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A Study of the Usefulness of Pakistan Library Automation Group's (PakLAG) Services

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Introduction

Library automation in Pakistan is in its infancy. Major constraints in this regard include absence of planning, software/hardware problems, lack of cooperation, lack of competent and willing manpower, non-existence of standards, financial limitations and absence of consultants and experts (Haider, 1998). Pakistan Library Automation Group (PakLAG), a not-for-profit trust, came into existence in year 2000, when some young professionals from the field of Library & Information Science wanted to institutionalize their volunteer work to overcome the obstacles in the way of library automation. Lahore based activity soon spread all over the country and volunteers from other provinces and cities joined the efforts to promote the use of ICTs in libraries. During the last eight years, PakLAG organized its chapters in all four provinces and federal capital. There is no membership fee and no official sponsorship. The idea was to achieve the objectives by promoting the self-reliance and economical solutions. PakLAG is carrying out various activities to achieve the following objectives:

- To provide professional and technical advice to libraries, information centers and documentation centers in their development programs.
- To recommend training programs for librarians so as to help them to develop, update and automate their libraries and documentation centers.
- To develop library automation and capacity building programs.
- To coordinate library development activities in the country with national as well as international development agencies and institutions.
- To provide information and conduct research studies on library development.
- To provide platform to the information professionals for the exchange of views, sharing of experiences, networking among libraries as well as to develop consensus upon the common issues faced by the profession.
- To provide research support and policy recommendations to government at all levels and to legislative bodies in the formation of policies regarding the libraries and information services (Pakistan Library Automation Group, 2009).

Activities and Services of PakLAG

Following are the major activities and services of PakLAG (Iqbal, 2008; Mahmood, Khan & Siddique, 2008; Pakistan Library Automation Group, 2009):

- *PakLAG Website:* The group maintains a website (www.paklag.org). Until May, 2009 this website was visited more than 76,000 times (Figure 1).
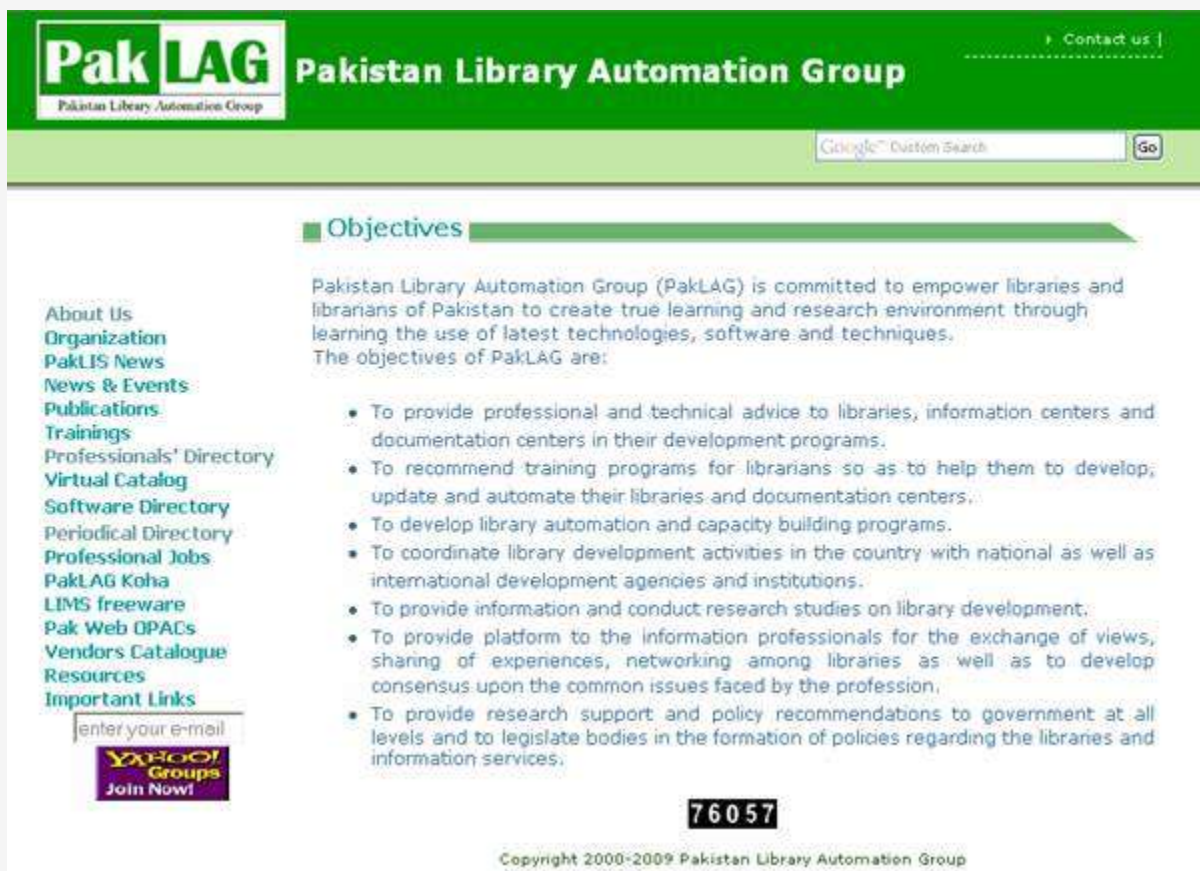
Figure 1. PakLAG Website

- *Library Information Management System (LIMS).* Based on MS-Access this free software automates library housekeeping routines including cataloging, circulation and reporting. It also facilitates the use of barcode technology. PakLAG team also extends training and support in the use of LIMS. It is being used in more than 200 academic, special and public libraries not only in Pakistan but also in the Middle East. A unique feature of this software is that it has been designed, developed, implemented and tested by library professionals without any help from computer experts.
- *PakLAG Web OPAC and Digital Library Software.* This is a web based application, consists of OPAC and digital library, to be connected with LIMS and provides remote access to library resources. It is a Java Server Pages and MySQL based application.
- *PakLAG Data Converter.* Retrospective conversion of data of legacy ILS is a daunting task while implementing library automation system. This converter converts data from CDS/ISIS format of Library Automation Management Program (LAMP), first DOS based Integrated Library System

developed with financial support of Netherlands Library Development Program. PakLAG distributes the converter free of cost and also provides its training.

- *Plagpk Mailing List.* Mailing lists are tools of social networking. The PakLAG's plagpk mailing list is the first list in LIS field in Pakistan. In May 2009 it had membership of 2174 LIS professionals working in Pakistan and abroad. It circulated 6352 messages among the library professionals by May 5, 2009. LIS professional discuss professional issues, exchange personal news, and share resources through this list.
- *Free Library Automation Consultancy.* PakLAG provides free library automation consultancy to the libraries through phone, email and personal visits. More than 200 libraries got benefit of this service.
- *PakLAG Koha.* Koha is a web based multilingual Integrated Library System to cater automation needs of medium to large libraries. It is customized version of open source software Koha 2.2.8 for windows. According to a survey there were approximately 300 libraries around the world using Koha. PakLAG Koha satisfies all the functional requirements of a library management system. It is full-featured MARC based Integrated Library System customized to cater the needs of Pakistani libraries. The user friendly interfaces of PakLAG Koha provide ease of use with great flexibility. Virtual keyboards for Urdu,Arabic,Persian Sindhi, Baluchi and Pashto languages and export of MARC records in local languages are the unique features of this software. Four libraries have implemented this solution so far.
- *LIS Professionals' Directory.* Online directory of LIS professionals can be searched by name, organization or city. Directory members can update their information by themselves. It can be used for resource sharing because it provides contact information of each member. It has more than 650 entries.
- *Virtual Catalog.* A multilingual web OPAC with virtual keyboards of seven languages i.e Urdu, Arabic, Persian, Sindhi, Pushto, Baluchi and Saraiki make it useful for not only library professionals but also general public even for those who are not English literate. It aims to promote the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and reading habits among the people especially, living in remote areas. It will cover library material of all types, published in and about Pakistan, and material published in Urdu and other regional languages all over the world. Its objectives include (a) To provide bibliographic control of material published in and about Pakistan, (b) To provide MARC (Urdu and local languages) record for copy cataloging, and (c) To work as collection development tool for library professionals. There are more than 10,000 entries so far.
- *Library Software Directory.* It provides information about library software being used in Pakistan. It is very useful source for researchers doing research on library automation, use of ICTs and library professionals who want to automate their libraries. Software information of 140 libraries is included.
- *Open Access Periodical Directory.* This directory covers open access journals, magazines, newsletters, yearbooks, annual reports, etc published in any language or discipline by any institution of Pakistan. Each entry provides information on title, publisher, city of publication, ISSN, language, online availability date, subject, format (green or gold), and link (URL) to periodical's website. By now 145 periodicals have been entered and can be searched by title, publisher, city and subject.
- *Pak Web OPACs.* PakLAG has listed web-based Online Public Access Catalogs. The entries include 21 ILS based OPACs and 14 OPACs using Library of Congress Gateway's search interface.
- *Vendors Catalogs.* PakLAG provides the list the Pakistani vendors' online catalogs that are useful for the acquisition of library material. There are only 14 vendors who facilitate their customers to search their collections.
- *Resources (Presentations, Manuals, etc).* PakLAG uploads presentations given by various LIS experts and other material useful for LIS students and professionals.
- *Training.* Keeping in view the emerging trends and technological developments, PAKLAG is actively engaged in the capacity building and human resource development activities. PakLAG organized training on state of the art library tools and technologies including LIMS, Zebra Server,

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MarcEdit, Data Converter, Endnote, PakLAG Web OPAC and Digital Library Software and Greenstone. Many workshops, seminars, lectures, internships and short term attachments have been arranged for LIS professionals.

- *Professional Jobs.* PakLAG has been uploading job advertisements of professional posts. It covers job information appeared in national dailies, sent by employers and LIS professionals in Pakistan and abroad.
- *PakLIS News.* Pak-LIS News is the first online newsletter of the library profession published in Pakistan.
- *Publication Program:* A PhD dissertation has been published. Some software user manuals have also been electronically published on CD-ROM.
- *Survey of ICT Training Needs:* Conducted a survey of Pakistani librarians to design future training program. The results were published in an international journal (Mahmood & Khan, 2007)

Objectives and Methods of Study

The objectives of this study were to:

- Find the perceptions of LIS community about usefulness of the services offered by PakLAG
- Seek suggestions from the user community to improve the quality of services.

The survey method was used to achieve the study's objectives. A short questionnaire was prepared to collect data. The data collection instrument included demographic information of respondents (city and organization type). A list of 15 services was provided with a 6-point rating scale to measure perceptions on the usefulness of services. An empty space for suggestion to improve the quality of services was also provided. The questionnaire was sent through PakLAG email discussion group. A web based survey form was also used for data collection (SurveyMonkey). Telephone calls were also made for reminder where possible. Two hundred and seven usable responses were included in the analysis.

Results

Library practitioners of all types, LIS faculty and students participated in the study (n=207). Their area wise distribution (Table 1) shows that most of them were from Punjab province (49%). The second largest number of participants were from Sindh province (26%). Another larger group was from federal capital Islamabad (18%).

Table 1. Area wise distribution of the respondents

Rank	Area	Percent
1	Punjab	49
2	Sindh	26
3	Islamabad	18
4	NWFP	5
5	Foreign countries	1

Most of the participants were from university libraries (both public and private) (50%). The second largest group was LIS faculty and students from various universities in Pakistan (19%). Another group belonged to special libraries (14%). The results show that PakLAG also had its users in foreign countries although they responded in less number (Table 2).

Table 2. Type of organization of the respondents

Rank	Organization type	Percent
1	University libraries	50
2	LIS schools	19
3	Special libraries	14
4	College libraries	10
5	Public libraries	3
6	National library	2
7	School libraries	1

Perceptions of the participants about the usefulness of PakLAG services were measured through a 6-point rating scale (very useful, mostly useful, useful, somewhat useful, not useful and don't know about service). The percent responses for all categories are given in Table 3. The results reveal that the participants found most of the services useful for their work. The most popular services include LIMS software, plagpk mailing list and information about professional jobs. The results also show that some users were still ignorant about many services rendered by PakLAG.

The open space provided for suggestions to improve the quality of PakLAG services was used by 120 participants. Most of them praised the PakLAG's efforts to help library community in using ICTs. Major suggestions given by a large number of respondents are:

1. PakLAG should market its services in a professional manner.
2. Mailing list should be filtered by the moderators. Only important and relevant professional messages should be released.
3. PakLAG website should be improved.
4. More training courses and workshops on various topics of library automation should be arranged.
5. Information on LIS jobs, PakLIS News and Directory of LIS professionals should be updated regularly.
6. LIMS software should be updated according to the changing needs of local libraries.
7. A career counseling service should be started for LIS students and new graduates.
8. A directory of libraries in Pakistan should be developed and made available on PakLAG website.
9. PakLAG network should be expanded to other cities.

Table 3. Percent response on various PakLAG services

PakLAG Service	Very useful	Mostly useful	Useful	Somewhat useful	Not useful	Don't know about service
LIMS Free Software	47	20	20	2	1	10
PakLAG Web OPAC and Digital Library Software	35	25	24	1	1	13
PakLAG Data Converter	21	15	23	7	1	32
Plagpk (Mailing List)	47	19	20	3	0	11
Free Library Automation Consultancy	43	21	18	5	1	13
PakLAG Koha	22	20	23	8	1	25
Professionals' Directory	40	21	20	7	2	10
Virtual Catalog	27	25	24	7	2	15
Software Directory	31	20	21	9	2	17
Periodical Directory	26	30	18	6	1	18
Pak Web OPACs	27	24	25	4	2	19
Vendors Catalog	24	25	24	7	1	19
Resources (Presentations, Manuals etc)	28	26	21	7	1	18
Professional Jobs	46	19	20	5	2	8
PakLIS News	40	23	19	7	2	10

Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that the library and information community in Pakistan found the services rendered by PakLAG very useful in their work. They praised the level and standard of services. They commended the volunteer efforts of PakLAG team to help library community in using ICTs. The feedback of users of PakLAG services will help in improving the quality of services. This market survey has also been successful to get ideas for launching new services. This study is also a source of motivation for the team of volunteers.

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