

EUROPPlus, the intranet of the European Commission, knowledge and networking tool

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0. INTRODUCTION

Today, EUROPPlus is the internal Web server, i.e. an information channel 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 not access the Commission's Internet server 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 EUROPPlus was in fact created, in April 1995. It had been named EUROPPlus, because it offered an extra dimension rather than a mirror copy of EUROPA. This plus was all the internal information which could be put on line under the leadership of the Secretariat general, former DG X¹, former DG IX² and the IT-Directorate³. 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 gained access to the Internet, which gives EUROPPlus the potential to become a very powerful portal.

Nowadays, both servers live an independent life and their management is no longer shared by the same team, which means that many cross-fertilisations which were of benefit to both internet and intranet servers have been lost.

1. GOAL

The overall goal of EUROPPlus is to allow for a coherent, quick and transparent flow of information and communication between the College, the Directorate Generals (departments within the European Commission) 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 internal transparency. Simultaneously it can help pave the way to the e-Commission and e-Europe.

The fact that the Commission has a central intranet EUROPPlus does not prevent individual departments from having their local intranets dedicated to their own internal information. In the last year, three of these local intranets have migrated on the central intranet EUROPPlus. This contributes to a better sharing of knowledge and information.

¹ Directorate General "Information, Communication, Culture, Audiovisual". In the whole text DG stands for Directorate-General

² Personnel and Administration

³ Called in French "Direction Informatique" (abbreviated in DI)

In the last 5 years, Email has become a crucial means of communication. It should be noted that the email services of the Commission (Route 400 and now Outlook) are not incorporated into the intranet services. Interaction between email and the intranet remains to be developed. The Commission's intranet is not yet used as a work flow tool but many management applications have an intranet interface even if they run on platforms outside the intranet's platform.

2. TARGET AUDIENCE

The intranet is accessible to more than 20.000 officials or agents of the European Commission, in Brussels and Luxembourg, in the 23 cities of the European Union and in some 100 delegations throughout the world.

Many services contribute to the sharing of information or of document management and, finally, to avoiding duplication of work, at least theoretically.

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. There still remains a substantial potential for increasing work productivity.

3. CONTENTS

The number of documents on EUROPAplus is both tremendous and difficult to calculate. We know that the server hosts around 420.000 static pages. But databases, used for the management of internal procedures, do generate dynamic pages that are significantly numerous (see under 3.5). Counting the total number of documents available in dynamic databases is a difficult exercise, since the concept of document is difficult to define. For example, the number of documents in a database containing legislative documents is clearly defined and more easily computable, whereas a database containing phone numbers and the identity of the owners does not contain documents as calculable entities but only partial bits of information. We know for sure that the intranet gives access to at least 5.000.000 documents. The average number of document hits per working day is 160.000 documents.

EUROPAplus consists of all sorts of documents and collections of documents. They can be categorised as follows:

- 3.1. **administrative** information for the personnel emanating from the personnel and administration service
- 3.2. information coming from the different **services**. These can be either their intranets (this applies to five directorate Generals) or sites created specially for EUROPAplus.
- 3.3. **management applications** (for example the job description application launched recently)
- 3.4. information as **news and databases**
- 3.5. **document** production and management (notably legislative procedures)
- 3.6. information **retrieval** tools
- 3.7. what's new and **messages**
- 3.8. **portal** function, facilitating access to the Internet servers of all the institutions of the European family (Council, Parliament, Economic and Social Committee, etc. and Internet access generally)

3.1. Administrative information for the personnel coming from the General directorate "personnel and administration"

Usage statistics show that the administrative information used by the personnel counts for about 33% of all requests to the server but does not necessarily represent 33% of the whole contents of EUROPAplus.

This information may take the form of :

- organisation charts of all General Directorates of the Commission
- a whole series of data disseminated by the general department 'Personnel and administration' in its "Guide des informations de nature administrative" (GINA) hosts more than 7.000 files dedicated to :
 - staff matters (statute, staff reports and evaluation, etc.)
 - medical care and refunding of medical costs
 - furniture, office supplies
 - European schools
 - internal directories of all sorts
 - telephone directory of the Commission staff (persons searchable on line according to different patterns)
 - service directory of the Commission staff (staff searchable according to hierarchical structure, to keywords, by name)
 - internal job vacancies application (NADIA)
 - other
- an internal newspaper on-line called "Commission en direct" with many interactive tools (forum, small ads, personally speaking, arrivals and departures, etc.)
- a site dedicated to the administrative reform undertaken by vice-president Kinnock which allows for interactivity with the staff (created on December 11th 1999)

3.2. information coming from the different services. These can be either their intranets (this applies to five directorate Generals) or ad hoc sites created specially for EUROPAplus.

- intranets of services (Development, Enterprise, External Relations, Joint Research Centre and Trade)
- sites produced by Directorates-General (autonomous partial sites or excerpts from local intranets)
- translation services (on-line ordering of translations, terminological database Eurodicautom, automatic on-line translation via Systran, bulletins of translators, etc.)
- secretariat general services on line (for example manual of procedures, legislative preparatory documents)
- budgetary guidelines and rules, budgetary management database, standard contracts from DG Budget
- IT guidelines and services from the IT Department
- site from the Central Library

3.3 management applications

A few management applications have a web interface visible on the intranet even if they are destined for a limited target audience. The job description exercise, which was done recently for the whole Commission staff in the framework of the administrative reform, was only possible from within the intranet. This meant that whoever wanted to complete this form had to fill it in using the intranet. This guaranteed that EUROPAplus was known by everybody.

Most management applications will soon have a web and not a proprietary interface any more. This does not mean that the central management of EUROPAplus will have more work, it simply implies that the intranet will be the normal front office platform of all management applications used by EC officials.

3.4. On-line news and databases

3.4.1. News

News is being produced **internally** in many ways and is disseminated via the intranet. Some news produced **externally** by professional press agencies or specialised press bodies is bought by the Commission and distributed on the intranet as well. This information is very popular and contributes to better information for the average official of the Commission.

• *News from inside*

- RAPID, news to the outside world from the Press and Communication Service of the Commission (PCS), also available on EUROPA.
- EU-Review, a review made in-house by the Secretariat general and sent to the delegations of the Commission throughout the world. This gives a weekly overview of events, which happened within the various European institutions.
- Press Reviews written and sent electronically each morning to the server and redistributed around 8 or 8.30 on the intranet. These Press Reviews come from representations and delegations of the Commission and relate to the way European events are appreciated by the local press in different parts of the world.
- Press cuttings, excerpts from the press selected by the Press and Communication Service of the Commission (PCS) and redistributed via a database organised according to main themes or profiles
- Sources say, a news fact sheet produced twice daily, mainly centred on EU news
- Commission en Direct, the in-house newspaper (45.000 paper copies distributed weekly to all institutions, delegations and retired officials) is a source of news and administrative information. It also has an interactive forum dedicated to issues of general concern for the Commission staff

• *News from outside (subject to copyright, internal distribution only)*

- LiveNews, most European news wires on line, also searchable via keywords since organised as a database
- Telexpress, press releases selected by the Press and Communication Service of the Commission (PCS), issued three times a day
- Agence Europe on-line (in four languages), daily bulletin on-line each morning
- European Reports, bulletins published on-line twice weekly
- Oxford Analytica, a database produced in Oxford (UK) with an analysis of economic and financial world events, daily bulletins

- Reuters databases (Reuters Business Briefing, Reuters Energy Briefing, Reuters Insurance Briefing, Reuters European Union Briefing)

The intranet is a real mine of news but profiling, i.e. tailoring requests for news to one's needs still remains rare. Creating personal information profiles only comes with external information providers using databases, i.e. structured information. Many news sources are collections of documents that are not searchable as such.

The Commission is investigating subscribing facilities, which would bring the information to the user in a more automated fashion than now. Yet one must be conscious of the fact that adding individual profiles for all news arriving on the intranet remains difficult to realise. Heterogeneity of news casting platforms does not make the process easier. In this field, much remains to be done.

3.4.2. Databases other than news

The Commission buys in many information sources, which are not news. These are invaluable sources, their existence is not necessarily conspicuous on the intranet but contributes to a better information for all the staff.

We may mention, without trying to be complete, a huge database collection like Dialog Corporation (750 databases in the field of business & finance, chemicals, energy & environment, food & agriculture, law & government, medicine, pharmaceuticals, science & technology, social sciences), Lexis-Nexis specialised in law, Dun & Bradstreet (information about firms).

3.5. document production (legislative procedures)

The Commission, as a legislative body, produces many documents, introduces and leads many procedures. Today, most procedures rely on electronic document production and management. The stream of preparatory and legislative documents is available in databases. Counting their use remains a difficult exercise but methods are now appearing allowing for more reliable statistics.

- *Grefe 2000*

Grefe2000 and LegisWrite are computer systems which have been in use since 7 October 1998. They are used for:

- drafting official documents, whether legislative in nature or not,
- compiling complete dossiers,
- submitting them electronically to the Registry for approval by the Commission,
- monitoring the whole approval procedure,
- intervening at the request of the Secretariat-General, and
- electronically transmitting the dossier after adoption by the Commission to the other institutions and to the Publication Office (EUR-LEX, CELEX and Official Journal)

- *SG-Vista (Secretariat general Vista)*
This is a document repository. It contains all the documents emanating from the Commission's Registry. It also contains information on procedures similar to those to be found in Pre-Lex available on EUROPA.
- *CELEX*, the database containing the European law, is also available on-line internally. CELEX offers a simple and direct access point for obtaining legislative texts including the most recent publications of the Official Journal L and C series and pending preparatory documents.
CELEX contains 2.500.000 documents (all language versions included). In this context a document means an analytical part containing bibliographical, documentary, legal information. 850.000 of these documents contain a text as such.
- *EUR-Lex*, database containing the European official journal is also available on line. Whereas EUR-Lex on Internet only contains 45 days of on-line Official Journal, the internal copy of EUR-Lex contains official journals from 1998 onwards.
- *SCADplus*, bibliographical database, available on-line on EUROPA, is also on EUROPAplus. It contains a calendar of political events within the European Union, a practical guide to the free movement of persons, fact sheets about the main changes resulting from the Amsterdam Treaty. It also contains a glossary on institutions, policies and enlargement of the European Union and summaries and legislative follow-up documents on the policies of the European Union. SCADplus contains about 400.000 documents.

3.6. information retrieval tools

In order to navigate through this ocean of information, retrieval tools are indispensable. EUROPAplus offers different tools that facilitate information retrieval :

- a thematic index which is also searchable using a search engine. In other words, finding keywords is possible on the thematic index
- a search engine, which scans the whole contents (i.e. 420.000 documents). The search engine does not allow to retrieve information in proprietary databases whose entry point is EUROPAplus
- proprietary databases (proprietary meaning where collections of documents constitute a homogeneous set of documents like CELEX, EUR-Lex, SG Vista) have their own search tools
- a what's new entry, a notice board, a what's new of DGs sites, all this allows for easy search but more powerful and easier to use tools facilitating information retrieval are still needed.

3.7. what's new and messages

Different possibilities are used to inform the staff about new events:

- a generic "what's new" heading
- a message box for important political and administrative messages
- a notice board, for social events, conferences concerning the whole staff
- a "what's new of the what's new", i.e. the what's new of the different sites fed in by different services

3.8 portal function

In order to facilitate access to the Internet servers of all the institutions of the European family (Council, Parliament, and Internet access generally) a whole part of the Homepage acts as a portal. The official does not have to know the internet addresses of all servers of the European Union. He accesses them via this entry. Many internet links are also available, which makes EUROPAplus a very powerful tool.

4. BEST PRACTICES

Whenever an intranet is being created, many forces intervene which do not necessarily strive for the same goals. Luckily many people are open to changes and ready to accept the advantages the intranet offers.

Most appreciated features

Here are some features which are among the best assets of an intranet :

1) paper savings

1.400 tons of paper have been saved annually because

- service directories and the phone directory of all staff have been put onto the intranet. This is much appreciated. The information is much more up to date and can be updated with goodwill immediately. Searching is easy, the drawback is that you need a computer to find the information, without a computer you have no information
- the job vacancies and the administrative information leaflets have been put on the intranet . This allows quick transmission of the information, the drawback being that the information does not come to you any more, you have to look for it.

2) data bases like CELEX, EUR-Lex, SG Vista are really appreciated. The availability of electronic documents tends to increase dramatically.

3) news is there to delve into. You may select the source you are really interested in instead of only reading the newspaper you were subscribing to. The drawback might be that you feel overwhelmed by an information overload. You must find ways of reaching out for the sources which matter for you and neglect others which are by experience of less importance to you.

4) quickness and permanent availability of information are important features, which are counterbalanced by the fact that you become and are very dependent on a computer. Web fans do not understand that some information might not be available for them. They would tend to ask for a justification for the non-availability of this information.

5. SOME SENSITIVE ISSUES

5.1. Tools and server management

Statistics are difficult to establish and are not necessarily reliable. Yet, they are crucial in the healthy competition between services to be on the hit parade. The statistical tools produce raw data which can only be fine-tuned manually (2-3 man-days per month to fine tune them)..

We do not have yet any content management tool, which means for instance that the index by theme is managed manually, whereas using a data base for this purpose would simplify day-to-day management. A lack of appropriate tools is an important drawback, notably since the web team in charge is understaffed.

5.2. Strengths of EUROPAplus

EUROPAplus has different assets, notably if compared with the internet server of the European institutions EUROPA : categorisation of content, modularity of search, publishing rights granted to teams feeding in information

- 5.2.2. *categorisation of contents*

The main pages managed centrally have the advantage of being categorised. In other words, using intelligently the index allows for quick and easy retrieval. This being said, in view of the amount of information available on line, the index should be more complete. The thematic index can be browsed using the search engine, a facility not always available on internet or intranet servers

- 5.2.3. *modularity of search*

Retrieving information is made easier since the user restricts his search only to document collections relevant for him:

- proprietary databases have their own search modules, which facilitates information retrieval, as long as one knows what is available in a given database. In an intranet like EUROPAplus, a certain common knowledge of the institution is supposed to be present. This previous knowledge of a given environment in turn facilitates information retrieval
 - the content of the whole server has been subdivided in document sub-collections. The search engine can peruse a given collection and exclude others, thus reducing the background noise (unwanted replies)
 - some news are also searchable using the search engine for that sole purpose
 - certain local intranets, like the one from Directorate General Development (around 6.000 files) have their own search facility, allowing to browse only a specific site
- 5.2.4. *publishing rights granted to teams feeding in information*
- Production of information is fairly decentralised. Information providers have publishing rights. They simply have to abide by some guidelines laid down in an information providers' guide. They manage their own collection of documents. It is fairly straightforward and not too cumbersome.

5.3. Weaknesses

The weaknesses are either dictated by a lack of human resources centrally and locally or provoked by human factors.

- *5.3.1. No harmony in the way information is being presented*
The fact that certain intranets are finally incorporated into EUROPAplus means that there has been no co-ordination upstream. In other words, certain links to the central intranet will be replicated in some local intranets (for example link to the central phone book of the Commission).
Corporate branding might also be diluted, since the team in charge has not respected the common look and feel advocated by the central team.
- *5.3.2. Duplication of information and of work*
The same fact may lead local web teams to duplicate locally (physically and not with a link) the information centrally available, this is not the best way of using scarce human resources. By the same token, these collections have not been categorised nor included in the central index by theme within EUROPAplus
- *5.3.3. Customisation and personalisation fairly limited*
Personalising information apart from the categorisation mentioned before is hardly available on line due to lack of skills inside the central team.
The job description mentioned before has not been integrated into the central service directory. Developed quickly and in isolation, this application has not been designed to integrate certain elements of the service directory, which is a missed opportunity.
- *5.3.4. Updating is not yet a reflex, which means that many sites are not updated.*
The lack of discipline adopted towards paper information can also be the rule in electronic information managed by a huge administration. An updating culture must be developed.
- *5.3.5. Editorial Board*
The former editorial board, which was an excellent co-ordinating body, has been abandoned. This leaves the central co-ordinating team with a huge responsibility and with a lack of contacts with the different webmasters.

5.4. Human factors

It is wrong to assume that most users should read most information on the intranet. This is not the case. Just like before intranets were created, 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). The information overload syndrome does not have to be necessarily a corollary of an intranet.

5.4.1. Cultural barriers

Some cultural barriers persist, some people being rather hostile to the invasion of IT into their daily working environment. Yet, in the last year, sensitivity to information, which must go hand in hand with a certain command of IT tools, has improved tremendously.

- *Email*
Bad habits persist. Using generic emails channels instead of the intranet as a quick vector for communication (in the latter case it saves bandwidth !) should be avoided. People get weary of receiving these emails and some throw them away without even reading them.
- *Retention and overflow of information*
Retention of information, whether voluntary or not, should be discouraged. Furthermore, the overflow of information creates a certain weariness. Some people do not read important information thoroughly enough.
- *Training*
Training remains a huge problem, since it involves significant costs. Yet, training everybody is very important. It means training different populations for different purposes (browsing, writing html, doing ftp, even simply learning how to use the intranet properly, etc..)

2. *Web teams positions in the hierarchy*

Some Web teams are placed at fairly high levels of management, like heads of unit or similar functions, others belong to IT departments. In many instances, information seems to remain the main focus. A golden rule seems to be that units providing information are responsible for the contents they send; they might update the server directly or via an intermediary. The content manager has different responsibilities according to the service concerned. He might be king in his own realm or has to share this responsibility with people of different horizons.

3. *Day-to-day management*

The importance and usefulness of an intranet seems to depend very much on high-level management staff. If staff members are overwhelmed with daily management questions and not aware of IT questions or of the importance and usefulness of the intranet, they would tend to solve their information and communication problems via their usual ways of communicating. This means internal notes, phone calls and not necessarily using the intranet, losing thus timesaving opportunities. In other cases, but still not in the majority, some high level staff would use the intranet as a timesaving tool, giving direct access to the staff.

4. *Computer literacy*

Many high level managers are not necessarily computer literate and would still tend to use traditional information channels (newspapers, press, etc.). This can, in certain cases, represent an important drawback. One would then tend to find two main streams of information, **traditional** and **electronic**. Now and then, high level management would discover that what they are looking for is already on their Web, be it internal or external, and would be astonished about the fact that many people are more informed than they thought. This in turn would tend to convey the idea that secrecy of information is less easy with Web servers.

Some services would find Web servers very useful to quickly spread vast quantities of documents. Services dealing with very sensitive political issues would tend to neglect intranets (or only use them in the very last phase) since they would rely more on traditional means of information dissemination. They have the impression that this information is more under control and are afraid of this electronic means, which seems less controllable.

5. *Updating remains crucial*

Updating an intranet remains a difficult exercise because – just to give an example - administrative information relating to persons, although being co-ordinated centrally, is managed in a decentralised fashion, which means that certain owners of information do not transmit the updating information. A certain retention of information, whether voluntary or not, hampers updating. A lot of time and effort is put in convincing the owners of the information to update regularly and efficiently.

6. CHALLENGES

If EUROPAplus is really to become the focal point of information dissemination inside the Commission, different challenges will have to be met. Most issues are well known, the main difficulty lies in how to tackle them, since many of them imply "simply" a change of attitude, a modification of habits. **Changing habits does not have to be revolutionary, but it takes a lot of time and effort to change mentalities.**

Just a few examples of these petty issues might best illustrate the tremendous challenges they imply.

1. quality of the information put on the intranet

- 1.1. **updating** should be a reflex, old information makes no sense on a vector supposed to be fast, reliable and easier to update than paper documentation
- 1.2. before putting information on a site, has one **checked** whether someone has done something similar on parts of the intranet or is about to do it ?
- 1.3. consider all the data collections available on an intranet as a whole, as a document collection shareable, i.e. fragmented in easily browsable and searchable entities. This entails **subdividing** all the collections in sub-collections searchable as such.
- 1.4. **content quality** should be central to any information policy. For the first time in history, we have a tool which allows updating in almost real time, we should take advantage of this tremendous asset. Availability of the same information only once and publication speed ⁴ are vital elements of an intranet. Centralisation and decentralisation should mean to do the job in the most appropriate place. Just to give an example a central document repository avoids duplication of information and different levels of updating of the same documents put in different places on the same intranet.

2. sharing of responsibilities, avoiding the egoistic syndrome, teamworking

- 2.1. consider oneself not as a unique information provider or source but only as a member of a bigger **team** within the Commission. The information society directorate has tried to know how many people in all Commission's services are involved in one way or another with the new information society. This has revealed that many partial aspects are being dealt with in other services (social, IT, commercial aspects, etc.)

⁴ As an example: Should one publish only in html or privilege the Word documents in Acrobat Reader format?

- 2.2. create better **networks**, either inside one's own service, or between different services tackling the same tasks and inside a given sector, i.e. horizontal and vertical co-operation
- 2.3. EUROPAplus should find the appropriate co-ordination body which guarantees a corporate branding without imposing useless rules which delay production.

3. **better involvement of management and integration of management applications**

- 3.1. the job description exercise realised with all the Commission's staff could have been used in order to enhance the service directory on line. Due to fragmented decision-making, this has not been done. It could have resulted in a better use of costly resources. Management has there an important role to play.
- 3.2. the split of the teams in charge of EUROPA and EUROPAplus has meant less resources for EUROPAplus and less synergy between both servers. Co-ordination was easier when the common team was in charge of both servers. Practices applied in one case could be easily extrapolated and adapted. This dimension has now vanished, since both teams work in an entirely different environment

4. **sharing of good practices**

- 4.1. better networking means exchanging information about good practices. Best practices, total quality management, service level agreements should all imply greater and better exchanges between the centre and the periphery.
- 4.2. co-operation is the motto. Ideas can and should stem from inventive individuals but be better co-ordinated, thus allowing teams to co-ordinate, to create synergies, to realise economies of scale and to avoid duplication of work.

7. 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 vital to get out of the vicious circle IT domination 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. For them this is a question which 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 the Commission** and if one considers the fact that economists find little correlation between IT expenditures and financial performance. But minds are evolving slowly and 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 after all an information business. We will have to convince even more high level staff that each employee is not only a user of the intranet but also an information provider. 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. We shall have to switch from data processing to knowledge processing.

This is a lengthy process and one should never rest on one's laurels. Here lies the real challenge and probably the key to success !

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