

My intranet is not yours

Standalone

The European Commission is a large information provider, its Internet server EUROPA is well known from the Internet surfers. But inside the institution almost each department has an intranet web server, Jean-Bernard Quicheron working in the online information unit of DG X¹ will outline some of their features.

Introduction

The European Commission co-ordinates an inter-institutional Internet server called EUROPA, which is very popular among Internet surfers and presents all sorts of information for a wide public. Its success is demonstrated by the latest available figure for December 1998, i.e. **53,759,001** overall hits or **9,268,124** document hits.

The European Commission as a large information provider through its Internet server called EUROPA also has a general intranet, EUROPAplus. Both servers were presented at different online events. The intranet server EUROPAplus is also a very popular internal server with **10,496,081** overall hits in December 1998 or **1,836,489** document hits in the same month.

Yet, almost each department – called a Directorate General – within the Commission has its own intranet. We shall not single out some intranets in particular for reasons of confidentiality but the information mentioned relies on trustworthy sources. Among the 43 general directorates of services of the Commission, 34 have an intranet.

An internal survey has really shown that indeed "My Intranet is not yours". If the vast majority of intranets is of the Web type, there remain services where shared files are used for communication purposes.

In the following paragraphs, we shall deal with contents, tools and management. This will allow us to show how different perception can be. One should never forget that the Commission services deal almost with any conceivable matter, except defence.

Contents

The oldest intranet has been created in December 1995, some are still being created or strongly modified. In other words the scenery is very composite and ever changing.

It is impossible to say that there is a *standard intranet structure*, each department acting according to his own needs but also mainly according to his resources, which are mostly scarce. Pressure coming from the generic intranet EUROPAplus might influence the presentation of the local intranets (per department). It remains unclear what the role of all the local intranets will be in the long run in relation with the central intranet EUROPAplus.

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As to *contents*, it varies enormously according to the missions of the different departments. But as a general rule, the site would host a directory, a description of the main aims and tasks of the service, different internal notes and even draft minutes of working parties (i.e. under a management heading), some databases, invitations to meetings, forms usually used in the service, links to important Internet servers, a news heading and of course a what's new entry. Staff information (i.e. personal files) would not be accessible via the intranet but only to the officials responsible for staff matters.

Some intranets are managed via an editorial board but this still remains a minority of cases. On the whole the very light personnel structure tends to foster settling questions in a non formal way, a lot of leeway being left to the different actors. Only very sensitive issues would be dealt with at the highest level. The backing of the senior management remains absolutely essential.

Since the Commission has different Web servers (an Internet server, an Intranet generic server and many specific intranets), delimitation between contents is not always an easy task and motivation to feed in the different servers might fluctuate according to services. Some persons in charge might think they have fed in the Internet server, why should they do something different for the Intranets. There remains an important cultural barrier, though in the last year sensitivity to information which must go hand in hand with a certain command of IT tools has improved tremendously.

Tools

Just like the *browser* culture did not convince Bill Gates at the very beginning when Internet emerged, the IT community within the Commission was not conscious at the inception of the Web of the importance of good html-tagging tools. Fairly quickly things changed. IT products used by the Commission are, like in any private company, on a list of supported products, which means that help is available and granted by the IT department. Choosing a product – in a product management meeting – is not an easy task by definition. Hotmetal Pro was first used but finally Frontpage (3.0.2) won the competition. Many training courses are now being organised in order for the different teams to be able to use the html tool efficiently.

Graphical design can be very different from intranet to intranet, some staff would be real jack of all trades, and others would simply consider the intranet as a document repository. Yet, the trend is changing lately, a certain awareness of graphical design is there, while recognising that overdoing it is not the proper solution either. Luckily, many persons in charge would privilege contents while paying attention to a presentation of good taste. In some instances, it is not easy to have the competent staff. Teams are on the whole fairly reduced in size.

Management

Some intranets are co-ordinated at fairly high levels of management, heads of unit or similar functions, others are in the hands of 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 own realm or has to share this responsibility with people of different horizons.

Some teams produce a one-man show, others are real teams with a general co-ordinator in charge with the contents, with one or more Webmasters.

In very sophisticated teams one would find: a co-ordinator, a webmaster, an updating agent and a technical adviser, but this is rather the exception than the rule.

Persons in charge of the intranets are not necessarily IT managers, even if for obvious reasons IT departments are privileged partners.

Day-to-day management remains a crucial issue. The importance and usefulness of an intranet seems to depend very much on high level management staff. If the latter is overwhelmed with daily management questions and not aware of IT questions or of the importance and usefulness of the intranet, it would tend to solve its information and communication problems via its usual ways of communicating. It 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. So there is still to improve on that side.

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 (ot 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.

Updating remains the crucial point. Updating even one single 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 the 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.

Personally I write a small weekly **editorial**, whose function is to create an internal awareness of the existence of the intranet, presenting certain programmes of the departments, some issues as to information overload and information mismanagement. This example does not seem to be widespread. Spontaneous reactions to the editorial but also to what happens on the intranet site are very scarce.

One has the impression that the intranet site is just looked at very quickly and not necessarily read, even if the editorial or the important messages appear conspicuously on the Homepage. Would that mean that a certain weariness appears, when confronted with an oversupply in information? Yes and no, people are there to work and accomplish certain tasks and what is on offer on the intranet is not necessarily of immediate interest to everybody. Furthermore, they would tend to look and not react, neither positively nor negatively; many people when asked whether they have seen a given editorial or a given piece of news would reply that they found it interesting but did not feel the need to communicate with the team in place. This would tend to mean that if one wants reactions, one deliberately has to provoke them.

Conclusion

This fairly short survey of the intranets within the Commission was an invaluable exercise for us, since we discovered what we expected, 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 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 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 !

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