

Meeting Report: Intranet Forum Meeting

Imperial College, 26 September 2006

The second Intranets forum meeting, held at Imperial College London on 26 September, provided delegates with two very different but useful talks from experienced intranet managers. The first was from Dr Mike Barrett, Head of the Learning Resources Centre in the School of Medicine at Imperial College London, who is grappling on a day-to-day basis to ensure that content on his teaching intranet is provided in a timely fashion to users with high expectations, while also managing its migration to WebCT. The second was from Martin White, Managing Director of Intranet Focus Ltd, and intranet guru, who is helping organisations co-ordinate their activity so that the resulting intranet structure delivers information that staff actually want, and that they can use easily.

Mike Barrett describes his intranet as 'in transition' as well he might, as he has the unenviable task of migrating the content to WebCT with very limited resources. The intranet was started in October 1998 and provides course-specific, year-specific, general-interest and careers content for the 2,000 students on medical courses at Imperial. The content is owned by Heads of Year, curriculum administrators, theme and course leaders, who vary in their level of activity, so consistency is difficult to achieve. Mike outlined the factors driving the change to using WebCT, which include the wish to provide e-learning and not just e-delivery, self-directed learning and more interactive material. A major priority for the content migration project at this stage is the conversion to interactive e-learning materials of 40 hours of Real Media files containing Year 3 lectures. These were traditionally broadcast to 14 sites in London, but audiences were waning, so the decision was made to produce a series of learning objects in a searchable e-library, that users can access at their own convenience. The migrated intranet will also have new content, including an e-library of materials, searchable by type and content, and transportable between different delivery methods.

Martin White's talk took on a farming theme when he likened intranet development in the academic sector to herding chickens and then suggested the use of cattle prods to ensure co-ordination! The reason became obvious when he took us through an amusing 'naming and shaming' tour of some university intranets. This highlighted a situation very common in the academic sector, that of everyone being allowed to 'do their own thing' so that multiple intranets become available. This was particularly illustrated by Martin's latest project with the Open University, which unearthed 194 intranets. To counteract this, Martin put forward his federated intranet model which involves a top level where the organisation-wide information sits with directories and search. Under this level are the departmental intranets which must use interchange standards (e.g. provide basic information such as departmental structure, name of intranet manager etc). These intranets must also follow good practice, such as meeting usability requirements, and have a workspace for collaborative content. A crucial part of this model is the need for a

good search engine because of the quantity of content and the fact that you can't link to everything. Martin then provided us with ten intranet success factors:

- Obtain a sponsor and budget
- Develop an intranet strategy
- Match content to business needs
- Support content authors
- Design a flexible information architecture
- Understand the role of search
- Integrate with / complement other business applications
- Undertake regular usability testing
- Assess the impact
- Revise the strategy.

His parting suggestion was that we should carry out reviews of our own intranets using the Intranet Review Toolkit (<http://www.intranetreviewtoolkit.org/>) but advised this was not something to be done lightly and certainly not without the comfort of alcohol!

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