

Intranets

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There is often a contrast between organisations, proposed timetable for an intranet selection and implementation process, and the reality. In this case, an intranet took a year rather than the estimated six months.

Behind the firewall

It's Midsummer's Day and I've just come back from a celebration. One of my clients invited me to the launch of their new intranet at which the MD said some nice words about me. Pity he had forgotten my name and just referred to me as 'our consultant'! It was just over a year ago that I had the first meeting with Gerry, the intranet manager for a charity located just to the south of London. With the company having a number of regional offices all around the UK, the intranet had become the main information platform, but had run in to the usual problems of using Front Page to generate static pages. Gerry had been to one of my workshops on CMS selection, and had persuaded the charity that 2005 would be a good time to relaunch the intranet. The charity's web site was run under contract by a web agency so that was not in the frame.

My first meeting of the Intranet Steering Group (ISG) took place in early July and I was given the project timetable, which showed a launch in time for the Christmas party. I explained that this was being far too optimistic, and suggested that either the date was pushed back into 2006 or Gerry should find a new job. He took it well, though I'm not sure his manager did. The charity did have an outline intranet strategy and we started work on developing a statement of requirements for the CMS. The first thing that became obvious was that although the ISG had undertaken a good review of what staff wanted on the intranet they had not thought through how staff would be adding content. The main justification in the business case had been that all staff would be able to be intranet publishers, and no one had really thought through the implications.

Summer came and went and it was not until September that work started on a Statement of Requirements to send out to the CMS vendors. The ISG decided that they would write it and then I could review it. The first draft ran to 120 pages, and had around 70 mandatory requirements. I explained that any CMS vendor getting an SoR of this length for a project that would probably be worth £70k of software sales would probably bin it. The first draft also asked the vendors to describe in 300 words how features such as workflow worked. I suggested that they start again with a 50 page target length. The final version was draft seven, which had ten mandatory requirements, and was not ready for distribution until early October. Winter was approaching.

Certainly there was a cold chill amongst the ISG when they received the responses from the vendors in early November. The variation in approaches was very wide, and it was quite clear that some vendors had used a standard boiler-plate proposal with just a nod in the direction of the client. Even so working through 12 responses to get a short list down to four took several weeks of review and queries to the vendors.

The next challenge was to arrange for the vendors to give presentations to the ISG. Everyone understood that it was important that the members of the review panel were the same for all four presentations, but the result was that the meetings could not take place until early this year. These proved to be very interesting. Even though we had set out quite a detailed timetable for the three-hour slots virtually all the vendors ignored this. At the end of the two days we felt that we had more questions than answers and it was not until early February that we felt able to select a preferred vendor and ask for a firm quote. This is when the true costs of a CMS emerged as training and professional services started to be quantified. The total costs looked to be over \$200k, only just within budget.

Then of course the legal department had to look at the contract and in the end it was not signed until late February. The initial implementation was delayed a little as a new server had to be purchased and then it was found that there was no room in the rack space for it. However, work on developing the templates and training up content publishers could begin, and by good fortune the beta version went live in late May after a lot of overtime. Then came usability testing for both the site design and the content publishers, and some changes had to be made. In the end we just managed to get the intranet up and running in mid-June, almost a year to the day we started out. You still think you can implement a CMS in a few months?