Meeting Reports

UKeiG Intranet Forum meeting 19 February 2009

The meeting was hosted by Lawrence Graham at 4 More Riverside, (next to City Hall and overlooking the Thames and the Tower of London). There were two presentations:

How would a Librarian design an Intranet System?

Jennifer Smith

Jennifer used to be a law librarian, but was frustrated by information systems that didn't organise information in the way that she felt they should. She has therefore been working with her IT Professional colleague, Ben Summers, to develop an information management system, known as 'OneIS' (pronounced 'One IS') that can be used by small businesses to organise and share their information. Although they didn't set out to build an intranet this is, in essence, the end product, but it is able to deal with information in a variety of formats.

As an information professional, Jennifer felt that the system should be one that:

- Manages information well
- Presents no IT hassles
- Engages users

Managing and finding information

Most existing information systems are designed for information in a specific format, e.g. contact details in the Outlook address book, Word files etc in shared folders, records of books in a library catalogue. However, users often don't know which format has been used for the information, or it may be spread over different formats. The aim was therefore findability, which meant having everything all in a single well-indexed system.

The user enters metadata including the 'subject' selected from a taxonomy developed to meet the needs of most businesses. During testing, users were happy to spend time entering metadata because it was so easy to use and they could see immediate benefits. The speed and quality of search retrieval was tested using 20,000 documents. Jennifer and Ben are confident that users will be able to find the information they need; the full text of all formats is searchable and information can be found whether or not it is linked to an Intranet page. Users can also browse for information via the taxonomy, or discover information by using indexing terms as links to information, for example returning all the documents by a specified 'Author'.

Engaging users

Engaging users is achieved by an appealing, uncluttered design, features to 'push' information, and making the system easy to use, to encourage staff to share information. The home page has a noticeboard for news items, where users can add, for example, links to other websites, rather than e-mailing them to colleagues. Users can also opt for RSS feeds, and daily, weekly or monthly e-mail alerts. To ensure intranet pages are kept up to date with minimum staff effort, continuously running searches can be embedded into pages for certain information such as staff lists or press releases. Updating Intranet pages is simple, and there is version control for documents.

No IT Hassles

The OneIS system is hosted externally and accessed via a secure website so there is no requirement for in-house IT support – nothing to install or maintain. This reflects the growing move towards services being hosted externally: as Steve Mills of IBM put it[1], 'If all you need is the milk, why buy the cow?'. Jennifer and Ben offer a 'ready to use' starter system. This can be upgraded to the Premier system, which can be customised to suit the business's needs. Future developments are planned to include room bookings, annual leave booking etc.

Jennifer and Ben were pleased by the interest in the concept of this product by the Intranet Managers at the meeting.

For further information, see: http://www.oneis.co.uk/ or contact Jennifer: Jennifer.smith@oneis.co.uk.

Intranet Survey of Imperial College Library Staff Intranet

Janet Corcoran

Janet reported on this survey which was undertaken as part of their Library's Knowledge Management Project.

Initially, informal responses were collected on how the Intranet was used, what users found difficult, and their likes and dislikes. There were good results from this, but also some contradictory responses, for example, some staff preferred to have central editing of Intranet pages (by Janet or her deputy), while others did not.

This was followed by a more formal survey, asking broad questions about how the information should be organised, what would make it easier to find information and other suggestions for improvements. Unfortunately, there was a low response rate from the 150 Library staff, probably because the survey took place during a period of uncertainty prior

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[1] http://www.information-age.com/channels/business-applications/features/303246/living-without-an-it-director.thtml

to restructuring of the Library. Nevertheless, the survey produced some useful ideas and some modifications to the Intranet have been made or are planned as a result.

One of the technical challenges is to introduce a search facility, which has not been possible to date as the Library staff Intranet is accessed by a secure log-in from the College Library website. Also, it uses the same design, which has been found to confuse some staff.

Janet commented that Library staff probably expected information to be found in a single location, but she has provided many different routes to the same information, and maintains an A-Z index and site map to overcome the lack of a search engine.

The presentation led to a discussion about the layout of Intranet pages, for example, whether navigation menus should be on the left or right side, and the need to make allowance for the size of different computer screens to avoid scrolling down to find useful information.

UKeiG Group members also shared their experiences of obtaining feedback from Intranet users. One suggestion was to require them to complete a questionnaire before accessing a document such as their monthly expenses form, although it was agreed that the responses might not be so reliable. Others had carried out one-to-one interviews, which, although time-consuming, gave a good insight into users' problems. Focus groups could also provide good quality feedback.

As always, the Group members enjoyed hearing about how others met the challenges of managing their intranets and helping users to find information they need.

UKeiG has an informal network and mailing list, The Intranets Forum, which holds free informal meetings every two months. This is open to all UKeiG members. Please contact Janet Corcoran j.m.corcoran@imperial.ac.uk for further details about the Forum, or to attend one of our events.