

browser market in the coming years.

What are the main features of Firefox?

Until other browsers, it is an open source product; that is to say that programmers can get access to the source code and produce mainly additional utilities to increase its functionality. These are being added to all the time, so unlike Internet Explorer which has not changed at all for several years, Firefox is continually able to adapt and increase in flexibility.

The main difference between Firefox and Internet Explorer (as far as users are concerned) is that it is a tabbed browser. That is to say, users can have multiple windows or tabs open at the same time in a single version of the browser window, until Internet Explorer which has to be opened a second time if a user wants to be able to move quickly from window to window. In Firefox users can simply click on an open tab and bring that to the front, making the whole process of moving from page to page very much easier.

Firefox also has improved security; it keeps your computer safe from malicious spyware and popups. Users are also prompted before Firefox downloads any programs so you only download those that you mean to. It also has a very effective way of deleting items that users have already downloaded, so the hard disk doesn't get clogged up unnecessarily.

An effective search bar is also integral to the product. Several hundred search engines are supported, as well as dictionaries, access to eBay and so on. Users simply have to type their search into the appropriate box and the search engine of their choice is searched and results are delivered directly onto a tabbed page.

Firefox includes a very effective bookmark management system that makes the whole process of adding, moving and editing bookmarks quick and simple.

Firefox is only a small download, taking seconds to download and install on a fast connection. It will also import all of the settings from Internet Explorer, so users will not lose existing bookmarks or passwords. Users can still continue to run Internet Explorer side by side with Firefox, so it isn't necessary to stop using one in order to start using another.

Various extensions add to the power of the browser; most search engines have now produced search toolbars that work with the product. Other useful extensions allow you to cut and paste not only the text, but also the title of the page and the URL with one click, rather than the clumsy approach taken by

Internet Explorer. Another extension allows users to 'nuke' elements from a page, which can be useful when printing a page with a lot of adverts; they can all be removed prior to printing. Yet another allows users to click and highlight words on a page, drag them to another part of the screen and drop them, and a search is automatically run for the highlighted text in the users search engine of choice.

More information on Firefox can be obtained from their website at <http://www.mozilla.org/products/firefox/> Extensions can be viewed and downloaded from <https://update.mozilla.org/extensions/?application=firefox> and a more detailed explanation of the browser and a comparison with Internet Explorer is at <http://www.philb.com/firefox.htm>

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The challenge of creating a Virtual Information Centre

Background

The UK Trade & Investment Information Centre, based in Victoria, London, has existed for over forty years as a free self service reference library where exporters can carry out research into overseas markets. Our parent body, UK Trade & Investment, is a government organisation which supports and promotes the work of UK exporters and promotes Britain as a location for inward investment.

Our users can compile contact lists of companies in foreign markets – identify agents, distributors or possible partners. They can also research market, sector and background information using a wide range of reports and statistical tools. At present, we have a comprehensive hybrid collection of over 20 electronic databases, plus 15,000 printed directories and statistics information.

From April 2005, we are moving to an electronic only environment. The centre will still be open to visitors. From around April 2006 we plan to have launched our "Virtual Information Centre" – e-resources only, available by registering on the existing UKTI website.

Why are we changing?

In common with many public access libraries, we have suffered a decline in visitor numbers in recent years. We also need to make sure our services are consistent with those already provided by UK Trade

& Investment in terms of adding value to as wide, and as appropriate, a user community as possible. This includes companies in the regions (who find it difficult to use our services due to lack of time and funds for travel) and staff located all over the globe, to whom a reference-only centre situated in London is not the most useful of resources. The circumstances we find ourselves in means that naming a way forward - online access – is easy. But we know that actually making this happen will be more problematical.

What are we aiming for?

By mid 2006, we aim to be making available a definitive collection of resources which best serves the needs of UK exporters and UK Trade & Investment staff, whatever their location. Crucially, this will be backed by human advice, regarding sources, navigation, or any other information-related topic, at the end of a phone line.

But what form should the virtual centre take – a subject gateway, perhaps, listing resources with native search functionality only, or a library portal, with federated search functionality?

We agreed that we require a database, meta-data tagged to Dublin Core standard, with a browsable search interface and which can hold both searchable (subscription databases) and non-searchable (free web resources) elements. The portal option for delivery is by far the most suited to our needs. We will shortly be approaching software suppliers with our requirements.

Key issues

The portal route presents various challenges, which need to be addressed by ourselves, publishers and any of the software suppliers we work with.

The nature of our collection brings specific considerations. Library portals traditionally integrate with text-based databases. Our databases are a mixture of both text-based and statistical format. The databases use a number of different protocols - if the protocols used are not known to software vendors there will be significant impact on the project in time and money whilst solutions are developed.

We need to be clear about how we're going to model and present our customer base to information providers and software vendors. It's becoming clear to us that vendors are used to working within certain model types. The closer the fit to a model that publishers and vendors are familiar with the easier it should be for all parties to agree what is required and how it should be costed. We may not have an academic, closed community but there are certain parallels which can be drawn between this model

and our own.

We know that our publishers will be much keener to work with us if we can guarantee that those who access the databases fall into distinctly identifiable and verifiable groups. We have identified these groups as - UKTI staff, SMES (small to medium business enterprises employing less than 250 staff) and those researchers who support the work of SMEs.

The primary remit of our Information Centre is to work with SMEs, and we would not be adhering to this strategy if we supported access to other types of users. We need to be able to guarantee that our system will be password protected and will support access to only these user communities. This has resource implications in terms of how we check the details of those who register with us, who verifies these details, and how the system is policed.

Lastly, the security of our system must be assured. As a government organisation, we have to work within our secure IT infrastructure. Addressing this issue will bring us additional costs in time and money and must be factored into our plans.

Going forward...

As I write, there seems to be a long haul in terms of the necessary preparations to be made, and a short time in terms of months available to fit everything in. The issue of time will be critical to us. In a government environment, with shifting policy and funding emphases, it would seem that extensive time frames for project working are a luxury which are not available to many. So we must work within the time limits we have.

This lack of precedents makes the project more difficult to implement, but not impossible. We know that there are a few other institutions out there who are trying to do the same thing. If anyone has experiences or advice they'd like to share with us, we'd welcome your input.

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