Meeting report: UKEIG intranet forum

7 June 2007, TUC, London

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An intranet forum meeting was held on Thursday 7 June 2007 at the TUC's London premises. Forty attendees heard from three speakers, and a participative discussion ensued.

1. Information architecture: how is your site structured?

The first speaker was Mel Morey, Intranet Projects Officer at the TUC. Mel talked us through their current site, ToUChbase, and gave us a sneak preview of a proposed new structure that has been developed in response to comments from staff and Web analytics.

Figure 1 shows that the first navigational menu item horizontally across the top of the screen is About Us. This expands to show information about departments, committees and projects etc. However, as part of the restructure this will be called "Inside TUC", because members of staff who have been with the organisation for up to 40 years may not look under a menu item called About TUC as they may feel they know everything about the TUC. 'Departments and offices' will also be moved up a level to make its content more accessible.

Figure 1

The next section is Documents, which is both a repository and archive, followed by Tools, which includes external resources such as websites, and Internal Resources, such as a people finder, acronym finder and access to HR and Finance systems. Finally, the Help section will be removed, as Web analytic statistics (extracted from their Refocus content management system) show that this is rarely used.

The homepage itself consists of quick links, Latest Events, Spotlight on a news issue, Latest Announcements, and a Google search box to search the external web. The Add to My Touchbase plug-in, which allows users to tag favourite pages, will be removed in the revamp, as feedback indicates that this isn't used.

All TUC members of staff have permission to directly publish a story on the Latest Announcements section of the homepage, and, amazingly, there has not been a single instance of this privilege being abused with inappropriate content.

Issues

Mel recounted how search statistics showed that some frequently used items (e.g. an expense claim form) were too difficult for staff to find because they were positioned four levels deep in the structure. To resolve this issue, the item in question was added to an A-Z listing of the site, and a quick link was created on the homepage and to the Spotlight section to promote it. The following month's statistics showed there were zero searches for the expense claim form, so this approach was therefore successful. While it appears that an A-Z listing to a site has the advantage that users don't have to understand the architecture of the site, the point was also raised that A-Z listings may also be used to compensate for unreliable search results. The audience had differing experiences of intranet search, and so this will be a topic for a future forum meeting.

Another issue is whether to categorise content by the department that owns it, or by function. For example, Mel felt that the Learning and Development section should be on the same level as Personnel rather than within it, to encourage usage. However, the Personnel Manager understandably didn't want to lose control of the content, so Mel had to exercise her influencing and negotiation skills to resolve this issue. Similarly, how many of you have copyright or data protection sections within your Library/Information Centre pages? Would users know which department is responsible for these policy issues, and so where to look for them?

It sometimes seems that all content authors think their content is the most important and want it to be one click away from the homepage. For example, the staff responsible for the Going Green initiative wanted it to be a higher level menu item but this just would not fit with the rest of the structure.

Decisions also need to be taken when naming categories. For example, should the organisation's pension provision be referred to as the TUC superannuation fund or just plain old pension scheme? And take care when categorising subjects - for example, grouping Wales TUC under Regions is incorrect as Wales is not a region!

Mel and her colleagues have the opportunity to explain the structure of the intranet and highlight key content in a 1.5 hour slot in a staff induction programme four times a year, and the forum audience enjoyed this insight into their information architecture today.

2. What is your intranet worth?

Next up to the lectern was Paul Miller, Chairman of the global Intranet Benchmarking Forum (IBF). Launched five years ago, IBF is the leading intranet benchmarking group driving forward the intranet management, performance and best practice of its members' intranets. Although Paul does not have an information professional background, one of his team is Helen Day, who won the International Information Industry award for Best Intranet Project in 2004 for her work at Boots the Chemist.

Paul spoke about the importance of assessing the financial value of our intranets. IBF is currently working with a team of economists to put precise valuations on tangibles and intangibles. In January 2008, IBF will launch a tool that will be deployed within member organisations to calculate the financial value of a major intranet. In the meantime, Paul recounted that when the BBC put all its taxi bookings on the intranet, this saved about £2.50 in administrative cost per booking, which in total saves c.£1.7m per year of costs.

He also spoke about British Airways saving £40 million in the past three years by putting payslip and rota information on their intranet for pilots and cabin crew to access remotely from home or hotels. And Microsoft has saved huge amounts using LiveMeeting as a collaborative tool instead of physical business travel.

As well as financial value, Paul spoke about how intranets add value in other ways too. Flexible working (e.g. from home or remotely), has created a need for the virtualisation of the workplace, which can be fulfilled by an intranet. Culture and branding is also encapsulated in an intranet, and this helps with staff retention and recruitment by creating a sense of belonging.

The forum felt that leaders tend not to use the intranet to its fullest potential, although Paul did know of one MD who has a two hour live chat session ("e-Ben") with staff. And IBM have what is known as a "jamming" session, where a topic (for example, "What should we invest in for our Corporate Social Responsibility remit?") is posted on the intranet, and staff have 48 hours to blog on and participate. A summary report on the results is then published.

With annual membership at just under £18K, membership to IBF is restricted to Global 200 (IBF Global), FTSE 100 (IBF 100) and Fortune 500 (IBF North America) organisations, so those of us from smaller organisations were very grateful to hear Paul's expertise at the forum.

3. An electronic social medium for UKeiG Intranets Forum

Finally, Dion Lindsay wrapped up the meeting by reporting on the results of his questionnaire regarding the need for an e-social medium for the UKEIG intranet forum. Using surveymonkey.com, 25 responses were received from the 50 forum members polled. 21 members wanted to dialogue between meetings and 17 already had a topic they wanted to post. Respondents stated their potential reasons for posting as:

- Seeking solutions to my intranet problems

- Discussions started at face to face meetings

- Providing examples of what I am doing

- Learning about what others are doing

- Because I can't attend face-to-face meetings

- Organising visits

- Sharing news – useful articles, future developments

It was agreed that the e-medium would be closed to involve only intranet forum and UKeiG members due to the potentially confidential nature of some posts. There was some discussion about whether an email based listserv, blog or wiki might be appropriate mediums, and we look forward to an appropriate technical solution being agreed between Dion and Karen Blakeman.

Meetings

Our thanks to Helen Davies, TUC Information Manager, for hosting and chairing the session. The next meeting is on 5 July 2007 at the Disability Rights Commission in Manchester (or via videoconference at their Gray's Inn offices in London). The theme is accessibility. It was also announced that the 12 December 2007 meeting will be held at 3pm at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the theme is marketing.

The following were raised as ideas for future topics: content standards, archiving, Web 2.0, usability testing and discussion forums.

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