



Meal Plan 5

“We’re Booked Through January:” PC Reservation/Time Management Software

You run the best place in town. Everyone wants to eat there, especially during the dinner rush. You need to keep turnover brisk, but you don’t want to offend your customers and push them out the door before they’re finished eating. So how are you going to manage demand for computing resources when you’ve got lines three people deep waiting for the next workstation? How do you ensure fair and equal access for everyone while still allowing patrons the time they need to complete their work? If someone just needs to check their email, will you have quick access stations with shorter time limits?

In this section, you’ll find three different approaches to reserving computers and enforcing time limits: no system at all, a sign-up sheet or a software solution. Also included is a comprehensive list of features and criteria to consider should you decide to buy PC Reservation software.

TOPICS TO BE COVERED:

- Computer Reservations and Time Limit Options
- What to Look for When Buying PC Reservation/Time Management Software



Computer Reservations and Time Limit Options

FIRST COME, FIRST SERVE: NO TIME LIMITS

If your library is blessed with abundant resources, you can let patrons use your computers for as long as they like. If all your computers are in use, patrons simply have to wait until someone else leaves. If you choose this option, you should probably set aside one or more machines as “quick-use” stations, especially if your card catalog is automated. The time limit on this type of computer is usually 10 or 15 minutes, which ensures constant turnover. Fifteen minutes is long enough for most folks to check their e-mail, do a quick Google search or search your online catalog. Frequently, these quick-use stations don't have chairs to encourage patrons to do their work quickly. Some libraries have both quick-use stations and “catalog-only” kiosks.



Notes from
a Chef

Setting and Sticking to Time Limits

“We just tell them it's an hour and remind them if they forget how long they've been on. We occasionally get a teenager in who doesn't quite like to follow the rules, but generally speaking, everybody's good about getting off when their time is up. [Time management systems] are pretty expensive, and we're not sure we need to spend the money on that unless we're really having a big problem, which we aren't usually.”

*Barbara Stewart
Capitan Public Library, Capitan, NM*

A HOME-GROWN SYSTEM: SIGN-IN SHEETS

If you have just a handful of public access computers and they're all in one location, it makes sense to use an informal sign-in sheet or an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of patron computer usage. Modoc County Library has implemented a time-management system that's similar to the process of checking out a book, a solution that didn't require expensive software. When a library patron wishes to use one of the computers, he or she must visit the front desk and sign up for a time slot. A library staff member then “checks out” the computer and hands the user a slip, which is due back in one hour (<http://maintainitproject.org/librarytips>). With either of these solutions, you'll need to decide:

- Whether you take reservations over the phone.
- How far in advance someone can reserve a computer.
- How many hours a week they can reserve.



Notes from
a Chef

Flexible Hours

“You know, I really have the most agreeable bunch of people. I don’t have timing software on my computers. I have an hour limit, but if I’m not busy, if I don’t have a lot of people waiting, or if someone is filing for unemployment, or filing their taxes, or doing something of that nature, all they do is tell me what they need to do, and I give them two, three hours to do it. We are 55 miles from the nearest Kinko’s, which is 110 miles round trip for somebody to go and access another public computer.”

*Kristen Freeman
Humboldt County Library, CA*



Notes from
a Chef

Equitable Access for All

“Right now we have little pieces of paper floating around, and then somebody comes in and they want a computer, and you’ve got to kind of look through all your pieces of paper and say, ‘Well, now, what time does person X get off of their computer? They’ve had an hour and now I’ve got somebody who’s waiting or I’ve got two somebodys or three somebodys or four somebodys.’ And I’m just juggling these pieces of paper or a list or whatever you’d want to call it. Wherever you have a limited resource and a high demand, you’ve got to be sure you’re providing as equitable an access to the resource as possible, and the way we do it now is with a limit of one hour per person per day, unless they’re doing homework, and then they get two hours. It’s just a lot of paper shuffling when you’re trying to just make sure that everybody’s gotten their time [who] needs to get their time and you also are trying to serve the other people who are sitting around waiting, so it’s hard to keep everybody happy sometimes.”

*Sara Paulk
Fitzgerald-Ben Hill County Library, GA*

PC RESERVATION/TIME MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

There are several competing vendors in this market, and PC Reservation software is often expensive, so put some thought and effort into this decision. In the long run, Reservation software can save you and your staff thousands of hours of tedious and frustrating work. Moreover, a surly patron can ignore or backtalk a librarian who’s trying to get her off of a computer at the end of her session, but she can’t ignore software that automatically logs her off after an hour.



**Notes from
a Chef**

PC Reservation

“We have a person from Auburn University, and I was telling him we needed some kind of a time management program, but we didn't want to spend a great deal of money and have a ton of features, like most of the commercial products that are out there. So he's been working with us for about two years designing and refining a time management program so that it does just what we need to do, and that's a help. It's called LibShield. He has sold that to a good many libraries, in Alabama, especially. So we were kind of his testing ground.

We decided we wanted our patrons to have a library card to be able to use the computer. Of course, we do have some guests coming in, so we ask for picture ID and we give them a guest number. But when a patron wants to use the computers for the first time, we put their name and their library card number, or the last six digits, into a database, and then when they sit down at a computer, they type in those numbers and press Enter and a timer begins. They're into the computer, and they can do everything they want to do. After an hour, it will go back to the original screen, but they can put their number in again if we're not busy. On our end, we're able to see how many minutes they have been on the computer. So once all the computers get full and we've got a few people waiting, we can go to the people who have been on the longest and give them five more minutes so they can finish up and get off, and then we put a new person on. So it's a way of being fair.”

*Dianne Ballantine
Auburn Public Library, Auburn, AL*



**Notes from
a Chef**

No Reservations About Reservation Software

“Reference staff used to say that they felt more like waiters and waitresses than librarians when having to manage the public access computers and take reservations. PC Reservation frees them up to have really meaningful interactions with the customers.”

*Aimee Fifarek
Scottsdale Public Library, Scottsdale, AZ*

“Well, of course they are never going to be happy unless they could get on there at 8 o'clock in the morning and still be on when we leave — just to be frank and honest with you — but we have not had any complaints. Before, we had to tell them, ‘Now, It's time to get off,’ and they resented us saying ‘Your time is up,’ but when that comes up on the computer and says your time is expiring, they don't question it. They just get up and leave, and it's wonderful. We don't make enemies that way.”

*Betty Worley
Sequatchie County Public Library, Dunlap, TN*



Notes from a Chef

Tracking Time and Usage with EnvisionWare

“I know in Anderson, in the beginning, before they received EnvisionWare, their patrons would have to come and sign up on a piece of paper and put down the time when they were going to log onto the computer. And then it did take a lot of manual work by the staff to ensure that the computers were being used for their regular allotted amount of time. [Using EnvisionWare] they can't get onto another computer and get another hour out of it. The system tracks through their library card. Everybody needs to have a library card or a guest pass to log on. So it's enforced a little more.”

*Kari Piazza
Shasta Public Library, CA*



Notes from a Chef

A Timeout for Timers

“The town IT person was here today, and I had decided to ask him to remove the timers (Fortress). Patrons are just too irritated when the computers start counting down their time and are outraged when they get ‘timed-out.’ They never seemed to notice the clock (in red) or the messages, and then leave fuming that they've lost all their work. We'll see how many online public access catalog (OPAC) sitters we have and if they gracefully relinquish their access upon request.”

Anonymous commenter on <http://www.maintainitproject.org/blog>

PC Reservation and Timing Approach Comparison

| SOLUTION | COST | TIME AND LABOR |
|---|-----------------|---|
| No Time Limits Sign-in Sheets | \$0 | Variable, but you may spend a lot of time explaining to patrons why they have to wait so long for a computer. |
| Home-Grown System (i.e., a sign-in sheet) | \$0 | Your staff has to take all the reservations and has to enforce the time limits. |
| PC Reservation/Time Management Software | \$500 to \$2000 | Depends on your setup, but with the right configuration, you can almost eliminate the time your staff spends managing reservations and time limits, but be mindful of training requirements for your staff. |



What to Look for When You're Buying PC Reservation/Time Management Software

The following list considers some of the major features offered by PC Reservation/Time Management software vendors. When you're out shopping, be sure to ask about the specific features that you want to implement and test them out, if possible.

Time limits and usage tracking — If you have lots of computers in different rooms within a single building or across different buildings, do you want to enforce a daily or weekly time limit across all your machines in all locations? Using a paper sign-in sheet or a shared spreadsheet means you'll be relying on your librarians to ensure that every patron has equal access to your public computers. A patron hoping to get around your time limits can move from one department or franchise to another, or simply wait until another librarian is on the desk. Having a centralized reservation system with usage tracking allows you to set daily or weekly limits on patrons' computer use at the branch level or the system level.

Pre-booking and self-reservation — Most reservation systems have pre-booking and self-reservation functionality. In other words, patrons can sign themselves up for time on the library's computers. These systems usually have a Web interface, so someone can reserve a slot from home or anywhere else with an Internet connection. Of course, librarians can also sign in patrons who walk up to the circulation desk without a reservation. It's not uncommon for larger libraries to dedicate one or two workstations to self-reservation so that someone who's already in the library can reserve a spot without taking up staff time.

Patron authentication — By far, the easiest way to implement time limits and pre-booking is to tie your PC reservation system into your existing database of patron records. This way, patrons use their existing library card number and PIN to reserve time slots on the computer and sign in to the workstation. Talk to both your ILS vendor and your PC Reservation software vendor to make sure that integration works smoothly between the two systems, and ask about how much assistance each one will provide if something goes wrong. Usually, compatibility requires that both systems use the same communication protocol (e.g., SIP2 or NCIP).



Notes from
a Chef

Patron Authentication at Its Best

"Our library cards are authenticated, so someone could walk up if they have a library card and reserve a computer. There's very little staff intervention. We do have some temporary passes for people if they're just passing through and don't have a card."

*Greta Lehnerz
Natrona County Public Library, Casper, WY*

Reporting features — Can you easily create reports for yourself, library administrators, trustees and the public? Keeping records of computer usage and presenting the charts and graphs to local funding agencies is a great way to advocate on behalf of your library and make the case for increased technology budgets.



Different reservation policies for different computers — Although many libraries enforce a single reservation policy across all of their public access computers, others prefer to suit the policy to the purpose of the computer. For instance, on standard Internet access computers, patrons can reserve one-hour blocks. However, the library may designate a few workstations for research only or for resume building and job searching. On these PCs, patrons can reserve two-hour blocks. On the other hand, there may be some walk-up/quick-use computers with 15-minute limits. Generally, patrons can't reserve these machines in advance. When all of the computers in the library are reserved, the turnover at these quick-use stations is much faster than at other stations.

Can patrons continue to use the computer when no one is waiting? Some inexpensive reservation systems log a patron out of their session when their time is up, regardless of whether another person is waiting for that machine. Or they enforce daily or weekly limits, regardless of whether there are free computers available. Does your system look ahead and allow patrons to continue their work when the computer hasn't been reserved? Also, if someone signs up for a computer at four o'clock, will your software look at the reservations during the three to four o'clock time block and find a machine that isn't being used? If your system can do this, it allows patrons to keep working past the end of their session.

Does the system give patrons time to save their work before logging them off? A good feature to look for is the ability to set a 10- to 15-minute warning before the system automatically blocks access. This way, the patron knows that the session is coming to an end and can save their work onto a Flash drive or other device and not risk losing it.




Why It's Nice to Have a Little Warning

"I have it set for 60 minutes, and that's our normal setting. After that 60 minutes, the machine automatically logs off. Every now and then we kind of have that frustrated patron, and I'm really sorry to say there's no way I can go in and add more minutes to that machine before it logs off. We have had a few frustrated patrons that were right in the middle of doing something and, you know, lost it."

*Annie Adamson
Caldwell Public Library, Caldwell, ID*

How long will you hold a reserved computer? If patrons are waiting in line for the next available machine and there's an empty seat because someone else didn't show up, they may get a bit restless. Some libraries will hold a computer for 10 or 15 minutes, after which, the machine is freed up for someone else. How does the system you're looking at handle this situation?

Does the software allow you to penalize patrons who consistently fail to arrive for their assigned slots? Usually, the punishment consists of a loss of reservation or computer use privileges for a designated period of time. As with all punitive measures, you should consider carefully the benefits versus the risk of alienating patrons.



Bundling — Buying all your patron management software from one vendor may cost less in the long run and allow for greater integration between different components. In other words, many vendors will bundle PC Reservation/Time Management software, print management software, computer lockdown tools and disk protection utilities.

Hardware and Operating System Requirements — What types of computing resources will your PC Reservation system require? Do you need to buy a new server, or can you run the software on one of your existing machines? Does the software run on Windows, Mac OS, Unix/Linux or all of these?

Setup and Configuration — Do you need to install software on every public computer in the library? How much tweaking and configuration will you need to do on each PC? How much support will you get from your vendor?



OTHER TASTY RECIPES

Sample Reservation Policies

- PC Reservation Process:
Deschutes, OR Public Library
<http://www.dpls.lib.or.us/reserveapc.asp>
- Computer Reservations FAQ
South Portland, ME Public Library:
www.southportlandlibrary.com/files/CybraryN%20FAQ%20306.doc
- Reservation information
Lodi Public Library (CA)
<http://www.lodi.gov/library/services/reserve.html>

Vendors of Reservation and Timing Software

- Useful's Pre-Book:
<http://useful.com/products/pre-book>
- CybraryN Solutions:
<http://www.cybraryn.com>
- Fortres' Time Limit Manager:
<http://www.fortresgrand.com/products/tlm/tlm.htm>
- Pharos' Sign Up:
http://www.pharos.com/Public_Library/Computer_Reservation.html
- EnvisionWare's PC Reservation:
http://www.envisionware.com/en/pc_reservation
- Patron Computer Software Comparison Chart, Pgs 41-43
MaintainIT Project
"Joy of Computing" Cookbook 1
<http://maintainitproject.org/cookbooks>



Open-Source Reservation/Timing Packages

As with all open-source products, make sure you have the staff expertise to install and maintain the system, since in many cases, you'll receive no official technical support.

- Cybera:
<http://cybera.sourceforge.net/site/co/hPage.html>
- ISM:
<http://www.grpl.org/ism>

Other Resources:

- PC Reservation and Print Management Software
ALA Technotes
This article provides a general overview of computer reservation and print management systems.
<http://www.ala.org/ala/pla/plapubs/technotes/pcreservation.cfm>
- Library Stories and Tips (see Tip #3)
MaintainIT Project
A low-tech solution for patrons to “check out” time on public computers.
<http://maintainitproject.org/librarytips>



Fast Food — Meal Plan 5 Summary

- If your library uses the first come, first serve method (i.e., no time limits), your staff's time and labor is variable, but you may end up spending a lot of time explaining to patrons why they have to wait so long for a computer.
- If you use a home-grown system (i.e., a sign-in sheet), it is up to your staff to take all the reservations and enforce the time limits.
- PC Reservation/Time Management software can — in the long run — save you and your staff thousands of hours of tedious and frustrating work.

MENU 4 CHECKLIST

- If you let patrons use your computers for as long as they like, set aside one or more machines as “quick-use” stations. The time limit is usually 10 or 15 minutes.
- If you have just a handful of public computers in one location, use an informal sign-in sheet or an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of patron computer usage.
- If you have the financial resources, consider using PC Reservation/Time Management software.
- When shopping for PC Reservation/Time Management software, look for these major features:
 - Time limits and usage tracking
 - Pre-booking and self-reservation
 - Patron authentication
 - Reporting features
 - Different reservation policies for different computers
 - Can patrons continue to use the computer when no one is waiting?
 - How long will you hold a reserved computer?
 - Does the software allow you to penalize patrons who consistently fail to arrive for their assigned slots?
 - Bundling
 - Hardware and operating system requirements
 - Setup and configuration