

Meeting Report: Managing New and Emerging Library Technologies: Skills for the 21st century

Report of a meeting organised by the East Anglia Online User Group

(<http://www.eaolug.org.uk>)

Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, 13 June 2007

The day began with a fascinating presentation on Web 2.0 by Paul Anderson from Intelligent Content, Ltd. Paul recently won the EPSRC's Computer Science Writer of the Year award, so was perfectly placed to comment on this fast moving social phenomenon. Following a run-through of the origins and evolution of Web 2.0, Paul demonstrated some of the current big ideas in the Web 2.0 world, such as wikis, blogs and social networking sites such as MySpace. Delegates worried about the ease of use of Web 2.0 resources quickly had their fears quelled, as Paul deftly showed how the real success of these resources lay in their accessibility. From the discussion that followed, it was uplifting to hear that a number of delegates were already using Web 2.0 applications to interact with their users.

Up next were Joanna Ball and Karen Begg, two college librarians from the University of Cambridge, who shared their experiences of setting up an e-books project from scratch. Joanna and Karen explained that the motivation for the project came from the college libraries themselves, most of which lacked space and/or funds to provide multiple copies of print books for their readers. They explained how the task developed their project management, fundraising and technological skills, and how the project was a tale of successful collaboration and a willingness to work openly with suppliers and readers.

Next, Laura Perrot from Sue Hill Recruitment gave a talk entitled "skills required to effectively meet the challenges of 21st century librarianship". Laura explained that the increase in use of technology has had a significant impact on the responsibilities of the librarian. As a result, roles have become more diverse and varied, which is often reflected in the number of different job titles for "librarians". Laura was keen to point out that there are lots of employment opportunities out there, even though skills are changing. While technological abilities are a must, librarians aren't required to be computer experts. Usually, a working knowledge and awareness of technology should suffice. Instead, overlooked 'soft skills' such as relationship development, negotiation and other interpersonal skills are more often in demand from employers. In a changing environment, librarians and other information professionals need to think about how they can sell their skills within their organisation. Laura's talk also included examples of vacancies recently advertised by Sue Hill, with a discussion of the skills and competencies employers were looking for in successful candidates.

Andy Baker from Bedfordshire Libraries gave a revealing insight into managing a wi-fi project across Bedfordshire's county libraries. Andy explained that wi-fi was introduced in Bedfordshire to widen access to ICT, and to increase the Library service's footprint, especially in rural areas, where the Library may only be open for a few hours per week. Initially, a pilot wi-fi project was launched in a small public library in Potton, which gave Andy and his colleagues the opportunity to manage and test the system on a small scale. The trial at Potton was well received by users, and wi-fi was introduced to six further libraries across the county, with more set to follow. Access to the wi-fi network is limited to 15 minutes for guest users and one hour for library members, with a download limit of 30MB per session.

Andy explained that the learning curve was steep, with a number of unforeseen problems, but the benefits of the service outweighed these problems.

The final speaker of the day was Martin Palmer from Essex Libraries, who spoke about project managing RFID (radio-frequency identification) implementation across 35 libraries in Essex. Essex first investigated RFID as early as 1998, but the prohibitive cost of early RFID technology meant that it wasn't introduced until later. Colchester Library became the first library in Essex to trial RFID, in September 2003. Martin and his colleagues learned a number of lessons from the trial, and found that users warmly received RFID once they discovered how easy and convenient the technology was to use. RFID was then introduced to three further libraries, before being rolled out to 31 sites across the county between January 2006 and March 2007. The business case for the project was based on making Gershon saving efficiencies (2.5% per year), making better use of staff time and contributing to the council's corporate agenda. The project was completed on schedule and within budget. Feedback has been impressive and usage targets have been exceeded in all libraries.

Overall, it was an interesting day, which met all of my aims and objectives and provided me with a lot of useful information on topics I needed to know about. It was good to have speakers who had first-hand experience of new technologies who could share their "been there, done, that" wisdom. The extended lunch-break also provided a rich opportunity to network with other delegates, question speakers and catch up with old friends.

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