What Makes a "Small Solution?"

First, it makes sense to say what I mean by a "small solution." "Small": as opposed to a grand scheme or all-encompassing plan. "Solution": something that actually improves some situation for one or more libraries (since this is a library-oriented publication).

A small solution need not be insignificant. Fred Kilgour undertook a small solution in Ohio in the late 1960s. So did a group of librarians and computer people at Stanford University. It would be hard to call either OCLC or RLG insignificant, but both spring from (and progress best by) small solutions.

The Ohio College Library Center would have been a solution had it never gone beyond its original functions, serving a few Ohio colleges and universities. BALLOTS would have been a solution for the Stanford Libraries, even if it had never been used elsewhere. MARC II would have been a solution for the Library of Congress had it never been extended beyond books and subsequently become the lingua franca of library automation.

Small Solutions and Pilot Projects

What's the difference between a small solution and a pilot project? Attitude and approach. Many pilot projects are small solutions, but not all.

Let's say that a library has a grant to investigate digitized collections by studying alternative approaches to digitizing and storing images, methods for providing intellectual access to images, and ways to connect images and text (when that's meaningful). Let's say that the grant includes enough money to actually digitize several thousand images.

A pure pilot project might look for a wide variety of images to be scanned, possibly even the most difficult images, across all areas of the library’s collection.
The result of the small solution will be a coherent digital collection that can add to the extended services of that library and other libraries. If additional money is available, the digital collection can be expanded or linked to other collections.

Sometimes the Federal government does it right. As far as I can tell, the American Memory Project and more recent initiatives of the Library of Congress have always been small solutions rather than pure pilots: small, coherent projects that yield meaningful results even if later projects fall by the wayside.

Marks of Small Solutions

Self-sufficiency: that's the first clear sign of a small solution. That is, a small solution should be beneficial on its own terms, regardless of later developments.

Sustainability is another mark. Many small solutions begin as grant-funded projects, but the good ones always yield results that can be carried forward on the regular budget, if need be.

Small solutions should have clarity. They should be defined in terms of specific problems and specific goals, and they should demonstrably achieve those goals. Which is not to say that a good small solution won't have unexpected side effects: the best small solutions always yield more than was expected.

Extendibility may be a mark of the best small solutions, but there's nothing inherently wrong with a closed solution. It's always nice when a solution can be expanded or replicated--but if you have a unique problem, why not build a unique solution? In practice, lessons learned during the solving will probably help in other areas; there are surprisingly few wholly closed solutions these days.

Admitting Failure and Moving On

Nobody likes to fail, even though most of us know that occasional failures help us grow toward success. But when it comes to small solutions, it's useful to learn to admit failure and move beyond failures.

For those who hate failure, small solutions may seem difficult as compared to grand schemes. A grand scheme involves so much time, so much money, and so many participants that no single agency need ever "fail" as such; somehow, the whole just doesn't come together. But with proper small solutions, one agency has clear responsibility and the time line allows for recognition of failure.

It's okay to fail. I've certainly done it--that is, been involved in projects that were terminated; I've even recommended termination of projects I was deeply involved in.

It's possible to complete a project and realize it's a failure in retrospect. That's no tragedy, unless you fail to recognize and learn from the failure.
If you have never failed in any project, some self-evaluation might be in order. Are you attempting enough? Are you looking for real solutions, or just making sure you avoid problems and failures?

Sometimes, small solutions work briefly but make no sense for the long run. That's fine. Figure out what worked, build on it, and move on.

About the Author


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