

EUROPPlus, the Intranet of the European Commission Information at your finger tips

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Abstract

In April 1995, in the wake of the setting-up of the Internet server EUROPA in February 1995, the European Commission developed an Intranet called EUROPPlus. EUROPPlus is an extended Intranet destined for the officials of the European Commission. It has become a management tool designed for and by the Commission's officials. Its aim is to create a corporate spirit, to give fast and user-friendly access to the main internal and external information sources needed by the staff in their daily work. Furthermore, it should contribute to reducing the quantity of printed material distributed within the Commission. The Intranet has now been in existence for more than two years. Its growth potential is enormous. Its contribution to informing the Commission's staff will certainly lead to better information for the general public.

Introduction

In February 1995 in Brussels, the European Commission hosted the G7 Ministerial meeting dedicated to the "Information Society" and launched its Internet server called EUROPA. It was an immediate success. The Commission wanted all of its officials to have access to EUROPA and therefore created a mirror copy on an Intranet in April 1995. When the full potential of this tool was realised, it was renamed EUROPAplus, since it gave access to the Internet server and, as a plus, to internal Commission information.

Since then EUROPAplus has been the internal information server intended exclusively for the use of European Commission staff. It has been installed, progressively, on the personal computers of all officials. In August 1996 the total monthly number of hits was 989,638 (corresponding to 339,402 document hits). Eight months later in April 1997, the server registered five million hits (corresponding to 1,141,969 document hits). Without any doubt, the Intranet server is a success.

Definition

EUROPAplus is an extended Intranet destined for the officials of the European Commission. It reaches about 17,000 persons, principally in Brussels and Luxembourg, but also in 23 offices and more than 100 delegations of the European Commission throughout the world.

It has become a management tool designed for and by the Commission's officials. Its aim is to create a corporate spirit and to give fast and user-friendly access to the main internal and external information sources. Furthermore, it should also contribute to reducing the quantity of printed material distributed within the Commission.

Although the server is generally presented in English and French, some sites exist only in French or only in English since it is assumed that both languages are understood. Information can also be available in other languages than the two already mentioned, depending on who is producing the material.

EUROPAplus is accessed using the browser Netscape. The range of computers installed within the Commission varies widely, ranging from the already slightly outdated computer to the most powerful and up-to-date one.

Contents

The server is split into five main headings: News, Commission at work, Other sources of information, EUROPAplus and you and, finally, a navigation bar which looks like a spider's web and gives access to different hyperlinks. An index which allows for easy browsing or perusing the different sites is also available. The following list which gives some details of these headings is not exhaustive for the simple reason that the services offered are too numerous to all be mentioned.

1. News

This allows each official to be well informed about the Commission's activities. It contains certain information sources coming directly from the Commission and presented to the general public, for example, Midday Express (daily meeting with the press) and RAPID (a data-base full of news from the Spokesman Service, also available on the Internet server EUROPA).

There are also other internal press or information reviews coming from elsewhere, such as:

- *IGC data base (Intergovernmental Conference)*
- *EU-Review (a weekly summary of activities of the EU Institutions prepared for Commission delegations),*
- *Sources Say (2 editions a day of fast and concise information about EU activities)*
- *Telexpress (press releases, 3 or 4 multilingual editions a day)*

The internal staff courier called "Commission Direct" will also soon be available in electronic form on EUROPPlus.

2. Commission at work

This heading aims at presenting information to the Commission's officials which could be pertinent to their daily work. The Bulletin of the European Union, a well-known publication, is available on line (in French since 1994 and in all languages since January 1966), so is the Maastricht Treaty (and the Amsterdam Treaty).

Access, without the use of an Internet connection, is also available to the servers of different general directorates (some of them also on EUROPA); for instance:

- *Citizens First (your rights as citizens within the European Union)*
- *CORDIS (Community Research and Development Service)*
- *EURO (general information on the future European currency)*
- *I*M EUROPE (Information Market Europe)*
- *ISPO (Information Society Project Office)*
- *CELEX (data-base on line with a Web interface, containing European legislation, case law, preparatory acts, national implementation measures and parliamentary questions)*

In addition, the various services of the Commission can present themselves on a site called "DGs at work", which gives everyone an overview of what happens within the Commission.

3. Other sources of information

Any official surfing on this part of the Intranet will find an abundance of material of a practical, administrative or purely organisational nature. Amongst other things, information on the Central Library of the Commission (in Brussels and Luxembourg), internal financial regulations, staff statutes, daily administrative items (leave, travel, various entitlements, recruitment competitions, etc.), the ECU rate, information technology at the Commission and a overview of electronic information bought from outside can all be found here.

4. EUROPPlus and You

This is a section specific to Web sites. It contains the results of a survey done in 1996 about the Intranet's usage and satisfaction, guidelines for publishing on EUROPPlus, a site dedicated to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), some Netscape guides and the history of EUROPPlus.

5. Navigation bar

In the middle of the screen a navigation bar resembling a spider's web gives access to:

- *a welcome heading*
- *a suggestion box, which is widely used*
- *What's New (with direct links), which allows the user to see and access services added to the Intranet (including the access path for later searching)*
- *a search engine allowing queries through the whole site of EUROPPlus or sometimes on a specific site*
- *a link to the mirror copy of the Internet server, EUROPA*

- *the composition and tasks of the Editorial Board*
- *a "Who is who" which contains 5 directories:*
 - *Telephone Book of the Commission*
 - *Docurama, an overview of all documentary services of the European institutions*
 - *Directory of the Diplomatic Corps accredited with the Commission*
 - *"Who's Who de l'information" within the European Union*
 - *IDEA (an Inter-Institutional directory)*

Navigation on an Intranet remains a difficult exercise if specific information needs to be retrieved. Informing the user is a constant task and not particularly easy. The user population is so heterogeneous that a solution which gives excellent results for a particular group would have to be re-invented for another. For the time being specific information can be searched for either by using the index, which contains all main headings (even duplicating some entries for easier retrieval), or through the search engine. The managing team is convinced that the search and retrieval facilities offered by the search engine should be enhanced. However, no matter what is done in that field, training users will remain an important task, since information retrieval cannot be as immediate as certain users would like. An effort, however small, is also required from them.

Management

By definition all Commission services may contribute to the Intranet. The management has been entrusted to a small team, part of DG X (Information, Communication, Culture and Audiovisual), which co-ordinates the input and gives advice on any matter relating to the server.

A horizontal Editorial Board common to EUROPA and EUROPAplus (bringing together representatives from a number of services) meets once a month to define the general policy, debate conflicting matters or evaluate new projects. This board is open to any service wanting to join. In practice though, it is advisable to limit the number of participants in order that the Board remains efficient. Some drafting or think-tank groups may be set up to meet certain specific needs.

The Editorial Board (about thirty people altogether) is asked to examine new projects (sites) and to give its opinion, by electronic mail, within a week. This procedure is very fast and non-bureaucratic. Depending on the situation, the proposed site could be put in production immediately or slightly modified in order to meet the quality or coherence criteria commonly defined. In the event of a site being rejected by the Editorial Board, the site must be modified, a new version presented and the whole procedure gone through once more. Other bodies at a higher level than the Editorial board intervene to define policy or act as referees in case of conflicts.

The server has two components: a test and a production server. All new services are put on the test server before getting the green light to transfer their information to the production server. Certain services are allowed to transmit their own data directly onto the test server via FTP (File Transfer Protocol).

In order to avoid overwhelming the co-ordinating team with comments or suggestions relating to a given site, a "business card" system has been introduced. The section or service which created the site introduce themselves on this card which is accessible via a hyperlink. This card briefly describes the service, gives the launch date, the update frequency, the name and phone number of a contact person who will receive any comments sent directly via the suggestion box (most sites have this business card and a suggestion box). This system relieves the central team of an unnecessary burden and allows for decentralised management of the information and thus speed of updating.

Advantages and Disadvantages of an Intranet

Managing such a huge Intranet means facing a lot of challenges, both large and small. Paper saving can be tremendous. Information is distributed to everyone much faster. However, psychological barriers have to be overcome and co-ordination and management remain sensitive issues. Executives have to be convinced that an Intranet is a tool and not a game. IT (information technology) questions have to be solved quickly and should not hamper the information flow or hide the information challenge.

1. Advantages and facilities

- *Paper saving can be tremendous.* Publishing internal administrative information in an electronic form can lead to huge paper savings (hundreds of tons in the Commission), since some information needs to be distributed in great numbers (for instance, up to 40,000 copies for the staff courier called "Commission Direct").
- *Information is delivered more rapidly and to huge populations.* A lot of data-bases with outdated interfaces and query languages can now migrate onto Web interfaces (thanks to CGIs - common gateway interfaces) and be accessed by non-professional users. User friendliness and standardisation of Web interfaces facilitate access to information which can now be consulted and updated on-line. Physically distant user communities are as privileged and close to the headquarters as on the spot users.
- *Psychological aspects, healthy competition.* A healthy competition takes place between services, each wanting to be at least as good as the other. Each service is, so to speak, compelled to analyse what it does and to think of its objectives as part of a whole, since corporate spirit is put at the forefront of preoccupation. Suggestion boxes linked to the different sites are a source of fresh ideas. Electronic information tends to modify mentalities and reactions. Bureaucracy does not fit into this framework very well.

2. Difficulties and challenges

Management of people and information remains a great challenge and the same could be said for co-ordination. Co-ordination is not there for its own sake but to avoid chaos.

- *Co-ordination and management.* Central co-ordination is not easy, since the Web is, by definition, decentralised. It is important to make people understand that power is, in any case, shared (otherwise nothing would work) and is not the privilege of co-ordinating teams. Psychological and convincing skills are indispensable.

It is difficult to convince leaders that either existing teams dealing with information must be reconverted or that the central team must be reinforced without turning it into a centralised giant. For lack of human resources, the good management of the Intranet could be at risk.

Keeping to a certain simplicity of use and of coherent access paths also has its own difficulties.

The Intranet creates needs and justifying the necessity to have certain sites dedicated and reserved to a small user group can also cause problems. But this outside information (from professional information providers like Reuters, Financial Times, Knight-Ridder, Lexis-Nexis, etc.) has to be paid for and can be expensive which means that giving universal access to it is financially dangerous and generally not advisable.

- *Adapting to a new environment.* Convincing internal information providers of the need to constantly update their information sites is, and will continue to be, a tremendous challenge. Many managers, i.e. high level officials, are not necessarily sensitive to IT questions and this can constitute a serious handicap. Time for carrying out tasks such as formatting or rewriting of texts in order to adapt them to the electronic environment is very often under-evaluated. The EUROPlus co-ordinating team has to spend a lot of time convincing all sort of people that the Web is time-consuming, demanding and needs extra training efforts and skills.

- *IT specific questions.* Reading long texts on a screen is tiring. It is all the more important to be able to write or re-write information in a easily readable form and format (users will tend to print long texts and not read them on the screen). Overloading the screen with images and all sorts of icons and long texts can be counter-productive. Style should be simple and pleasant without going to the other extreme of being too simplistic.

Information Technology specialists are not always as open as one might think to adopting new Web technologies, since many difficult questions such as copyright issues occur for which there are no easy solutions. Security considerations can also complicate matters. Some IT specialists remain to be convinced that information is more important than IT.

The major challenge remains to convince everyone involved in the information and IT process that each of them is responsible for his or her own part and that the whole is worth more than its components.

Conclusion

Managing an Intranet involves many actors at various levels; information specialists, IT managers, graphical designers, writers and re-writers, decision-makers, documentalists, members of different co-ordinating committees, trainers at all levels, users of all sorts, information providers, designers and managers of data bases. All of them (and the list is by far incomplete) take part at different levels in the design and the use of an Intranet.

Nobody knows for sure yet how Intranets will evolve, since new and unforeseen developments occur each day. Managing an Intranet, and especially a huge Intranet like the Commission's, can only be a collective task where everyone has a say. The managing body has to act in as neutral a fashion as possible, yet not accepting just anything and everything since its aim is to strike the best balance possible between the various interests which are, by their very nature, conflicting.

Co-ordinating is a fascinating task but also very demanding. For it is essential that each viewpoint, wherever it comes from, be respected, integrated into a common vision and not allowed to dominate. At all times the managing team should be ready to listen to advice and criticism. Healthy management, professionalism and corporate spirit are its main ingredients.

The Commission's Intranet has now been in existence for more than two years. Its growth potential is enormous. Its contribution to informing the Commission's staff will certainly lead to a better information for the general public. There is no doubt that it is a way to serve the cause of Europe.

Disclaimer:

The views and comments reflected in this paper are those of the author and do not represent the official European Commission policy.