

The complexity of success: rethinking library system migration through staff experience

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Abstract

A library system migration is usually judged at go-live. This exploratory survey received 35 responses from librarians at three Lithuanian academic libraries about their experience of moving from Aleph to Alma. By institutional criteria the migration succeeded, yet staff experience was mixed: while some respondents regained confidence within six months, for many, adjustment took longer. The paper argues that institutional metrics and staff experience are two distinct currencies of success: one cannot be read from the other. If staff experience is not counted separately, the record of a migration remains incomplete, and libraries plan future change from a partial picture.

Key words: librarians; organizational innovation; adaptation, psychological; surveys and questionnaires.

Introduction

Success at go-live means the system is running. It does not tell the library how long staff took to work confidently again, what the change cost them, or what should be done differently next time. Few libraries evaluate a migration once it is complete (1), and a library cannot learn from major system change if it collects information about the system but not about the people who make it work.

A library-system migration is not only a technical implementation but an organisational change that reshapes everyday work and continues beyond go-live (2). The definition of information-systems success has long included user satisfaction and organisational impact, not only technical delivery (3). In library migration research, however, staff still appear as a factor rather than a subject: Yeh and Walter (4) list managing staff emotions among ten critical success factors; Boss and Beisler (5) record staff difficulty as counts in a table and identify additional training as the main response.

This study began with an observation: while leaders saw the migration as a success, staff were less sure it had felt like one. It examines how librarians at three Lithuanian academic libraries experienced the move from Aleph to Alma, and what success measured at go-live leaves out.

Method

This retrospective exploratory survey was designed with possible wider use among institutions migrating later to Alma and now serves as pilot work for a planned larger study. Data were collected from the librarians involved using a self-developed questionnaire of closed- and open-ended questions.

The migration took place in 2021-2022, and the survey was conducted in 2025, several years after go-live. Responses therefore rest on self-reported recall rather than observation at the time. In total, 35 librarians across the three libraries responded. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The questionnaire covered emotional difficulty, professional confidence, time needed to feel confident in Alma, forms of support, and openness in talking with colleagues or managers. It also used terms such as cognitive overload, loss of mastery and migration trauma as descriptive prompts rather than validated measures, following earlier work that treats putting experience into words as part of sensemaking (6).

Closed responses were summarised descriptively, using simple counts and percentages. Open responses were reviewed only to identify clear matches with closed categories; they were not analysed further for this article.

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Results

What did the institutional metrics show?

By the project criteria used at the participating institutions, the migration was considered technically successful: Alma went live on time, the required data were migrated, and core library functions were available. These were real and measurable achievements, visible shortly after go-live.

What did staff experience show?

The staff responses showed a different side of the same migration. Twelve of 35 respondents (34%) described the migration as very or extremely difficult. Fourteen respondents felt reasonably confident working in Alma within six months; the remaining 21 took longer, including six who were still not fully confident at the time of the survey, three to four years after go-live. The concept that resonated most often was loss of mastery, selected by 13 respondents. The most common emotions were confusion and anxiety, each reported by 15 respondents, followed by frustration and stress, reported by 13 and 9 respondents respectively. Ten respondents described feeling motivated or excited by the challenge.

Respondents reported different effects on professional confidence: 11 felt more competent after learning new skills, 10 reported a minor effect and recovered quickly, eight doubted their abilities for a while, and six reported no real effect.

Respondents also varied in how openly they discussed the migration. Only four of 35 (11%) reported that they had talked openly and felt supported. Among the 12 respondents who found the migration very or extremely difficult, 11 either stayed silent or filtered what they shared, and none of the 13 who selected loss of mastery reported talking fully openly. Fifteen respondents (43%) selected only technical forms of support, such as more training or practice time.

Did naming the experience help?

Retrospectively, 26 respondents (74%) said that terms such as cognitive overload, loss of mastery and migration trauma helped them make sense of what they had experienced. When asked whether naming the experience during the migration would have helped, re-

sponses were genuinely divided: 11 (31%) said yes, 13 (37%) said no, and 11 (31%) were unsure.

Two currencies of success

The findings of this study suggest that the migration did not fail; rather, success was incompletely understood. The organisation and staff may both have measured migration success accurately, but they were counting different things. The library measured success through institutional gains: timeline met, system working, services improved. Staff experienced success through personal gains and losses: new skills and motivation for some, but also loss of mastery, confusion and a long period of adjustment for many (Figure 1).

	INSTITUTION	STAFF
GAINS	Timeline met ✓ System works ✓ New functionality ✓	New skills Motivation for some
COSTS	Alma licence fee	Loss of mastery Confusion / anxiety Extended adjustment

Fig. 1. Two currencies of migration success: an interpretive summary of institutional and personal outcomes.

These two currencies – institutional and personal – are connected, but they are not interchangeable: personal loss cannot be paid with institutional gain. A working system does not automatically restore a person’s professional confidence or compensate for months of stress. As one respondent put it, "a red Bounty bar would have helped restore emotional balance" – recognition that sees the person, not only the project. If staff experience differed from the institutional record, why did it remain less visible? Three patterns in the responses point to an answer. First, a timing mismatch: the organisation declared success at go-live when the main technical goals had been met, while staff adjustment had only just begun and continued for months or years. By the time many respondents felt confident again, the organisation had moved on to other projects. Second, silence: few respondents talked openly and felt supported, and those who struggled most appeared to say the least. In this context, silence

could easily be mistaken for acceptance. Third, language: even in a survey about emotional experience, many named only technical needs, as if technical language were more familiar than words for personal or professional cost.

These are not separate causes but symptoms of one underlying problem: staff cost was never built into the definition of success. This is not an argument about bad leadership or intentional neglect. Rather, it reflects a structural blind spot in how the migration was organised and evaluated. As a member of the implementation team at my own institution, I can say plainly why staff experience was never tracked: there was no formal task for it. Go-live had a checklist; staff adjustment did not. This is not unusual: in one survey of North American Alma libraries, the majority reported no formal post-migration evaluation (1).

There was no clear answer to whether naming the experience during the migration would have helped; responses were divided. Shared language may support sensemaking during disruptive change (6), but the findings do not show that naming alone would have changed the migration experience. Its value may instead lie in making the human cost visible and discussable.

Looking ahead

For future migrations, the implication is not to replace technical metrics with staff-experience indicators, but to count the second currency separately, because it cannot be read from the first. Three questions seem worth asking: how long adjustment actually takes, whether staff have the words to describe what the change cost them, and whether they feel able to raise difficulties openly.

Staff experience may be assessed before, during and after go-live. Asking staff before the migration gives a starting point for comparison, while repeated follow-up is needed because adjustment may continue long after the formal project has ended (2). Measured only at go-live, it captures the start of adjustment, not its course.

As pilot work, this study also showed where the instrument and analysis would need strengthening before a larger study is undertaken.

Several limitations should be noted. The study is small

(n=35), limited to three Lithuanian academic libraries and reliant on retrospective self-report, with possible self-selection and recall bias. The questionnaire was self-developed and not previously validated. The analysis is exploratory and descriptive: the sample does not support testing relationships between responses, so comparisons between groups of respondents are offered as observations rather than findings. The findings cannot be generalised.

The patterns are nonetheless consistent enough to raise a question worth asking. Can we call a migration successful if we only measure half of the experience? Systems do not succeed on their own; people make them work.

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Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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