

BARRIERS TO ACCESS: INTRANET AND INTERNET PORTALS

Kate Arnold

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The Internet provides librarians with a wonderful opportunity to expand their role in any organisation. With a well organised, user-friendly intranet or internet site librarians can re-invent their role. This session provides a practical approach to how to get the most out of your intranet/internet site. It will examine the main issues to consider when developing a site, with illustrations from National Grid for Learning and the BBC Library's intranet site, Research Central.

*Kate Arnold
Content Manager NGfL,
Becta, Milburn Hill Road,
Coventry CV4 7JJ
e-mail: kate_arnold@becta.org.uk*

Introduction

This is intended to be a practical session examining the barriers to access to web portals, showing how we as librarians can help to remove these barriers and increase access. I will be illustrating this with examples of two sites that I have worked on:

an intranet site – BBC Research Central.

an Internet site – National Grid for Learning (NGfL).

Since I agreed to give this talk I have left the BBC, and moved to Becta to work on the NGfL, and this move has made me realise how important our role as librarians is, and how we can really benefit everyone by helping to remove the barriers to access.

At first glance you would not expect these two sites to have a lot in common, particularly since one is an intranet site, the other an internet site, however, they do. I would like to start by sharing the main similarities now as background, and will go into greater detail about the individual sites later.

- Large, diverse audiences - all BBC programme and support staff; while the NGfL caters for all learners from early years to lifelong learners.
- With very different needs and wants and uses for the information.
- Differing time scales for speeds of response – a journalist producing a news programme and child doing tonight's homework both require speedy responses, while a teacher preparing next term's lessons and a producer working on next year's output require slower responses.
- Self service – no need to go through an intermediary like a librarian or teacher.

Before I examine barriers to access and look at the basics of intranet and Internet portals, I would like to mention that I am hoping that you will gain some benefit from what I have to say:

- if only reassurance that you know more than you realise, that your library skills are transferable and that you can use 'old skills in new jobs';
- the case study element will provide you with ammunition to

convince others that you can do something, or to provide evidence to clinch a business case deal. I know this one works. While in the early stages of developing the BBC intranet site, Research Central, I found it difficult to convince my bosses that the site would have a positive not negative effect on enquiry levels (e.g: levels would go up, not down as predicted). I found that once I returned from a fact finding visit to the US with evidence about what had happened to CNN, ABC, NY Times and Time Warner, suddenly people listened.

Barriers to access defined

To begin with let us look at some definitions of barriers and access:

Barriers: 'a defensive stockade or palisade; a fence or other structure to bar passage or prevent access'

Access: 'a way of opportunity, of approach or entrance; (v.t.) to locate or retrieve information (comput.)' (verbs transitive)
(from Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, 1983)

Having defined these words, let us examine the barriers to access to web resources. For speed I have grouped the barriers into three categories.

Access – getting online

Infrastructure – technical support, fast online connection – all the things we take for granted when we have pcs on our desks.

Time – Do you have a pc on your desk? Do you use your pc all day to manage your work-flow? Some groups of users do not have permanent, unlimited access to pcs. Teachers for instance, have to find the time at the end of the day to fit in use of the pc.

Equipment – at home or in the office? High tech or low tech?

We as librarians must not forget we have had access to online databases, on desktops, for last ten years, and more recently to e-mail and the Internet. It is only been in the last couple of years that this has happened to other groups within companies and other organisations.

Skills – finding the right stuff

Information literacy skills such as searching, organising and retrieving information can be as basic as how to use an index or search engine.

Most people do not have the research skills that we librarians possess. We have always thought about how to use info skills to find the right information, and how to organise it for future use.

Which leads on to:

Knowledge – knowing where to look for quality material

Knowing what is out there, and how to access it has been one of the librarian's much underrated skills. As has our ability to evaluate and analyse a source for its quality. We all know how to judge a book's value (well-known author, publisher, good quality paper, an index, no mistakes etc) all of these apply to web sites. But does the average user know about this? A point echoed by Sheila Webber's⁽¹⁾ comment about the Millennium generation taking search engines for granted but not understanding how they work or how to get the best out of them.

Those are the barriers. Notice how I have emphasised that the librarians take on each of them, and how they appear not to be barriers to us, since the skills we possess mean that we have the ability to use the barriers as gates. Does that not mean, however, that we have tended to become 'gatekeepers' or 'toll keepers'? I think this quote aptly sums up the situation:

'Some of the speakers at the UKOLUG conference started me thinking about the changing roles of the intermediary or librarian as technology increases. The traditional idea is that the information intermediary was a barrier between the end user and the system. One can imagine a hostile librarian sitting at a desk and protecting her collection from disruption'. Annabel Colley⁽²⁾

It shows that in a lot of cases we ourselves impose barriers to access for our customers. Probably out of a fear of change for our roles but also because, for so long, we have acted as an intermediary – organising interpreting, retrieving and analysing information for users through our beloved reference interview. The Web takes that luxury away. Suddenly our users have access to a vast library of material, much of it very up to date but, alas, it is not organised or evaluated. That is where we can come in, and help to facilitate use of this and other resources. The Internet is very much a two way process, an interactive medium. So we have to rethink our

delivery model. It is not difficult, really just common sense, and there are lots of good case studies embodying best practice out there.

So what is in it for us? Why change?

Why should we remove the barrier and allow access to everything? We should do it because it will make our roles easier, since we will be:

- Providing resources to match user needs – moving from a ‘just in case’ resources model to a ‘just in time’ model.
- Making our jobs more enjoyable, by allowing users to do their own basic (usually the more mundane) queries, while leaving the more complex or inconvenient searching to librarians. Maewyn Cumming and Lucy Cuthbertson⁽³⁾ found this to be true in a recent survey of government departments.
- Encouraging the practice of sharing, particularly examples of best practice.
- Developing of the librarian’s role to include coaching and promotion of services. This can allow you to get closer to your user communities.
- Improving the organisation’s information literacy skills.

Intranet/Internet Portals – some basics

Planning, planning, planning are the key elements of any successful portal. If you follow the guidance given by Dot Duckworth⁽⁴⁾ you cannot go wrong. The basics apply equally to whatever type of site you are preparing, whether it is for intranet (internal consumption) or internet (external consumption).

The key essentials are:

Who is your target audience?

What are you aiming to achieve. Plan the portal around the users needs and wants. Do not impose an information structure that fits with how you use the web. Think about the types of information sources to be included and a site structure that matches the way your users perform tasks.

How is this all going to be achieved? You really need to think about promotion, training and the evaluation and feedback mechanism. If you plan to add value to your organisation, how will people find out about the site?

Some practical examples

- *BBC Research Central*

Research Central site was developed as an intranet-based portal providing all 26,000 BBC staff with access to library catalogues, commercial databases, web research advice and a directory of some 500 professionally evaluated websites. The site was developed in response to a demand from users for easy access to reliable web material and Information and Archives (I&A) vast collection of resources (books, cuttings, film, video, sound, still and music to name a few), preferably at the desktop. Plus a desire from I&A to adopt a more proactive approach within the organisation.

The project team of 6 started work in November 1999, and the site was ‘soft’ launched in March 2000, when a further 4 people joined the team to provide end user training prior to an official launch in May 2000. The site has been astonishingly successful, achieving 1 million page impressions in the first 9 months. For further information about the actual development of the site and examples of screen shots please refer to Sarah Agarwal’s article⁽⁵⁾.

Success factors

A number of factors helped in making the project a success:

Clear objectives: We had 5 clear objectives for the site, a 6th was added after implementation⁽⁶⁾.

Timetable: We were fortunate in having a part-time consultant to help with the technical side of the project. He brought project management skills, which were invaluable in establishing a timetable from the start of the project, and then making us stick to it.

Team: Carefully chosen to ensure we had the right mix of people with research background, understanding of the customer needs and web expertise.

User needs: We spent a lot of time, almost the first month of the project, just talking to users about their information needs. We developed a feedback process to allow a continual dialogue with users once the site was launched.

- *National Grid for Learning (NGfL) portal*

The National Grid for Learning (NGfL) strategy was launched in 1998 with the aim of creating a connected learning society. The strategy covers

three areas: infrastructure; content and practice. The portal (one part of content) and infrastructure element of the NGfL initiative are managed and developed by the British Educational Communications Technology Agency (Becta), the government's lead agency for ICT in education.

The NGfL portal (www.ngfl.gov.uk)⁽⁷⁾ provides access to a network of educational materials and resources that support learning, teaching and training. All sites linked from the portal must go through a registration and approval process which includes meeting a set of quality criteria so that users can be confident that any website carrying the NGfL logo has pledged to maintain high standards. Content on the NGfL is organised into 13 sections, each contains a directory of links to specific websites of interest in or for that sector. The portal was given a major update and redesign in January 2001, and now has links to over 300 websites. It receives more than two million hits per week.

In the future, we are looking to expand and develop the content team's advisory role and work more closely with content providers to ensure that their online resources are appropriate to user needs. Through work with focus groups we are continuing to improve the scope, quality and accessibility of resources on the portal.

Recap on the basics

To create a successful intranet or Internet portal you need to ensure the following issues are thought about and effectively planned. (Tania Olsson and Vicky Web's 'I' Page case study is a good illustration of this⁽⁸⁾.)

User analysis – know your users, keep referring to them to make sure your product is 'fit for purpose'.

Information sources and structure – think about what resources to include on your site and organise them with users in mind.

Design and navigability – keep design simple and consistent, check out Jakob Nielsen's www.useit.com site.

Promotion and training – tell users about the site and keep promoting it at every opportunity.

Feedback and development process – completes the loop, keeps you in touch with users needs. Ensures the development process is interactive and responsive.

The future ...

Finally, some inspirational thoughts to end on about what the future holds for our profession. One set of comments comes from a librarian, the other from a computer writer. First a librarian's viewpoint from a news library leadership course run by Nora Paul in 1999, during which we discussed swapping old roles for new roles. I think you will agree that the list provides food for thought.

Waitresses to tour guides – moving from serving up information to pre-packaging it, and adopting a more pro-active role.

Transactional to transformational – from production line process to promoting change.

Clerks to coaches – more for news librarians, but still relevant for others – helping to facilitate change by providing coaching in information literacy.

I have it, to I know who has it – encourage the practice of sharing and improving knowledge management.

Second, a computer writer, Andy Oram,⁽⁸⁾ listing his top 10 predictions for 2001 said:

'The field of library sciences will become the next hot career path.'

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