A Tale of Three Libraries:  
Key Factors in Successful Online Collaborative Projects

Mary Jo Lazun  
Head of Electronic Services  
Maryland State Law Library  
mjlazun@mdcourts.gov

Sarah Rhodes  
Digital Collections Librarian  
Georgetown University Law Library  
sjr36@law.georgetown.edu

Dee Dee Dockendorf  
Assistant Law Librarian  
Virginia State Law Library  
ddockendorf@courts.state.va.us.

The Chesapeake Project is a collaborative effort of the Georgetown University Law Library and the state law libraries of Maryland and Virginia to preserve born-digital collections. Early on, the project encountered a series of major setbacks, but thanks to the shared commitment of the participating libraries it moved forward. The factors contributing to this success are not unique to this project and can be easily adopted by other libraries wishing to embark on collaborative initiatives.

Program Outline

Project Background: The Chesapeake Project is a demonstration project implemented under the auspices of the Legal Information Preservation Alliance.

Obstacles to Success

1. Three very different libraries
2. Loss of the project visionary
3. Complete change of system

Key Factors in Successful Collaboration Projects

1. A fundamental commitment to the project goal.  
   For a collaborative project to succeed, all members must have a fundamental commitment to the project. Although our libraries have been happy to assume a leadership role among the law library community in preserving born-digital materials, The Chesapeake Project did not emerge from a desire for trend-setting or garnering publicity for our libraries. Rather, all three libraries have committed to work together toward a feasible, collaborative, and long-term solution to what we believe to be a crucial problem facing our profession, our patrons, and the larger – even global – communities in which we operate. Harvesting a publication from the Web and preserving it within a digital archive amounts to saving a key legal document from certain extinction. This is powerful motivation.

2. Management commitment  
   Our management shares this commitment and is willing to staff and budget for it. We are not working with grants or temporary employees; our collaborative project is part of our budgets and part of our performance evaluations.

3. Project is directly tied to the library’s mission  
   Unless the project is directly tied the core mission, it becomes an easy target when time comes to cut budgets or staff.

4. The project work compliments current work processes.  
   The project needs to integrate with current library workflows. A new initiative might represent a new or different way to doing things but should not require a complete re-tooling of work processes.

5. A talented project manager  
   For a collaborative project to succeed there must be a point person from the start. This point person should not be a busy librarian who has been asked to take on the job of project manager
as yet another “duty as assigned,” but someone who can make this project his/her first priority. It is also important to point out that if a good person is assigned from the start, the time commitment to project management will decrease and the work becomes part of staff members’ day-to-day duties.

6. Flexibility and Creativity
When trying anything new, those involved must be willing to be flexible. We have seen this in working with catalogers. We have not changed AACR2 but we have found ways to make it really work for us.

7. Face Time
Communication is always key, and a great deal of work can be done via email and phone. But there is no substitute for face-to-face meeting.

8. The outcome is useful
Even if all the above items are met, unless the goal of the project is to produce something of use, it will be hard to sustain. In our case, the items we have harvested are used by staff daily and patrons often. We not only see the fruits of our labor but taste them too.