

Book Reviews

Managing suppliers and partners for the academic library

David Ball, with contributions from Jane Ryland and Jill Beard. London: Facet Publishing, 2005. 184pp. ISBN 1-85604-547-1

Universities are facing fundamental changes on two fronts: the effects of the electronic revolution and its impact on educational technology and research, and the emphasis on widening participation and collaboration between institutions. This book focuses on two types of relationships now critical to academic libraries: those with commercial suppliers and those with partner institutions.

Suppliers are defined both as publishers and aggregators providing materials, electronic and print, and systems vendors supplying library management systems and virtual learning environments. The authors emphasise the importance of the right specification and ongoing contract management both at the outset and throughout the life of the contract. Other issues covered include the information chain, issues in electronic purchasing such as the pros and cons of the "big deal", licensing constraints, consortia, pricing models and outsourcing. An important conclusion highlighted by Ball is that user involvement can often be left out once a contract process is underway. Issues of concern to librarians rather than those of users are highlighted. While it is not suggested users should be made to pay, the economic consequences of their demands should be made clear to them.

The second section of the book covers relationships between HE and FE colleges and the NHS. The relationship with these two sectors are opposite in one fundamental sense. Whereas in the "franchising" relationships with FE colleges the HEI is the commissioner; with the NHS it is the NHS that commissions the service from the HEI. There are however many similarities and, as for suppliers, an effective management of the partnership, with its formalised terms and conditions, is involved.

The book is particularly well illustrated with evidence from a wide range of studies to support its points, with examples ranging from the actual number of documents in institutional repositories to the percentage of journals in blanket deals actually consulted by users. Examples are taken both from UK, academic and public sector, and USA.

The authors conclude that the current environment offers the opportunity for university libraries to contribute to the development of HE provision and to influence in their favour the commercial environment. This book offers a comprehensive yet succinct guide in support of librarians working towards this end.

Helen Edwards. Head of Information Services, London Business School

Why Intranets Fail (and How to Fix Them)

Luke Tredinnick. Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2004. 174pp. ISBN 1-84334-068-2.

There's no end to the ever-increasing number of books on computing: word-

processing, operating systems, the Internet. Strangely, however, in bookshops otherwise well stocked with computing titles, I can never find more than one or two books on intranets.

Why is this? It's not because of a shortage of intranet implementations. Any company with more than a few staff is likely today to have an intranet. Is it because they are simple to install and to manage? Certainly not, as Tredinnick shows clearly in his book. Intranets are difficult, and you don't have to go far to find one that is not as successful as its creators intended.

Tredinnick's perspective is clear: he thinks the way to avoid failure with your intranet is to involve information professionals, and not just to leave it to the IT staff. According to the author, we are all becoming information professionals nowadays. Even an accountant or an auditor deals only in information. However, what makes an information professional distinctive is that they see information as an end in itself. However this may be, their goal it to be self-effacing: the book's final sentence is the stirring: "A truly successful intranet allows the users to forget it is ever there."

So this is a refreshingly objective guide to the reality of intranets, and free of technical jargon. The helpful annotated bibliography points out that most books published on intranets "exude the uncritical enthusiasm for the potential of intranets to which this book is in part intended to form a cautious coda." The great strength of Tredinnick's book is that it is informed by information management theory, based on experience, and cautious.

Interestingly, if the book has a fault, it is that it is less a cookbook than an explanation of where we all went wrong.

The second part of the book, the how-to section, makes far more sense when read after the background discussion in part one. Although there are very useful tips in the book, the most interesting part for me was the analysis, which outlined some of the problems that intranets can face, rather than the cookbook section describing how to fix it. The recommendations become more meaningful from the context in which they are put.

The first part of the book explains in workmanlike fashion the corporate setting into which intranets are introduced. The author describes the six categories of intranet user, and the four functions of intranets, and begins by quoting the three reported functions users most want from their intranet: effective searching, good navigation aids, and up-to-date and relevant content. Here, as in other areas of research, the author is good at teasing out what users really want, rather than what surveys seem to prove they want. Intranets are not like Google: search engines work best on huge quantities of content, while intranets may be more effectively used by drilling down a hierarchy. All this is valuable and has plenty of implications for intranet design.

One of the best sections of the book is the description of navigation hierarchies. After describing information-based hierarchies and process-based hierarchies, he points out that in the virtual world of digital publishing content can be placed in multiple locations. In this way, a template could be found under a general heading of templates, as well as within the department in which the template was created.

Clearly, Tredinnick has experience of working in organisations – he describes

how splitting responsibility for creating sections of the intranet by department can cause problems due to departmental rivalry. (I never trusted that HR department, anyway.)

In one or two places, Tredinnick doesn't stick to his argument. Although the book emphasises the need for user-focused intranet thinking, rather than technology-driven sites, he becomes unnecessarily technical and prescriptive in stating that any documents not in HTML format, such as PDF, or Word documents, should be discouraged from being distributed via the intranet, because their format doesn't lend them to effective linking. But who is to police this format monitoring, and who is to do the conversion? It sounds to me like reinventing the dreaded webmaster role, the bottleneck that prevents the company website ever being up to date.

My experience of intranets is that however imperfect the new world they represent, and whatever legacy formats might be involved in getting the site running from day one, it's usually better than what was there before. Armed with Tredinnick's useful guide, one of the few critical guides available that enable you to create a sensible intranet strategy, the intranet can become steadily more effective.

Michael Upshall

Press Releases & News

Adept releases Onfolio 2.0

Adept Scientific releases Onfolio 2.0, an RSS reader, capturing references from online sites such as newspapers and academic databases. It is used for web research.

Building on the productivity tools in the award-winning web research product,

the new edition adds automatic reference capture from a variety of online sites including newspapers, magazines, academic journals, RSS feeds and academic databases. The Academic and Scientific Edition also adds a bibliography tool and automatic synchronisation of reference data between Onfolio and EndNote. It claims to be the first browser-based web research tool with the ability to automatically capture reference data and content from online news sites, magazines and book sellers, and to be the first RSS reader to support one-click capture of reference data from RSS feeds into EndNote libraries. In addition to these firsts, the new edition also speeds up the process of capturing and filing references from academic databases and journal hosting sites into EndNote libraries. For people who do not use EndNote, Onfolio includes basic bibliography tools that can place formatted references in MS Word documents and on custom-generated web pages. The entire cycle of online research is more efficient using Onfolio, the comprehensive web information-management tool. Seamlessly integrated with Internet Explorer and Firefox, Onfolio captures bookmarks and stores local copies of Web pages, PDF files, charts, e-mails and more into personalised collections for reliable offline access. The RSS reader makes it simple to read, organise and search RSS feeds, providing timely access to new information. Easy-to-use personal publishing tools allow researchers to effortlessly share information with colleagues. The addition of the new Academic and Scientific Edition enables effective handling of bibliographic references, making Onfolio the ideal tool for academic web research.

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