

Koha users and vendors are growing superfast but not its development community: **Chris Cormack**

Chris Cormack is the original developer of Koha, the first free library automation software. He worked for Katipo Communications Ltd. during the construction of the original release of Koha. He also played a commendable role in the Koha community, holding many key elected positions over the years and often speaking and training at various conferences and workshops globally.



As a Technical Lead of Koha (Wellington and Wairarapa, New Zealand), Chris is undoubtedly responsible for making Koha one of the leading library automation software in the world.

*Open Interview brings you Chris Cormack's interview with **Gopakumar V.** The objective of this interview was to understand the trends, issues and challenges of Koha in the perspectives of developers and library and information professionals.*

- **Can you tell about the evolution of Koha briefly?**

Koha started as a replacement for a proprietary library system that had a Y2K problem. It started first as a system for running a public library system but rapidly evolved into one being able to be used in any type of library.

- **What were the major impediments in the development of Koha?**

There were not any real technical ones, all of the tricky things were constraints imposed by the library community themselves, for example, things like requiring MARC support meant we couldn't store data in more efficient ways, etc. Also, every single library seems to do at least one thing different to every other library.

- **The Koha community is growing superfast day by day. How do you feel about it?**

I think it is great! The challenge is that the user community is growing very fast and the vendors supporting Koha is growing too. However, those committing back to the community is not growing at the same rate. The challenge is always trying to get people to give back to the community.

- **What are the trends in the application of Koha in libraries worldwide?**

More and more libraries are using Koha to manage/catalogue things not usually thought of as things in a library. I have seen it being used as an asset management tool, especially with data assets.

- **As per the (library automation) trends, which other open source software is the competitor for Koha and how Koha is prepared for it?**

In terms of the current environment, it would be [Evergreen](#), but the communities have never thought of themselves as competitors. They both are community-driven projects. However, in the future, [FOLIO](#) may become one because it is quite a different proposition as it came from a vendor, not from the community. Moreover, it has a very different governance and management structure around it. It remains to be seen though.

- **What kinds of common issues and challenges is the Koha development community facing that needs more research and solutions?**

Again, there is nothing really technically difficult about a library system, all the complexity is with the user experience and user interface design. Keep Koha easy to use and install for small libraries while being useful for large ones also is the hardest thing.

- **How difficult is it for the developers to understand the requirements of the libraries (that differ from one another) and accordingly work on Koha?**

Understanding the individual library is fine. The trick is that- that library might think that is the way everyone does it, it never is though. So, building things in a way that are configurable is the challenge.

- **The number of Koha users in Indian academic libraries is increasing. How do you see this development?**

This is great news, however, we don't see growth of the Indian community inside the Koha community. We don't find many Indian people involved in coding, or documentation, or translation etc. I would love to see this to increase also.

• **What would be the future of proprietary library software if many more libraries would start preferring open source software (OSS) (like Koha or the other OSS) as the quality of OSS has become better these days plus there is sufficient material and resources available?**

I think OSS has been better than proprietary system for many years now, the reasons people buy a proprietary system is nothing to do with its functionality, it is all to do with ideology. There are enough resources available I think, as long as we keep growing the community.

• **How is Koha addressing the issues of customisation as libraries have different users, collections, services, etc.?**

This is basically what we have been doing for nearly twenty years now, trying to make configurable solutions that can work for more than one library, or library type.

• **Many vendors are coming up to provide Koha related solutions right from installation to maintenance. How economical and sustainable is this?**

Again, this is sustainable as long as those vendors actually get involved in the project. It is not good for them, or their clients if they don't because they will end up not knowing what is going on with the software.

• **Some libraries do not go for Koha thinking that maintenance would be a problem after installation and the librarians will be held responsible for any problem. Thus, they are little skeptical to completely rely on the Koha group or community for any help? What is your message to them?**

This is exactly the case with proprietary software too, if you don't pay for support you don't get support. There is nothing special about that, the only thing with Koha is you can not pay for support and do it yourself if you want. Those libraries should pay for support though, like they would with a proprietary vendor.

• **Among Koha's wide global community, where do Indian Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals stand, especially in the success of Koha?**

The usage of Koha by the Indian LIS professionals in huge amount has led to its growth and success. However, due to the lack of major participation in the global community they are not well-known outside of India. I hope this will change.

• **Where do you see Koha in coming five years?**

I think the continued work on the RESTful API will see Koha looking quite different in the next five years but still fundamentally being the same system under the hood. I think that if Indian LIS professionals get more involved they will have a major role to play in the future of Koha.



Note • All the answers/ opinions expressed in this interview/document are of the interviewee.



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Credits • Assistance for framing questions and designing interview document- [Santosh C Hulagabali, PhD](#) • Technical assistance- [Sneha Rathod](#)

Interviewee • To know more about Chris Cormack, visit https://wiki.koha-community.org/wiki/Chris_Cormack



Gopakumar V, PhD heads University Library of Goa University, India. He has served in different academic institutions and has rich experience of academic librarianship. He was instrumental in initiating UG and PG courses in library and information science at [Goa University](#). He has been serving the library community as a trainer, speaker, author, research supervisor and organiser. He has a great interest in photography.

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