

FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR EXHIBIT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

database with thousands of records for information contained in a few fields. It might take a half hour or twenty hours to find the same information on file cards.

B. EXHIBIT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

The use of computers in all phases of exhibit planning, design and installation is an idea that is just beginning to emerge. Museum staff have matured in their knowledge about computers. Staff who develop exhibit systems have benefited from computer experience gained in the various museum departments of accounting, membership, development, publications, education, travel, exhibits and registration collection management. Museum staff also have the backup support of professional agencies and organizations and commercial exhibit companies. Fine Arts shippers and moving companies use computers to track their cargo.

Long-range planning for exhibits includes the process of yearly and five year planning so that the staff can develop a broad range of exhibit themes or ideas and establish a schedule for displaying the permanent collection or travelling exhibitions. This planning process gives the staff a clear sense of direction and helps them formulate a strategy to accomplish their objectives. With a common goal the staff works as a team united around a common purpose. Good planning motivates staff and improves their performance. Long range planning also helps to concentrate resources by keeping the combined cost and number of exhibitions down so that staff and volunteers, the physical plant, and the financial resources will not be severely overextended.¹³

Most exhibits take several years to research and organize, making long range planning imperative. The Impressionist exhibit at the de Young museum had one hundred and fifty paintings from Europe, America and Asia. Each of these works needed curatorial research, loan negotiation, insurance, packing, transporting, hanging in a thematically planned exhibit hall, and written material and photographs on each for an exhibit catalog.

13. Lisa Baylis (Instructor, Museum Management class, J.F.K. University) lecture on "Planning and Control" 18 February 1985.

Why is a systematic documentation of exhibits important? More people use museum collections today in more ways and more frequently than ever before.¹⁴ Internally, museum staff continue to increase exhibit mounting. Staff size is usually not increased to meet this demand. Travelling exhibits, especially Blockbusters,¹⁵ have come to play a larger role in supporting the museum financially. Externally, the general public has become older and has more leisure.¹⁶ More people have the time to do personal research and to visit museums. Legal authorities, environmental impact specialists, newspapers - all expect access to the collections. Museums are legally and ethically obligated to keep certain collection information and to maintain it within accepted professional standards.¹⁷

14. Robert Chenhall and Peter Homulos, "Museum Data Standards," Museum News 56 (July/August 1981): 40-49.

15. Joyce M. Hawkins, ed., The Oxford Paperback Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 1984): 62. Block-buster comes from the slang term meaning "a huge bomb able to destroy a whole block of buildings; something very powerful." In museum exhibits, this term is applied to exhibits that attract large crowds and therefore make considerable money. Karol Schmiegel mentions that the registrar is often a business manager, "responsible for millions of dollars for a blockbuster exhibition." ("Role of Professional Groups in the United States," Collections Management for Museums, D. A. Roberts, ed., (MDA: 1988): 93.)

16. Andrew Hacker, ed., US - A Statistical Portrait of the American People (New York: Viking Press, 1983). This report of the 1980 census said there has been a rise in the population of persons aged 65 and over from 16 million to 25 million, during the years 1960 to 1980. 1980 average life expectancy was 73.6 years.

17. Joel Bloom et al., Museums for a New Century, (Washington D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1984), 46.

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B.1. DOCUMENTATION AND REPORTING

Why use computers to tie together exhibit information? A computer's value in the documentation process is its ability to speed the creation, organization and retrieval of records.¹⁸ Currently, staff use microcomputers for exhibit tasks in their separate departments, usually for typing or calculating reports, or sorting and listing alphabetical categories of separate fields. An integrated computer system, tying together the departments, would require fields like "object" and "value" to be typed in only once but used in many different ways. A single report or list can be printed and then distributed to all involved, but centralized database information can be sorted to make new reports in new ways. Without a central database there are many people in large museums generating separate reports and lists about the same exhibit.

The computer system makes its major contribution to documenting efficiency by allowing all essential information about the exhibit to be stored in one, central, database from which all required reports can be generated. For example, fields of information normally contained on the loan agreement form are: exhibition title, dates and locations, lender, artist's name, artist's life dates, title of art object, history, medium, dimensions, reproductions, and arrival date.¹⁹ Most of these fields of information can be used, for example, by the insurance agent to set value on the collection, by the publications manager to write a brochure and a catalog, by the exhibits manager to produce labels.

In manual systems, new reports are created by many people making new files with index cards and ultimately writing reports from the information in the files. The manual method requires that the information storage structure and the information reporting structure must be identical or that the reports must be a subset of the storage structure and must be sorted in the same order. This creates redundant information. Manual searches for information are time consuming and usually incomplete, when compared with computer searches.

What should this central exhibit database include? First, we need to determine the elements of information required for all the reports. These elements may include data entered into

18. Ibid.

19. Paula March (Exhibits Registrar, Fine Arts Museums), Loan agreement form given to author.

the system in the exhibits management process, data brought into the system from collections management, and other museum databases, and data calculated by the system based on instructions provided by the exhibit manager. There should be information about object specifications, insurance, loan agreements, packing and shipping, object condition, scheduling, exhibit budget, installation, publicity, the catalog, and temporary storage. The database could generate, from this information, a notification form, packing and unpacking instructions, a contents checklist, a receipt card, a condition report, an installation list, information for publicity releases, and special instructions.²⁰

A well-planned computer system helps curators and administrators combine their efforts. A central database for all this information would bring together the work of several departments. Separate forms for agreements between lenders and borrowers, packing, shipping, insurance, scheduling, an object catalogue, and budget would be unnecessary. The database could generate reports and specific information.

B.2. PLANNING AND EVALUATION

Planning an exhibit takes time, usually at least a year. Before the exhibit can be approved by the museum's Board of Directors, the staff must work on the exhibit concept, requests to test object availability, the gallery and storage space, insurance, funding proposals and scheduling. All of this information could be put into the database as it is acquired.

The administration not only gains by cutting costs and preparation time when the staff know where to look for the answers but also, by reviewing past records on exhibits, the administrators and curators have a clearer view in planning exhibits for the future. The staff can see what has been spent in the past on organization, conservation, insurance, installation, advertising, packing and handling, shipping, a private opening, security, dismantling, and temporary storage.

20. E. C. Osborn and Grace Morley, Temporary and Travelling Exhibits, (Paris: UNESCO, 1963), 111-116. Examples of travelling exhibit forms.