
Frequency Asked Questions (FAQ) About RAILS and Delivery Automation

June 2021

RAILS invited Greg Pronevitz, a consultant we have been working with to study our delivery service, to speak at our April 27 RAILS Member Update. Greg talked about his work with RAILS thus far, which has included examining the quality and cost-effectiveness of our current RAILS delivery service, as well as exploring options RAILS might want to consider to automate services at some point in the future.

[View Greg's presentation.](#) [View presentation slides.](#)

Member update attendees had a number of questions during the presentation, mainly about possible future RAILS delivery automation plans. RAILS has no concrete plans or timetable for automating our delivery processes at this time. We are currently exploring possibilities and want to provide members with information on automation we might implement at some yet to be determined future date. We need to begin thinking about what's possible to keep delivery moving forward and to continue to provide the best possible service we can to our member libraries and their customers.

Q: *What automation is RAILS currently exploring as possibilities for the future?*

A: RAILS has just started to explore possible future options for automating our sorting processes, including label-less sorting, where a mechanical system determines the destination of an item rather than having to refer to a hand-written or printed label. Label-less sorting can be totally automated, or semi-automated, where a machine determines the destination but there is a human sorter involved in the process.

Two examples are automated materials handling systems (AMH) and Sort-to-Light Systems. Examples of both can be viewed in the member update presentation referenced above.

Q: *What are the advantages of label-less sorting?*

There are many! Library staff would no longer need to store, print, or apply labels to most outgoing materials, resulting in a huge savings of time and paper. For example, if a library processed 6 million delivery items per year, multiplying that number by an estimated 5 seconds required to manually process each item, would result in a savings of over 8,000 hours of labor per year, or the equivalent of four full-time staff members. This process would most benefit consortia libraries, where the volume of delivery is higher than the average RAILS library.

Universal barcode placement on the outside of an item provides ergonomic and efficiency improvements as well. No more hunting for the barcode by circulation staff, and it would ease the repetitive physical motion required to open each item to access the barcode.

Patrons could depend on the barcode being in the same place no matter what library they frequented. This would make the self-check process easier and more straightforward.

In addition, automated sorting systems are very accurate and mis-sorts occur much less frequently.

Q: *Are there any best practice guidelines available for the universal placement of barcodes? Where should they be located on the outside of the item? Front, back, vertically, horizontally, etc.?*

A: The Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS) already has a recommendation (not a mandate) for universal barcode placement. They recommend that barcodes be placed on the upper right of the front of each item. If RAILS decided to move ahead with this project in the future, it would make sense to do what IHLS is already doing so everyone in Illinois was using the same system.

Q: *Is the Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS) considering automating delivery processes and/or label-less sorting at some point in the future? Would RAILS work cooperatively with IHLS in implementing an automation system?*

A: RAILS would certainly work cooperatively with IHLS, CARLI, the Illinois State Library, and other partners if we decided to undertake this project in the future.

Q: *What are the next steps? Is there a timetable for automating RAILS delivery?*

A: As mentioned, RAILS is simply exploring options for future improvements to delivery right now. Before we make any plans, we need to make sure that as many of our members as possible understand the issues and possibilities. We will give our members plenty of notice before moving forward and there will be many other opportunities for members to ask questions and provide feedback if we decide to automate our sorting processes.