

# Understanding the costs of digitisation

## A Briefing Paper

A JISC Digitisation Programme Briefing, November 2009

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**In the last decade, millions of pounds of public funding have been available to undertake digitisation, to create online services, and to develop valuable resources. This funding has resulted in the creation of a significant quantity of digital material, the deployment of a considerable ICT infrastructure, and the development of a body of expertise in the sector.**

**On the completion of Phase 2 of JISC's Digitisation Programme in 2009, Curtis+Cartwright were commissioned to look at some of the projects in the programme (and beyond). They hoped to gauge where the significant costs had been in the projects, some of which had received over a million pounds of funding. This briefing paper and the accompanying full report present the results of that study.**

Digitisation projects are unique, and many elements are interdependent. It is not possible to provide a formula (or even approximate figures) to cost a generic project. This paper highlights areas which are likely to require significant resource to complete, and suggests approaches which will minimise the risk of a project running into difficulties, and maximise the efficiency with which it can be conducted. This is supported by a detailed report that considers the issues in greater depth.

### Budget for project management

Project managers often have responsibility for multiple projects at once, or juggle their day to-day responsibilities with managing a project. However, if you are running a project on the scale of those undertaken within the JISC Digitisation Programme (ie £0.5M and greater, 24 months) you will need a full-time project manager. The scale of this task should not be underestimated, and whilst the project manager may be able to undertake some specific project activities (cataloguing, etc), they should not be committed to unrealistic targets.

To increase the chances of success of your project, it is important to recruit a project manager with a broad skill base, which includes an understanding of the technical aspects of the project.

### Recruiting staff can be challenging.

Digitisation projects are typically short-term, and some regions do not have an established pool of staff available to fill these contracts. It can be difficult to recruit skilled staff on short-term contracts, and it is even harder outside of

London and other major cities. This may even influence your overall approach to the project, including your decision whether to partner or sub contract. Difficulty in recruiting staff will have knock-on impacts on project schedule and budget.

### Staff grades can be contentious

Internal organisational bureaucracy is frequently cited as one of the major "headaches" of a digitisation project – particularly as you will likely be dealing with multiple departments (HR, IT etc). It can take significantly longer to get things done than anticipated, so early engagement and negotiations are crucial. Project managers have frequently found that negotiating and prompting internal departments is a very time consuming part of their role.

A particular problem is that university administration may have a different view to project directors of the grade that staff working on digitisations projects should be appointed to. Typically, institutions judged that the staff roles were technical rather than research, and graded the positions as appropriate, despite funding being available for the higher grade. This can cause delays in recruitment.

### Reduce uncertainty where possible

Collections that are not well understood (poorly indexed, heterogeneous) are difficult to digitise, and present particular problems when outsourcing digitisation. Effort spent upfront investigating the collection is helpful in reducing uncertainty.

The more that is known about the collection to be digitised, the better you will be able to plan the project. If the content is poorly understood (and this is not recognised upfront), it may end up costing more money and taking more time to complete the project, or you may not be able to digitise all of the content you had hoped to.

For example, if the content is in boxes – how many items are in a box, what state is it in, how homogeneous is the collection? Often the people managing the bid and project are not the ones who know the most about the collection. If you do not have this kind of information about your content, find out if anyone else does – eg the curator. If not, either take some time to understand it at the bid writing stage or plan the project to take this into account - eg allocate a contingency budget, plan a project review halfway through.

## The tools matter

It is important to consider the tools that will be used to catalogue collections, in detail and upfront. If digitisation is being sub-contracted, the contractor may be providing the cataloguing tool – the usability of this tool should be a criterion for selecting the contractor, and should be tested prior to contract award. Some suppliers will be flexible, and be willing to develop their tools during the project to meet the needs of the client. Inadequate tools will significantly hamper workflow throughput.

## Clearing Intellectual Property Rights can be very challenging.

Undertaking IPR clearance will require substantial effort and expertise – but may be worthwhile nonetheless. The approach to IPR is fundamentally tied to the objectives of a project, and must be considered early.

Two elements must be considered – the rights that the project (*ie* the institution holding the collection, in most cases) holds in the content, and the rights that the service will grant to its users at the conclusion of the project.

Projects that have opted to undertake rights clearance should carefully consider the staff skills, and workflows required to complete this successfully. Rights clearance is a specialist task, and will usually require specialist staff.

It may be possible to use rights clearance agencies or contractors, but the experiences of projects that have used these have not always been good; digitisation projects are outside their normal lines of business.

## Plan the service, not just the project

Digitisation projects usually end by transitioning to a service to make the content available online. The design of this service, both technical and aesthetic, should be considered in detail early in the project, as it will affect many other decisions.

Your website will be the main link between your content and your users, and is fundamental to the uptake of your service. Designing a website that is useful, informative, well presented, and accessible is challenging. Most service websites will require periodic updates – of content and design, and this might not be considered upfront.

Website design is a common element of a project to sub-contract to an external supplier, and in these circumstances, it is important to work closely with your delivery partner to ensure that they deliver a product that meets your needs. A

close working relationship is also important if a different team within your organisation is designing the website – they may not have the same contractual obligations, and may be less pressured to deliver an output with which you are happy.

## Expect media attention

If you have a collection that is of significant public interest, it is important to be aware that the launch of your service may capture the interest of the media. Whilst this is an excellent opportunity to publicise your service, it can be very time intensive giving interviews and attending events (perhaps taking up 1 – 2 months of time).

As this will happen in the latter stages of a project, it can interfere with any planned final tasks and project shutdown. This will be particularly problematic if the project manager and project staff are not being retained. It is therefore important to scope the interest of the media early in the project and plan your resource allocation. A plan should be in place for handling this, both in terms of staff time and technical capacity to handle demand.

## Finding out more

The full report

[www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/digitisation/reports/breakingcosts](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/digitisation/reports/breakingcosts)