



In July 1998, ten libraries in northern Indiana

NORTHERN INDIANA COMPUTER CONSORTIUM FOR LIBRARIES (NICCL)

by Linda Yoder

joined together with a common vision: to hire one computer support provider to address the needs of libraries of different sizes. Each library was looking for affordable computer support to help guide in the implementation of technology. While the levels of technology and the specific needs varied from one library to the next, there were common issues.

Many were paying \$75 to \$125 per hour for computer support. Most of the libraries were working with a computer support company or individual whose only connection with libraries was that particular library. With grant funding available for technology, many of the libraries were researching solutions to the same or similar needs or directions.

Armed with a mission to "cultivate a technology consultant as an expert in services specific to libraries in a manner that is affordable and available to each library regardless of size or budget," the following plan emerged and was set into place with the initial contract based on estimated needs for a six-month period.

ORGANIZATION

Two agreements provided the structure for this group project. An Interlocal Agreement between the participating libraries defined how the group of libraries would interact. At the onset of the contract period, each library provided an estimate of the average number of hours per week needed for computer support. The individual hours were added together to determine the Total Group Hours. The contract officially expired when Total Group Hours were used. One library was designated as the Accounts Payable Library. The Accounts Payable Library was responsible for providing a report at the end of each month listing the number of hours used per library and the Total Group Hours used to date. Each library was invoiced at the beginning of the contract period for the number of hours estimated. If an individual library used more hours than estimated before the Total Group Hours were depleted, that library received an invoice at the end the month. At the end of the contract period, those libraries that did not use the hours estimated were issued refunds or credits to apply to the next contract.

The Computer Support Agreement outlined the interaction of the Group with the Service Provider.

Under the terms of the agreement, the services offered by the Provider included software installation and

upgrades, programming, troubleshooting hardware and software conflicts or problems, peripheral installation, software and hardware specification and configuration, consultation, network design and configuration, and training. Each library could choose "scheduled" or "as needed" service calls. If the library chose a regular schedule of service time, no travel time was charged to the library. If the library chose "as needed" service, support time was arranged at least one week in advance and per hour one-way travel time was charged to the library account. For emergency calls, a technician arrived within 24 hours of the call. Recognizing that some libraries would possibly need evening and weekend technical support hours for upgrades or special projects, the Computer Support Agreement included regular rates for special arrangements that were made at least one week in advance. Emergency weekend and evening rates would be billed at double time. Phone support was billed at the hourly rate divided to the minute. To provide accountability and assurance of performance, the Provider was paid in monthly installments by the Accounts Payable Library with a percentage of the contract withheld until the end of the contract period pending settlement of any disputes between the libraries and the Service Provider.

GROUP BENEFITS

Benefits of the group agreement became clear early in the process, as the interviews with three potential Service Providers began. Each offered similar terms using the "blocks of service time" as the basis for the agreements. The rates were similar as well, at or near \$35 per hour. Three words summarize the benefits as a whole:

Affordable

- Computer support rates can equal \$75-\$125 per hour; Group Agreement rates are significantly discounted (\$35 or less...read on!)
- Each library pays only for actual hours used. (Individual accounts are reconciled at the end of the contract period with refunds or credits and invoices issued accordingly.)
- Employee benefits and payroll taxes associated with adding a staff position are eliminated.

- Libraries can budget for service time.
- Group purchasing is available with competitive discounts and input and flexibility on specifications.

Flexible

- Hours are used on "as needed" basis or can be on prearranged "scheduled" visits (for example weekly, biweekly, monthly).
- Service time is "flexible function," in that hours can be used for repairs, support, consultation, networking, programming, etc. to meet the needs of each individual library regardless of size, level of technology or expertise.

Experience

- Provider has experienced, well trained group of technicians.
- Provider devotes 40+ hours per week to libraries.
- Knowledge gained from individual projects benefits the group.
- Libraries have common issues: Ikiosk, INSPIRE, grants, etc.
- Standardization, though not required, increases productivity through familiarity.
- Customized training is offered in a classroom setting at the provider's site or individual or group training at the library.

FIRST CONTRACT - JULY 1, 1998 THROUGH MARCH 26, 1999

The Group selected Xcel Computer Systems, Inc. (Osceola, IN) as the Service Provider for the first contract period. Determining factors included the size of the company and number of experienced technicians, the number of years the company had been in existence, references, and the business philosophies and vision for growth exhibited by the president of the company, Kevin McCarthy. McCarthy quickly recognized the similarities and the potential benefits in providing services to libraries and schools of all sizes. As a Service Provider, the benefits of this arrangement are a steady income and a regular schedule. In addition, the presence of many common issues equates to an efficient use of support time.

From the original nine libraries who joined together to formulate the plan, the group had grown to ten member libraries by July 1, 1998, at the onset of the first contract. In support of this venture, these ten libraries received a \$10,000 grant (\$1,000 per library) from the Indiana State Library to extend the first contract period. The first \$500 was reimbursed on a 100% match while the second \$500 was reimbursed at a 50% match. A short time into the contract, three more libraries joined.

The first item on the agenda for each library was a visit by the Service Provider to conduct a complete inventory including all hardware and software and peripherals.

GROUP PROJECTS

During the first contract period, the Service Provider became familiar with many library affiliations including the Indiana State Library, the Indiana Cooperative Library Services Authority (INCOLSA), the Indiana Higher Education Telecommunications System (IHETS), and various vendors of library application software including Ameritech Library Services, EOS International, and SIRSI.

During the first contract period, FY1999 Technology Grant applications were due to the Indiana State Library. Xcel Computer Systems, Inc. worked with each library to plan upgrades to systems to correct Y2K problems, installations or upgrades of local area networks, purchase of software or equipment to make the on-line catalog accessible on the Internet, and/or digitization of unique local print resources. The total approved for NICCL Y2K funding was \$119,110, for LAN funding \$45,762 with another (\$37,356) approved pending funding, for a total of \$202,228 for group members this year. The \$164,872 already funded represents 22% of the total \$750,000 LSTA funds awarded; the NICCL group represents 6% of public libraries eligible to apply:

	Y2K	LAN	Internet
Argos	4,920	8,402	Dial-up
Bell	9,840	10,160	Dial-up
Bourbon	4,450	13,590	56k
Bremen	14,150	5,850	
Bristol	6,560	7,760	56k
Fulton Co			T1
Middlebury	6,710	(9,775)	56k
Milford	8,200	(3,684)	56k
Nappanee	15,600	(4,400)	T1
New Carlisle	7,550	(5,528)	56k
Syracuse	20,000		56k
Wakarusa	8,530	(7,219)	T1
Warsaw	12,600	(6,750)	T1

Upon receipt of funding approval, group members were able to take advantage of group purchase discounts, saving \$200-350 for each computer purchased. Xcel applied for a Service Provider Identification Number from the School Library Division of the Universal Service Administrative Company. In addition group members saw a demo of Wordperfect 8 and participated in training with Windows 95, Wordperfect 8, and Basic Computer Repair and Maintenance classes.

INDIVIDUAL LIBRARY PROJECTS

Individually, Xcel performed the following services at the member libraries:

- consulted on Universal Service Fund applications,
- upgraded file servers,
- installed library application software,
- reviewed & consulted on network configurations,
- reviewed and improved security on networks from Fortres to firewalls,
- investigated digitalization, and
- repaired equipment from printers to fax machines (and even typewriters!)

SECOND CONTRACT - APRIL 1, 1999

A new contract period began April 1, 1999. Each library estimated needs for twelve months. Of the thirteen libraries participating in the first contract, four were invoiced for hours above estimates, eight were credited hours or time toward the second contract period. A minimum participation level was set at one hour per week or 52 hours for the contract period at an initial cost of \$1,820. Quantity discounts are offered as follows:

- For signing up for 200 hours of support, the rate decreased to \$31.50 per hour.
- For signing up for 500 hours of support, the rate decreased to \$28 per hour.
- For signing up for 1,000 hours of support the rate decreased to \$24.50 per hour.

The Group now has nineteen members and continues to grow. Both the Interlocal Agreement (between libraries) and the Computer Support Agreement (between the Group and the Service Provider) have been reviewed by a library attorney and the State Board of Accounts. Each agreement has been designed to incorporate new libraries at any time by amendment. The Total Group hours increase and potentially extend the length of time covered. Currently Xcel employs three technicians whose primary responsibility is servicing library accounts. Xcel also plans to hire a customer service representative to work exclusively with libraries and schools.

With the growth, communication guidelines have been established. The NICCL member libraries will meet a minimum of four times per year. An advisory group meets monthly with Xcel President Kevin McCarthy. This seven-member group sets the agenda for member meetings. Agenda items cover discussing training needs and demonstrations of new software from word processing to security to anti-viral to desktop management. The advisory group also explores interests common to the group and arranges presentations as appropriate. In May 1999 Indiana State Library Director Ray Ewick and Associate Director Martha Roblee gave a presentation on the definition of low-mid-high-future tech libraries, the State Library vision for libraries, and technology and distance learning.

SUMMARY

As the Group continues to grow, so does the list of benefits realized by having a common Service Provider. Regardless of size or number of computers or types of needs, each library has better opportunity to put into place efficient and effective means for connecting with local schools and other educational institutions and libraries in the state, in the nation, and around the world to provide the best possible learning environment for all, both as information providers (allowing access to on-line catalogs and local collections and resources) and information seekers.

NICCL MEMBERS AS OF MAY 1, 1999, AND POPULATION SERVED

Akron Public Library	2,615
Argos Public Library	3,630
Bell Memorial Public Library	3,590
Bourbon Public Library	4,164
Bremen Public Library	8,427
Bristol-Washington Township Public Library	5,136
Fulton County Public Library	14,870
Jasper County Public Library	23,023
Middlebury Community Public Library	13,321
Milford Public Library	4,260
Nappanee Public Library	5,510
New Carlisle Public Library	3,573
North Judson-Wayne Township Public Library	4,653
Plymouth Public Library	16,087
Pulaski County Public Library	9,838
Syracuse-Turkey Creek Twp. Public Library	7,695
Tipton County Public Library	16,119
Wakarusa Public Library	5,588
Warsaw Community Public Library	22,465

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