

Simplifying sortation at the University of Kent

When the University of Kent library underwent a reorganisation, a strategic plan was put together to explore the use of technologies to help increase efficiencies in its core library activities. As a consequence, in January 2011, the library had an FX Sorter system from 3M installed. This nine bin model, complete with two public access points, sorts library materials into allocated bins and has become instrumental in the way the library operates.

Marcus Chester, Front Line Services Manager, Information Services at the University of Kent explains: "The sortation system was installed as part of an Information Services reorganisation and alongside our staff restructure. We decided on the 3M FX Sorter because of the following key advantages:

- The sorter identifies returned items reserved for other library users and sorts them into a dedicated bin
- The internal access points provide on-screen instructions making it easy for the students to use
- The sorter gently sweeps materials into the bins, preventing damage to the books and keeping noise levels down
- Items are returned to the shelves much more quickly ensuring speedy turnaround of high demand items.

"Although the library's Core Text collection is RFID equipped the bulk of the collections still use barcodes; our long term plan however is to introduce RFID tags across the entirety of our stock. For security the library uses electromagnetic (EM) technology, it was therefore vital that the sorter we chose could work efficiently with both EM and RFID tags. We tested a number of different products from various suppliers and found that the 3M solution was best equipped to handle both technologies.



"In some circumstances, the introduction of new technology can cause concern amongst staff regarding job security. However, library staff at the University of Kent have embraced the sortation system. They have seen the sorter as a change for the better and in particular it has made the task of returning items to the shelves much quicker and easier. Overall, automating a large amount of the returns process has resulted in a steadier and calmer working experience, whereas previously the returns workflows were prone to heavy spikes causing backlogs in the sorting process, which raised stress levels. It has also reduced the risk to our staff of repetitive strain injury and other associated health risks."

"The sorter exceeded our expectations in dealing with our ever-increasing amount of book returns and has freed staff from manual sorting. During our snapshot week, at the end of our Spring Term, we had a net saving of 1.5 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff placed on sorting activities. Returns are now a full two weeks ahead of our previous year, although staffing changes around our reorganisation did impact upon that as well."



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