

Editorial Board Thoughts:

Tools of the Trade

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As I was trying to settle on a possible topic for this, my second “Editorial Board Thoughts” piece, I was struggling to find something that I’d like to talk about and that *ITAL* readers would (I hope) find interesting. I had my “Eureka!” moment one day as I was coming out of a meeting, thinking about a conversation that had taken place around tools.

Now, by tools, I’m referring not to hardware, but to those programs and applications that we can and do use to make our work easier. The meeting was of our institutional repository team, and the tools discussion specifically focused on data cleanup and normalization, citation integration, and the like.

I had just recently returned from a short conference where I had heard mentioned or seen demonstrated a few neat applications that I thought had potential. A colleague also had just returned from a different conference, excited by some of things that he’d learned about. And all of the team members had, in recent days, seen various e-mail messages about new tools and applications that might be useful in our environment.

We mentioned and discussed briefly some of the tools that we planned to test. One of the tools had already been test driven by a couple of us, and looked promising; another seemed like it might solve several problems, and so was bumped up the testing priority list.

During the course of the conversation, it became clear that each of us had a laundry list of tools that we wanted to explore at greater depth. And it also became clear that, as is so often the case, the challenge was finding the time to do so. As we were talking, my head was full of images of an assembly line, widgets sliding by so quickly that you could hardly keep up. I started thinking how you could stand there forever, overwhelmed by the variety and number of things flying by at what seemed like warp speed. Alternatively, if you ever wanted to get anywhere, do anything, or be a part of it all, you just had to roll up your sleeves and grab something.

The meeting drew to a close, and we all left with a sense that we needed to find a way of tackling the tools-testing process, of sharing what we learn and what we know, all in the hope of finding a set of tools that we, as a team, could become skilled with. I personally felt a little disappointed at not having managed to get around to all of the tools I’d earmarked for further investigation. But I also felt invigorated at the thought of being able to share the load of testing and researching. If we could coordinate ourselves, we might be able to test drive even more tools, increasing the

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likelihood we'd stumble on the few that would be just right! We'd taken furtive steps towards this in the past, but nothing coordinated enough to make it really stick and be effective.

I started wondering how other individuals and institutions manage not only to keep up with all of the new and potentially relevant tools that appear at an ever-increasing pace, but more so how they manage to determine which they will become expert at and use going forward. (Although I was excited at what we were thinking of doing, I was quite sure that others were likely far ahead of us in this regard!) It made me realize that at some point I—and we—need to stop being bystanders to the assembly line, watching the endless parade of tools pass us by. We need to simply grab on to a tool and take it for a spin. If it works for what we need, we stick with it. If it doesn't, we put it back on the line, and grab a different one. But at some point we have to take a chance and give something a shot.

We've decided on a few methods we'll try for taking full advantage of the tool-rich environment in which libraries exist today. Our metadata team has set up a "test bench," a workstation that we can all use and share for trying new tools. A colleague is going to organize monthly brown-bag talks at which team members can demonstrate tools that they've been working with and that they think have potential uses in our work. And we're also thinking of starting an informal, and public, blog, where we can post, among other things, about new tools we've tried or are trying, what we're finding works and how, and what doesn't and why.

We hope these and other initiatives will help us all stay abreast or even slightly ahead of new developments, be flexible in incorporating new tools into our workflows when it makes the most sense, and in building skills and expertise that benefit us and that can be shared with others.

So, I ask you, our *ITAL* readers, how do you manage the assembly line of tools? How do you gather information on them, and when do you decide to take one off and give it a whirl? How do you decide when something is worth keeping, or when something isn't quite the right fit and gets placed back on the line?

Why not let us know by posting on the [ITALica](#) blog? Or, even better, why not write about your experience and submit it to *ITAL*? We're always on the lookout for interesting and instructional stories on the tools of our trade!