
The corporate intranet: the last tool of survival for the corporate library?

Alyn Jones

The Author

Alyn Jones graduated from Queen Margaret College, Edinburgh, in 1998 with a degree in Information Management. He is currently studying at the University of Edinburgh for his PGCE. He can be contacted at alyn.jones@ed.ac.uk

The Occasion

Alyn is this year's winner of the Group's Undergraduate Prize.

Abstract

Practical and formal steps in arranging dissertation research in the USA are outlined. (This experience can be useful to future students - and their supervisors: some practical tips are included.) After considering various methodologies it was decided to conduct case studies in eight large (California) corporations. These showed the importance of their Intranets in developing an up to date and successful Library and Information service. A full description of the research has been available on the www since the dissertation was submitted.

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Introduction

This document describes some of the planning and practical stages surrounding research that will be published in the April edition of the *International Journal of Information* [see 'References' below]. The research investigated in eight high tech firms in the western United States the role that corporate librarians played in the development, use and maintenance of their corporate intranets.

The research began life as an honours dissertation, the results of which can be viewed at <http://jimmy.qmced.ac.uk/usr/im94jone/>

In the beginning

Aware that I would be required - as part of my undergraduate course at Queen Margaret College - to start an independent piece of research in September 1997, I began thinking fairly early on about some of the topics I would like to research and investigate. This was helped in part, by the fact that I was encouraged to apply for funding from two award bodies (see Acknowledgements opposite) in January 1997. As part of this application process I had to provide a rough outline of the area I was hoping to investigate, so this had the advantage of "kick-starting" me into some provisional thinking.

During my third year of studies I had been on an industrial placement which allowed me to investigate and develop intranet technologies. Sun Microsystems had very kindly donated some equipment to my placement host: this not only provided me with hardware and software to investigate, but also provided links and contacts within Sun. I was hoping to use this work as a starting point for my research and investigate the area of intranets and hopefully to link it with Sun as a company.

After making initial inquiries with Sun personnel as to the feasibility of some research, I informed the funding bodies that I wished to apply for funding to fly to California and speak to the people responsible for Sun Microsystems' intranet. At this point I had no real idea of the shape, form or specific area this research would take (as is often the case when spending other people's money!)

Formalising and Organising

By July 1997 I was informed that I had been successful in my applications and that I had received funding to complete my "research". In September 1997 I started my honours year and had to decide on a research topic for my dissertation. Choosing the actual topic started with some hectic brainstorming (although some boundaries were already set by the fact that I had a few key points in mind already: California, Sun Microsystems, Intranets). The brainstorming produced about ten rather woolly dissertation titles. These were eventually whittled down to one rough title that was later refined into the one that appears and the top of the completed dissertation.

The general aim of the research was to find out what level of involvement, if any, the librarians at Sun had with the development and maintenance of the corporate intranet and base my research around this. Some questions that I wanted to ask were already forming:

- did the library use the intranet?
- if so, how? In what ways? How useful was it?
- how effective was the intranet?
- the advantages/disadvantages of an intranet from library perspective
- was the intranet a threat to the library
- was the library involved in the planning, implementation and/or running of the intranet

It was pointed out to me that, as I was going to be travelling all the way to Silicon Valley to speak to one company, it might be an idea to speak to other librarians within other companies on the same topic and get my money's worth (so to speak). The library manager at Sun Microsystems is a wonderful woman called Cindy Hill. Cindy, it seemed knew everyone, and she provided me with names of other librarians in other companies. Using this contact information and armed with the name Cindy Hill I phoned these librarians explaining briefly who I was, why I was calling and asked if I might e-mail them some further information.

In general, all the librarians I approached were very happy for me to come to speak to them and were very generous in their time with my research. By December I had arranged meetings with librarians representing eight different companies in California.

Research Methods

At the same time as organising the practical side of research (ahhh, the joys of car hire, flight arrangements, accommodation & travel insurance) - I was immersing myself in the literature and deciding on appropriate research methods. As I was using a qualitative approach for my research there were four main approaches available. The table below summarises these:

Table 1 - Approaches to qualitative research

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGIES			
Approach	Brief Description	Time scale needed	Previous use in IS research
Action Research	Problem solving approach. Suitable for projects that requires specific knowledge. Produces definitive results.	Long	No
Ethnography	Researcher immerses him/herself in field of study Researcher observes study from "inside out".	Long	Yes
Grounded Theory	Theory is developed during research through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. Requires high theoretical sensitivity for success.	Short-Long	Some
Case Study	Used to investigate interaction between factors and events. An empirical approach to research.	Short	Yes

(* IS - Information Systems)

In the end I used the case study approach for my investigation. The case study approach has been described as an

“empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1984).

The description above provided a sensible rationale, given the topic that I was going to be investigating. Case study research operates much in the same way as all other research: “evidence is collected systematically, the relationship between variables is studied and the study is methodically planned” (Bell, 1992). The case study approach allows a picture or model to be built up that illustrates relationships and patterns of interaction between variables. Typically, the use of observation and interviews are employed for data collection and this investigation was no different.

Post data collection

Once the data was collected it needed sorting. I made sure that the tedious interview transcription period was completed fairly quickly and then the process of marking up and coding the material began. This made reference to the key points arising from the data collection much easier to access. It was then a simple case of examining what the literature claimed with the results of the data collection. This produced some interesting results, many of which have yet to be fully investigated and are listed in Appendix C of the final dissertation <<http://jimmy.qmced.ac.uk/usr/im94jone/appendices.htm>>.

One major problem that I kept running into was word length. The final dissertation had a maximum word length of 10,000 words (with a generous 10% leeway). The completed dissertation, before editing, was around 20 000 words which meant an awful lot of editing needed to take place. Some of the material was dropped, other results were merely noted rather than developed and were delegated to the appendices of the document.

The dissertation was completed and handed in for marking in May, 1998. Two days after the submission the whole document was published to the web. I felt very strongly that the results of this

work, and indeed the whole document, should be posted online. I had used many online sources during the writing of the research and, as well as wanting to give back to those I had borrowed from, I also wanted to add to what was already out there.

Since posting the document to the web, the research has received nearly 50 000 hits.

Summary of Results

The results of the work suggested that the case study libraries were heavily integrated with the corporate intranet. The integration of library services and library presence on the intranets observed was widespread, ranging from static information pages to impressive and ambitious projects that demonstrated innovative and clever use of technology. The librarians spoken to, for the most part, were actively involved in pushing this technology forward, delivering library services to meet their increasing customer demands.

End Note

One of the most frequent e-mails I receive as a result of posting this work to the web is from students completing dissertations or research documents asking for hints and tips. Below are some rough guides and good practices to follow.

1. Get a good research supervisor. This, in my opinion, is the most important thing. Without my dissertation supervisor my work would have been severely underleveraged. Having someone who has walked the steps before, who is constructively critical and thoroughly demanding is a God send. However, while this is often outside your control, there are a few things that you may be able to do to “swing” a good one in your direction; consider research in the current interest area of your ideal supervisor, speak to them, ask them if they would consider taking you on, get noticed.
2. Read thoroughly. Consume all available literature on the topic you are going to investigate. Read widely (both in topic and form). Do not limit yourself - read journal articles, web pages, trade literature, newspapers, magazines, books, interviews. Be inventive in finding material that others might not have read. Often reading by author, rather than by topic is helpful and uncovers gems that might otherwise have been missed.

3. Read critically. Evaluate everything you read - over time you will build up a framework of who said what and where. Poor material is often as useful as good material - you can contrast bad material with good or highlight inadequacies in previous research.

4. Get organised. When you are reading and collating reams of information it is imperative that you keep track of what you have read. Number all your reading material and then buy some blank postcards and a filing box. On the postcards write down the references of each document along with the number that you have given the work. Keep the postcards in alphabetical order of author and keep the reading material in numerical order. This way you can cross reference and find anything quickly.

5. Be polite. When contacting potential research candidates manners are everything. You have very little to offer them - they have much to offer you. Make the experience for them as pain free as possible and find ways to make it enjoyable for them. Do not burn bridges - you not only ruin things for yourself but also others trying to conduct research.

6. Keep going. There will be times you want to quit. There will be times when you just can not face revising work that you have already revised a hundred times. There will be times when you lose all interest in what you are doing. There will be times when you no longer care about getting this work in. At that point eat some chocolate, breathe deeply and keep going. It does end eventually.

References

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Book Reviews

Line, Maurice B., MacKenzie, Graham, and Sturges, Paul (eds.) **LIBRARIANSHIP AND INFORMATION WORK WORLDWIDE 1999**. London, Bowker Saur. 1999. 353 pages, hardback, 24 cms. ISBN: 1 85739 297 3 Price £105.

The latest, and eighth, in this series of reviews of professional activities worldwide provides an invaluable overview of the current scene, supplemented by full, and extremely useful bibliographies. The latter, in many ways, are the most valuable part of the series since they provide an up to date literature survey in a manageable format, organized under the selected topics that constitute each chapter.

As did its predecessors, this volume opens with an overview of the current scene, provided this time by Jack Meadows. He sees the information world in a state of transition, and highlights factors such as the increasing move to electronic formats of publication, the trend towards digitization as a solution both to conservation and storage problems, and the ever-increasing scope of the electronic library.

As in every issue, national, academic and public libraries each have a chapter dedicated to their recent developments and a new slant is provided on government information. This year a global overview considers not only the right of the public to know what governments are doing and the need to make information widely available; it also considers the rôle of government printers, deposit libraries and the Web in disseminating information. The problem that this last presents in denying access to many is not overlooked. It is a pity that Nurcombe's book on official publications which takes a similarly global view and was published in 1997 by the same publishers as this survey, is not included in the bibliography.

Education and training is a new feature and the authors, Joy Kirk and Svetlana Sellers, both from Sydney, one a teacher and the other a student, discuss the frequency with which Schools have changed their names to include Information, or to