switching to Koha as we did with our previous migration. The process itself was work intensive but the staff at ByWater did an amazing job getting our data over to the live server and they were able to go back and change entire categories and move data into them by using the codes from the old ILS. Other problems have occurred but have been fairly easily resolved.”

Positive Impacts for the Library

At the end of the day, the Camden County Library System found a solution to their problem of utilizing an outdated, closed off, client based system by moving to the first ever fully web based and open source ILS, Koha.

“The new system is more attractive and easier to use, with many of the functions working much more quickly than in our previous ILS. It’s much easier to delete and correct problems in Koha and its adaptability has made it possible for us to add long needed functionality to the way our ILL items circulate. It has also given us the ability to easily search for specific collections and media types by using the facets, and our OPAC is likewise more modern and clear, with enhanced content that is simply and effectively displayed.”

Utilizing the robust functionality found in Koha, along with forming a strong partnership with ByWater and the global Koha Community, libraries can now provide more services to their staff and patrons while utilizing a progressive, easy to use, collaborative system at a lower cost than other ILSes. According to Slone, this change has also opened doors to other possible improvements for the library:

“Switching from proprietary to open source software was a great decision for us. We have so much more flexibility and control over our own data, and with the money we saved, we were able to invest in catalog enhancements and some other new services. We're still in early stages of using it, but the change to Koha is also giving our library the motivation and the tools to streamline the things that have made us less productive in the past, so migrating to Koha is allowing us to provide a superior experience for both staff and patrons.”

He continues:

“One of the best things about Koha is that if the data is there, you can use it! Because of this we have already been able to look at our information differently and use it more efficiently. Koha is endlessly changeable and incredibly flexible, both in how it looks and how it works, and using something that can be adapted and changed quickly will let our library system react to concerns and new ideas, enabling us to better serve our patrons.”

Today's library technology market is drastically changing; libraries worldwide are quickly learning that traditional, client based software models that command large price tags and offer little in terms of support, flexibility and collaboration are becoming things of the past. Misconceptions surrounding web based open platforms are being proven false by more and more real world use cases and libraries are learning that robust functionality and comprehensive support do not need to come at a premium cost. Adopting an open source web based ILS platform not only lowers the price you pay for your software but more importantly it empowers your organization to have the tools and access, and flexibility to efficiently manage your patron’s experience, solidifying the library as the place for knowledge and information in this challenging digital age.

To learn more about Koha, ByWater, and what we can do for your library please visit www.bywatersolutions.com

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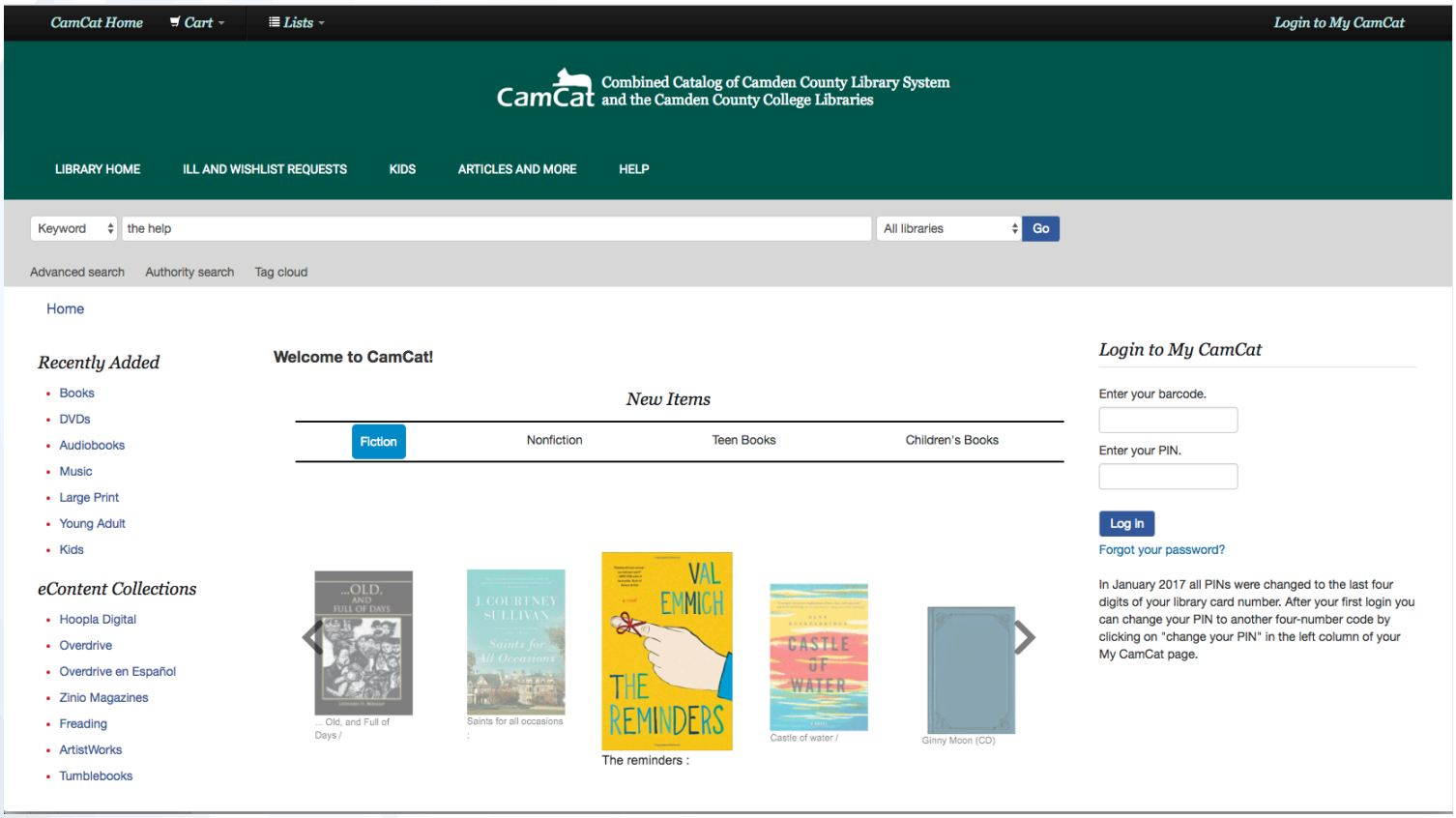
Koha Screenshots:

Camden County Public Library OPAC



https://camden.bywatersolutions.com/

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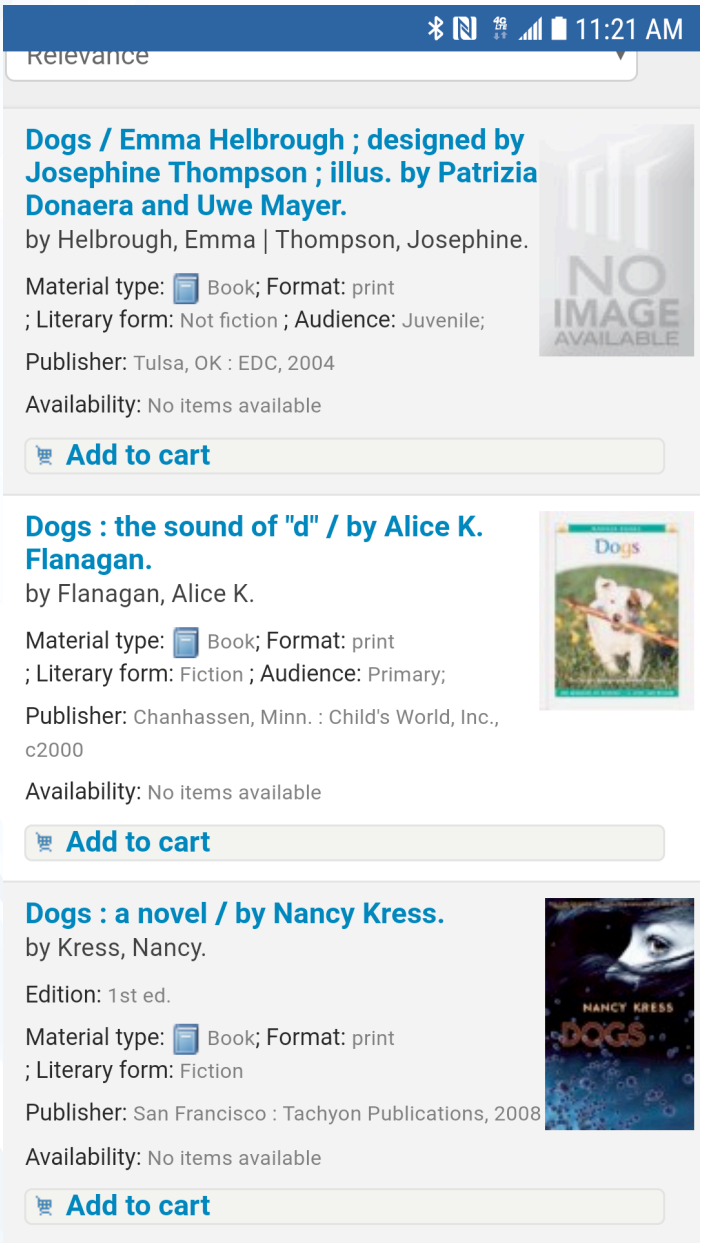
Koha Screenshots:

Fully Responsive Mobile Functionality



Access our live, open demo site at:

http://bywatersolutions.com/demos/

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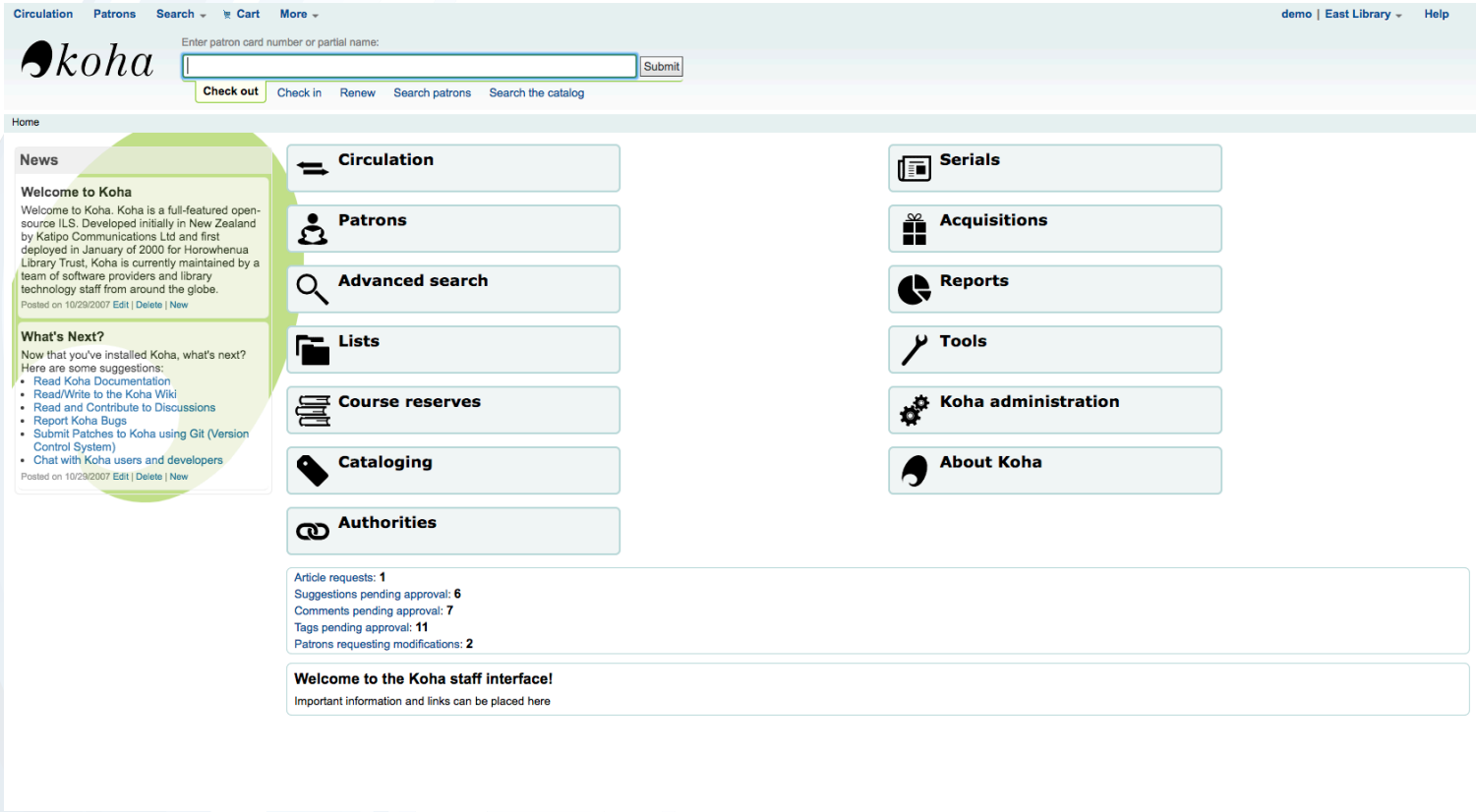
Koha Screenshots:

Staff Interface Landing Page



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