I'm an information professional – get me out of here!

UK Online User Group Meeting
CILIP, London 8 June 2004

So here we were, on the hottest day of the year (so far) at a sweltering 31° and then we are herded into CILIP's lovely Charter Suite (East) and subjected to the most aggressively efficient cooling system in the world. Needless to say, well before the coffee break came around Information Professionals were shivering uncontrollably and dangerously closed to mass hypothermia. The meeting at this point could easily have been renamed, "I'm a freezing information professional get me out of here!". But we struggled on and heard from three expert speakers on, what was effectively a meeting concerning the information explosion and how we are drowning in information – just to mix a few metaphors here.

Karen Blakeman explained in the initial session 'Taming you inbox', that all of us are now suffering from inbox overload and unless you are able to organise your email you will not cope with it. The problem is of course exacerbated by the ubiquitous spam everyone receives. She explained how to use filters to stop spam and described other remedies for reducing and organising your inbox. A good tip was to unsubscribe to newsgroups or lists you don't need anymore – sounds obvious, but I immediately unsubscribed to one on my return home.

Next up was Phil Bradley explaining precisely what spam is and, fascinatingly, how he conducted 'The Great Spam Experiment' in order to determine from where spam originates (checkout this on his web site at: http://www.philb.com/spamex.htm). It would appear that if you have an e-mail account that you don't advertise to anyone then you are safe from spam, but once you start using it and posting it then do expect a mountain of spam, and never, ever click on the 'remove' link.

But there was, of course, more to it than that. Karen Blakeman continued the theme of spam with a look at the problem and the currently available remedies such as Spampal and MailMaint. Also, she explained how these software packages actually operate, for example using a heuristic (weighting) system or using Bayesian probability. They don't all work perfectly however and spammers are always finding new ways of getting their execrable time wasting nonsense through.

Just before lunch we had a session on managing documents and records in the electronic age. Well do I remember attending an IIS meeting some ten or was it fifteen years ago and being told that the paper-based library was dead in the water. Err, not quite, as Claire Cowling, the speaker, informed us. We are all swimming in data of both the paper and non-paper varieties. It was essential that we start thinking now about our records and managing them effectively, by use of records management policies which would include a records disposal schedule because we fail to do this at our peril, particularly with the increasing relevance and importance of the Data Protection Act. We should not be thinking in isolationist terms, your department, my department, but in terms of common systems. Records are essential for corporate memory but are useless unless they are methodically stored in a universally accessible way and within a system that is professionally maintained.

After lunch Phil Bradley looked at improving search techniques and here we were talking search engines. "How many search engines are there?" Phil enquired, to which the answer he gave, after several brave guesses, was several hundreds of thousands. He went on to explain that if you are just using Google then its like just using one reference book. Certainly some of the online, and often free, tools he mentioned such as the comparative ranking search engine ez2find (http://www.ez2find.com) are really useful and I had not heard of many of them. Karen Blakeman carried on the web theme again with the subject of monitoring web pages which incorporates checking the currency of web links and checking when and how often a web site is updated or changed, using something like Change Detection (http://www.changedetection.com).

Phil Bradley ended the day's lectured sessions with a talk on 'New feeds aggregators and other good stuff' in which he mentioned that there are actually some useful weblogs out there (i.e. ones that give some brief beneficial information rather than the usual mega egotistical ravings) and he has his own one at: http://www.philb.com/blog/blogger.html Also, he mentioned a useful device for saving and storing web pages indefinitely using a system called furl which is available at: http://www.furl.net/index.jsp although he admitted that the copyright implications of this are not totally clear.

All in all a really excellent day despite the UKOLUG AGM (held during the lunch break) voting to change the name of UKOLUG to the vile UKeIG (The UK electronic Information Group). So a brilliant meeting, but a stupid name. Must have been the air conditioning.

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