

Your Key to a Successful Automated System
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The most important tool you have when you are developing an automated library system is your MARC load table. Know it, love it, and it will take care of you. Today's automated library systems look easier to use than their predecessors, but they still use MARC records (or should!) as the building blocks to create your bibliographic records. "What does that mean to me?", you may ask. It means that you still need to develop a thorough understanding of MARC21 coding to get your catalog records to look and function properly. The fact that your new library system looks easier to use does not necessarily mean that the underpinnings are any less complicated than they were in previously released products.

The MARC load table controls the placement of information taken from MARC records as they enter your library system. If you purchase MARC records from a vendor, or have an output file of your MARC records from a previous system, you will need to load the records into your new library system. To load the records properly, you have to configure the library software product's MARC load table. Make sure your library software vendor explains the MARC load table in the new product so that you understand what it is and how to change it. If the vendor does not allow you to change it, make sure you have a contact person on the vendor's staff that can make changes for you. Different vendors set up the MARC load table differently, so make certain your vendor explains how your data are loaded and how to change the information if the current set-up does not suit your library's needs.

Be aware of localized information that you need to discuss with your library automation software vendor, such as branch library locations, satellite locations and sub-locations within the main library collection, as well as call number prefixes or suffixes. These types of information are handled differently from one library automation system to the next.

Ask your vendor to tell you what you need to know about the process of setting up your automated library system in general, and your MARC load table in particular. Do not wait for them to bring the subject to the table. Their "out-of-the-box" MARC load table might be sufficient for loading your data, but you will find it much less painful to set the table up properly before the load than to attempt to fix problems after records have been loaded. Asking vendors to speak directly to each other on your library's behalf is frequently effective, if you feel that you have not been able to convey pieces of information to and from your vendors. MARC records and MARC load tables are powerful tools, best used by those in the know.