EUROPAplus, the intranet of the European Commission

More than 4 million documents on-line so what?

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1. INTRODUCTION

This session is called: "Intranet: from information tool to an efficient knowledge management tool". Apparently ideas converge. In May 2000, I presented in Lisbon a paper called " EUROPAplus, intranet of the European Commission. From information sharing to knowledge management". The difference lies in the fact that I did not speak about a tool but simply about information sharing. This slight difference might seem of no importance whatsoever to some of you, at least at first glance, but I think in a world led mostly by generalists (politicians) technical matters are often relegated (and delegated) to technicians. It should not necessarily be so, since an intranet is much more than a tool it is a vector, a platform, a forum, an area for dissemination or exchanging information but not only a tool.

I am deeply convinced that IT questions should not only be dealt with by IT specialists. Today IT has a bearing on almost any human activity so multidisciplinary thinking and management should be the rule. I noticed that many high level managers within the Commission - notably the computer illiterate or computer neutral - are convinced that intranets are a question of technology, which means for them a question they do not have to bother about since others are in charge. It should not be so, especially since information remains the core business of most firms and administrations. Minds are evolving slowly but the sheer bulk of information to be conveyed will push people to adopt other attitudes.

2. CREATION

Today, EUROPAplus is the internal Web server, i.e. an information vector for officials and by officials of the Commission using Internet tools and standards.

In February 1995, the Commission presented its Internet server, EUROPA, to the G7 conference on the information society convened by the Delors Commission. At the time, Internet access was fairly thinly spread within the institution, which meant that EC officials could see the Internet server developed by the Commission neither internally nor externally.

A mirror copy of EUROPA was put on an intranet server so that officials could see EUROPA on-line. This is how EUROPAplus was in fact created, in April 1995. It had been named EUROPAplus, because it offered a plus compared with the mirror copy of EUROPA. The plus was all the internal information, which could be put on line. The intranet grew as quickly as EUROPA and became very popular, an average of 160.000 documents are consulted per working day. In the meantime all officials of the Commission have an Internet access, which allows making EUROPAplus a very powerful portal.

3. GOAL

The overall goal of EUROPAplus is to allow for a coherent, quick and transparent flow of information and communication between the College, the DGs, the services and the staff. It can contribute to creating a real "esprit de corps", to changing the way information is exchanged and also to changing mentalities, i.e. to show that the Commission is a modern administration striving also for transparency inside.

The fact that the Commission has a central intranet EUROPAplus does not prevent individual departments from having their local intranets dedicated to their own internal information.

Many services contribute to the sharing of information or of document management and finally to avoiding duplication of work. Information available on particular local intranets (at the DG level), insofar as it can be and should be shared, should use EUROPAplus as a communication tool, thus saving time and effort. This latter process is starting slowly. Email has become in the last 5 years a crucial means of communication. It should be noted that the email services of the Commission (Route 400 and soon Outlook) are not yet incorporated into the intranet services. Interaction between email and the intranet remains to be developed. The Commission's intranet is not used as a work flow tool.

EUROPAplus has become a very powerful and popular tool for internal communication and information. Hundreds of tons of paper have been saved, distribution costs have been cut. The potential for increasing work productivity remains substantial.

4. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The EUROPAplus web server runs on a 12-multiprocessor Unix machine physically based in our Data Centre in Luxembourg. It has 2 GB of RAM, 200 GB of hard disk capacity and it relies on Netscape Enterprise Server for delivering its content.

The same machine also hosts the Internet server of the European Union, EUROPA. The information is sent to the officials' workstations by "S-Net", the Fast Ethernet LAN of the Commission, connecting all buildings in Brussels and Luxembourg (bandwidth varies from 10 Mb/s to 632 Mb/s).

The Commission has two leased lines in order to grant Internet access to its officials, with a capacity of 8 Mb/s both for Luxembourg and Brussels.

All Commission officials have an internet connection. Almost every official has a computer, thus an internet connection.

5. EUROPAPLUS SURVEY CARRIED OUT IN JANUARY 2000

The survey carried out on behalf of DG "Personnel and administration" at the end of 1999 and whose results have been compiled in January 2000 shows a fairly high degree of satisfaction. The information producers have filled out this questionnaire. An enquiry targeting directly the users would perhaps have delivered different results.

All DGs have answered this questionnaire which dealt with EUROPA and EUROPAplus. It confirms certain facts we knew, i.e. that the biggest Web teams are with *horizontal* services. DG administration manages a very big site on EUROPAplus called GINA and has a network of some 34 people feeding in.

Some 16 *vertical* DGs have their site on EUROPAplus with a total of 32 people in charge. Most members of Web teams are sharing their job between the internet server EUROPA, the central intranet EUROPAplus and the local intranets. Demarcation between these different tasks seems difficult, understaffing is the rule. The overview of all budgets allocated to Web publishing, which results from the survey, shows a mix of budget lines and various resources allocated to Web creating.

Some DGs have difficulty in deciding whether to publish or not on the central intranet EUROPAplus or just limit themselves to their local intranets. Yet, there remains an obvious need not to publish everything on the internet server EUROPA.

Assistance delivered by DG Administration for EUROPAplus shows an overwhelming degree of satisfaction (6 very satisfied, 8 satisfied and 2 not satisfied). Technology gives also satisfactory results. Criticism would boil down to asking for an improvement in the Information Providers Guide, an improvement of the search engine, constant updating of data.

As to staff, all grades (A+B+C) are contributing to Web publishing. 23 DGs have a local intranet, 16 people dealing with the local intranets also worked for EUROPAplus.

6. SOME RECENT STATISTICS

EUROPA	1999-2000	EUROPAplus	1999-2000
Document hits per day		*Document hits per day*	
	May 697.411		May 155.000
	April 697.411		April 160.000
	March 871.170		March 161.000
	Feb. 904.105		Feb. 165.000
	Jan. 741.483		Jan. 168.808
	Dec. 597.709		Dec. 146.053
	Nov. 695.801		Nov. 157.410
Total document hits per month		*Total document hits per month*	
	May 26.219.064		May 3 246 298
	April 20.922.336		April 2.717.364
	March 27.006.269		March 3.700.986
	Feb. 22.085.302		Feb. 3.454.073
	Jan. 22.985.958		Jan. 3.376.161
	Dec. 18.528.988		Dec. 2.190.796
	Nov. 20.874.038		Nov. 3.148.214

7. STAFF AND MANAGEMENT OF EUROPA AND EUROPAPLUS

Both servers are managed with a very light staff structure. Centrally only 6 people deal with EUROPA, whereas EUROPAplus central team only has 3. But, in the different DGs people are working for both servers.

Globally around 82 people work in the Commission (Publications Office and DG Personnel and Administration excluded) at managing and developing web sites for DGs and services on EUROPA and EUROPAplus. Only 31% of them work full time for the servers. Thirty-two percent work half time and 35% less than half time. One may estimate that a total of 60 men/year are dedicated by DGs and services to animating their web sites, i.e. less than 2 people per DG and service.

In around 80% of DGs and services, the same team (one to three people in the vast majority of cases) is responsible for EUROPA and EUROPAplus and local intranets (DGs') at the same time. Working for EUROPA tends to absorb more time than working for EUROPAplus. The position in the hierarchy of teams working for EUROPA and EUROPAplus varies a lot from service to service. They can be in units dealing with information, documentation or even with IT.

The following bodies are involved in the management of both servers

a) The GCOM-IT is the strategic body which takes the main political decisions on overall architecture, budget, main streams of orientations of the internet and intranet servers, contents, IT infrastructure and support. It is chaired by the Secretary general, the vice-presidency is in the hands of the DG Administration. The permanent members are IT-Department, Budget and Audit DGs and the Legal Service. Are also members: the Press & Communication Service, DGs Enterprise, Information Society and Statistical Office.

b) The IT-department and its Data Centre in Luxembourg are in charge of the servers (machines), telecommunications, safety issues and general IT policy.

c) The servers were managed centrally by a small team of people belonging to the Personnel and Administration Directorate-General. The central team was responsible for co-ordinating the non-technical aspects of the interinstitutional server (coherence of approach, of contents) and relations with all the departmental information providers which feed in the servers. It also manages all the new features and the massive flow of information sent by the administration to its staff. This team is also the driving force and catalyst of new initiatives. Since 3rd April 2000 the two teams are separated, EUROPA being managed from within the Press and Communication Service (PCS) and EUROPAplus from DG Personnel and Administration.

d) Co-ordination is ensured via the EUROPA and EUROPAplus Editorial Committees consisting of the representatives of DGs and services. Constant back up is delivered by the DI teams according to the help needed (telecoms, network, officials' Internet access, search engine, etc.). A Guide for the information's providers has been specially designed for EUROPA and EUROPAplus, ensuring a homogeneous look and feel (available on-line on the intranet and on EUROPA but password protected).

Some development work (formatting in html, conception of indexes, graphical design, setting up of entire sites, etc.) is being subcontracted in a very limited way to external firms under special call for tender contracts.

The institution has been able to develop the servers extensively whilst relying on the goodwill of its employees. Future developments will have to be based on solid foundations, i.e. on professionalisation of information production and dissemination.

8. SOME FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS CONCERNING EUROPAPLUS

The fact that EUROPAplus is now run by the DG Personnel and Administration has probably made the DG more conscious of the fact that it has at its disposal a tremendous tool for internal communication. So the year 2000 will be full of novelties.

a) Internet address

EUROPAplus should in the course of the year migrate onto an internet address. This will make it easier for all sorts of new to define populations to access EUROPAplus. The intranet would then host everything, which by definition does have a restricted distribution. DGs would then define themselves what should be restricted and what should be accessed widely by groups of people belonging to the wide family of the European institutions, thus making redundant the interinstitutional intranet EUROPATeam. Technically, this will be quite a challenge and will split information into two categories.

b) Best practice

EUROPAplus has been selected by the Commission as a best practice to be shown in Lisbon in May 2000 during the conference on best practices in public administration in the European Union. This is certainly the proof that EUROPAplus has been recognised in its function as vector of information.

c) Departmental intranets

We hope that departmental intranets, i.e. those only accessible to limited populations (e.g. within a DG), will migrate onto EUROPAplus. DG Development has for instance already put its intranet on EUROPAplus, which is then accessible to everybody within the Commission, except some sub-collections of documents with restricted access.

d) Platform for exchanging information

Lately, some DGs have asked whether they could not use the intranet as a sort of platform for information exchange between DGs. In other words, the "leading" DG (in charge of a dossier) would like to know what other DGs think of its documents on a given subject. So it puts documents on the intranet for everybody to see. So instead of using heavy procedures like electronic inter-service consultations, it puts on the intranet a site containing all the information it would like other DGs to read. This information is seen, read or downloaded by others and after being processed within a given DG, it is sent back to the leading DG. The latter can then put on its site the new documents. This is fairly similar to a workflow procedure. The advantage is that participants can interact without the intervention of a central team, which only sees to it that certain rules, mostly web site management rules, are complied with. A lot of information is already exchanged between producers and users without any interference of EUROPAplus managers.

9. SOME SENSITIVE ISSUES

Managing an intranet like EUROPAplus is a tremendous task, the job is never finished. One has to get used to certain aspects like:

- the intranet belongs to everyone and to no-one in particular
- statistics are difficult to establish (they can only be fine-tuned manually) and not necessarily reliable. Yet, they are crucial in the healthy competition between services to be on the hit parade.
- bad habits persist. Using generic emails channels instead of using the intranet as a quick vector for communication (this saves bandwidth!)
- training remains a huge problem, since it involves important costs. It means training different populations for different purposes (browsing, writing html, doing ftp, etc.)
- regular updating must become a reflex

- retention of information, whether voluntary or not, should be discouraged
- the overflow of information creates a certain weariness. Some people do not read thoroughly enough important information
- duplication of information on different intranets can become a nuisance
- attracting various in-house bulletins onto the intranet is a difficult issue but worth trying (we are just launching an exercise of this sort with the DG's Newsletters)
- services dealing with very sensitive political issues would tend to neglect intranets (or use them only in the very ultimate phase) since they would rely more on traditional means of information dissemination, because they have the impression they have them more under control and are afraid of this electronic means, which seems less controllable
- it is wrong to assume that most users should read most information on the intranet. No, just like before, some people try to get informed mainly in their own fields of competence and work. The intranet only gives them the possibility to see further than their personal horizon (provided they have time for that).
- customising information according to each individual's needs is an almost impossible task, but new tools are emerging. Trying to take the commercial portals as an example creates illusions, since these have commercial objectives and do not customise, as you would like it as a normal end-user.

10. CONCLUSIONS

EUROPA has been developed in the urgency of the G7 conference mentioned earlier. So has been the intranet EUROPAplus. After 5 years of experience, one can say that both servers are a success story. This development brought the Commission to allow access to internet for all its staff.

Managing the intranet of the Commission is an invaluable exercise, since we discover what we expect; mastering information management remains the key issue. Some good thinking is no doubt vital to get out of the vicious circle IT or information domination.

Many high level managers within the Commission - notably the computer illiterate or computer neutral - are convinced that intranets are a question of technology, which means for them a

question they do not have to bother about since others are in charge. It should not be so, especially since information remains the core business and if one considers the fact that economists find little correlation between IT's expenditures and financial performance. But minds are evolving slowly ant the sheer bulk of information to be conveyed will push people to adopt other attitudes.

We must redress the balance and focus on information. Every business is an information business. How can we try to be more convincing and efficient? We shall have to see how each employee uses the intranet; there are as many ways of using an intranet as there are employees. We will have to discover who actually uses our information, observe how the available information is used, work more closely with librarians and adopt a more journalistic approach, which by the way makes the success of TV. Of course, these aspects have always been at the back of our minds but reactions show that these features have not been taken sufficiently into consideration. We will have to organise many meetings to convince all that managing information is everybody's business, we shall have to create more awareness, to train as much staff as possible. From data processing we shall have to switch to knowledge processing. Here lies the real challenge and probably the key to success!

Disclaimer: the views and comments reflected in this article are those of the author and do not represent the official European Commission policy.