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Vendor Evaluation

**Introduction to COMPanion Corp.**

COMPanion Corp. is a small Salt Lake City-based company with the mission to support librarians by “giving them the tools to share and promote their resources” (COMPanion Corp, “Our Story). COMPanion Corp’s flagship library automation software, Alexandria, was first created in 1990 and is currently in use by at least 428 library facilities, the majority of them school libraries (Marshall Breeding, n.d.). COMPanion Corp. also has a volunteer management software called KeepnTrack, and a textbook management software called Textbook Tracker. At least 91% of COMPanion Corp’s yearly sales are to school libraries, according to Library Journal (2005). The majority of COMPanion Corp.’s users are therefore school librarians and library media technicians, teachers, students in grades K-12, and school library volunteers.

**Alexandria**

Alexandria is a cross-platform ILS and can be run on either Macintosh or Windows systems. The minimum requirements to run Alexandria are Windows 7/Mac OS 10.9, with an X86 or X64 processor, at least 4GB or RAM, a harddrive with at least 20GB free, and a monitor with 1024x768 screen resolution. The Alexandria web interface furthermore supports the two most recent versions of the following browsers: Safari, Firefox, Chrome, Edge, Internet Explorer (COMPanion Corp, “System Requirements”).

Installing Alexandria is extremely easy: users have the option for a download link or a CD-ROM, and an installation wizard guides the user through initial set-up. Updates can be downloaded directly from the COMPanion Corp website or automatically through the ILS interface. With the release of Alexandria v7, users also have the option to switch to cloud hosting, eliminating the need for any installation at all: COMPanion Corp. hosts, maintains, and backs-up all the necessary files. According to COMPanion Corp, “over 1000 libraries” have switched from self-hosted to cloud-hosted (COMPanion Corp., “Alexandria Newsletter”). Alexandria also has several add-ons that can be purchased separately from the main ILS platform in order to integrate different services such as OverDrive, netTrekker, Capstone, NoveList, Accelerated Reader and Lexile (COMPanion Corp., “COMPanion Partners”).

Pricing differs depending on what kind of system is needed for an individual library. A user must purchase Alexandria (about $300) and then purchase an additional yearly software subscription to guarantee regular updates and/or upgrade and 24/7 technical support (about $500). Users may also choose to purchase additional customization, with the average being approximately $100 per add-on. COMPanion Corp. also has an Alexandria store which offers barcode readers and pre-printed/customizable barcodes to use within the system.

Users of Alexandria prefer it to other systems mostly because of its price (Brown, 2013). Alexandria is one of the cheapest systems available, while still being robust enough to support necessary library functions: circulation, fines and fees, OPAC, patron management, and cataloging (Capterra, n.d.). COMPanion Corp. provides various means of tech support, including a free, 24/7 live customer support line, email, a detailed FAQ and Wiki, free and paid Alexandria training classes, a regularly updated blog and newsletter, and Alexandria University, a free certification program for regular users of Alexandria.

**KeepNTrack**

 KeepNTrack is a management software for schools to help verify, track, and manage visitors, volunteers, and students. Visitors and volunteers sign in using their driver’s license or state ID, and a visitor’s badge is automatically printed with their name and purpose of visit (COMPanion Corp., “Visitor Management”). It is web-based, which means it can run from almost any web-enabled computer, laptop, or tablet, and it can furthermore be run from either an attended kiosk or a self-serve kiosk. Pricing is customized depending on the size of the facility and perceived needs of the user(s).

KeepNTrack has a multitude of features meant to promote safety and security. For instance, KeepNTrack automatically runs sex offender checks on every visitor, and provides background checks on volunteer applicants (COMPanion Corp., “KeepNTrack FAQ”). Features for student management include keeping track of who is allowed to sign a student in and out of school, sending email or text message alerts when a student is signed in/out, and keeping track of tardies.

Like Alexandria users, KeepNTrack users have many avenues of support, including a 24/7 support phone line, training webinars and classes, a detailed FAQ and wiki, and a frequently updated blog and newsletter. COMPanion Corp. also has a KeepNTrack shop where users can purchase blank badge labels in a variety of colors, a badge printer, a USB camera, ID cards, and scanners.

Users of KeepNTrack seem on the whole to be satisfied with the application, though there are questions about where the background check information actually comes from, and complaints about certain features only working on Windows systems (CrowdReviews, “KeepNTrack Reviews”). Price satisfaction is split, with some users happy with pricing and others thinking it’s overpriced. Pricing is determined individually by school/business and based on what their needs, so larger facilities who have more visitors/volunteers may be hit by a higher price point. Other complaints include clunky software, frequent freezing or timing out, and miscommunication between the software and the hardware (TrustPilot, “KeepNTrack Reviews”).

**Textbook Tracker**

Textbook Tracker is COMPanion Corp.'s textbook management software, available for both Macintosh and Windows machines. Visually, the program interface looks identical to Alexandria, but its focus is entirely on circulating and managing textbooks. Textbook Tracker has many similar features to Alexandria, including being able to check textbooks in/out to patrons, generating reports for overdue books and fines, and cataloging new textbooks. It has some additional features as well, including a “Central Union solution” which reports available materials between schools in a district (COMPanion Corp., “Reports”). This allows schools to check district-wide inventory levels. Students and parents can use the “Textbook Tracker WEB” to keep track of which textbooks they have checked out and when they are due back (COMPanion Corp, “WEB”).

As with Alexandria and KeepNTrack, there are numerous training videos, Wiki docs, newsletters, and 24/7 tech support available for users to peruse. COMPanion Corp. also has a Textbook Tracker store which supplies hardware and accessories to go along with the program. The following is currently available for purchase: four kinds of barcode scanners, including a portable version, a checkout/due date slip printer, and two types of pre-printed barcode labels.

Users of Textbook Tracker like the easy-to-use interface, but there are again some complaints about the pricing (CrowdReviews, “Textbook Tracker”). The pricing structure is dependant upon size and needs of the facility, so larger school districts may have to pay significantly more than a single school or smaller district.

**Vendor Evaluation**

As a charter school library, we need software that is flexible, customizable, and affordable. Alexandria is a good option for our ILS, as it has the basic functionality that we need for our library (circulation, fines and fees, patron and book management) with additional customizable modules we can integrate into the system for added functionality. The AR/Lexile module, for instance, would let students find books within their reading range easily within the catalog, while also giving parents and teachers an additional option for finding new reading materials for their students.

Similarly, Textbook Tracker would be useful for managing our various textbooks, allowing teachers, students and parents to track and manage their textbooks as well as allowing the administrators (and librarian) to see what books need to be reordered at the end of the year. KeepNTrack, meanwhile, would be great for managing and tracking our volunteers, as well as keeping track of students. Its various safety features would not only help keep our students safe, but they would reassure parents and administrators that those with criminal backgrounds be kept out of the school facilities. All these products are highly affordable for our school, are easy to install and maintain, and would increase our book and student management functionality immensely. Furthermore, COMPanion Corp.’s various stores offers affordable hardware that will work across all their software, including scanners, barcodes, and ID printers.

That said, there are a few negative aspects of COMPanion Corp. They are somewhat prone to over inflating their user base, at least based on the numbers provided by the COMPanion Corp. website vs. the numbers on professional library websites like Marshall Breeding. According to COMPanion Corp., for instance, “over 10,000 libraries” use Alexandria (COMPanion Corp., “Alexandria”), while Marshall Breeding has that count at only 428 (n.d.). Some of the difference may come from the majority of Alexandria’s users being school libraries, alternate library facilities such as prison libraries, and church libraries, most of which don’t seem to be listed on the Marshall Breeding website. Still, the difference between the two numbers is large, and there doesn’t seem to be an explanation for the discrepancy.

This potentially smaller user base might explain why, despite “thousands” of users, there are very few reviews of COMPanion Corp.’s software, professional or otherwise. There are little to no professional reviews of Alexandria, KeepNTrack, or Textbook Tracker published within the last 10 years. There are a decent amount of amateur reviews, however, especially on websites like TrustPilot which has over 300 for Alexandria alone. Individual users seem happy with their software, but their purchases have not been verified and tend to be lax on detail as to why they are happy.

That said, despite the over-inflation of numbers and low amount of reviews, many schools use COMPanion Corp. software and the majority of their reviews are positive. COMPanion Corp. software will be easy for administrators (and students) to learn to use, and all the necessary functions we need for the library as well as an additional function for the office. COMPanion Corp.’s tech support is also a good fit as it will allow us to be in contact no matter what day or time we may need them. And finally, COMPanion Corp. has the right mix of pricing and ease of use that will work well in our charter school and enable us to enhance our user’s connection to books, textbooks, and the school itself.

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