

BIALL Foreign and International Law Seminar

Other papers include a description of the FLAG and FLARE projects by Peter Clinch and Hester Swift. We are very grateful to Hester because she has also contributed an excellent and extremely clear survey of sources of US legal information which is based on the presentation she gave at the BIALL Seminar on Foreign and International Law held earlier this year. We are also grateful to Lesley Dingle as she has contributed no less than three items to this issue, including her paper given at the same seminar which is a comprehensive survey of the materials available in the field of international law. Both these articles should be of long-term value to any legal information professional needing to undertake legal research in either of these areas.

Current Topics

Our Current Topics feature includes a very practical article by Wendy Small on how to manage your knowledge management and library resources through the recession. Her key theme is that these resources must always be business critical and this may include new

ways of working which should be embraced as the future shape of law firms begins to emerge. Penny Bailey has contributed a fascinating account of her career as it has moved from law librarian to managing director of her own company and covers the highs and the lows she encountered.

Craig Gerrard attended the 8th Nordic Law Library Meeting in Finland recently and has reported on the sessions where the new Finnish National Digital Library project was discussed. We have Part 2 of Lesley Dingle's interview with Professor Bob Hepple, who was hugely influential in shaping labour law in this country during the late 20th century and Lesley has also written a review article of a recent book on the use of digital technologies in academic law libraries.

Correction

In the obituary of F. Paul Richardson published on pages 154–5 of Vol. 9(3) two dates were given incorrectly. Paul became responsible for law at Hammersmith Public Libraries in 1957 (not 1975) and he retired in 1985 (not 1957). Our sincere apologies to Tina Richardson for these errors.

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KS and Tell: Harnessing Web 2.0 at the College of Law

Abstract: Tony Simmonds describes the various initiatives undertaken, and the lessons learned by the information staff at the College of Law's multiple sites, in relation to social networking including blogging, wikis, and social bookmarking.

Keywords: social networking; law colleges

Introduction

For some years, Knowledge Services staff at the College of Law have grappled with the challenge of harnessing Web 2.0. This article reviews candidly that experience, and the lessons we have learned along the way. It has been an exciting journey, but also bumpy and fitful. Success has alternated with false starts and setbacks. Enthusiasm has contended with some resistance. But overall the benefits far outweigh the difficulties, changing

definitively the way we manage and deliver information services at the UK's largest law school.

From command to collaboration

John Chambers has been CEO of CISCO Systems since 1995. CISCO supplies much of the hardware infrastructure of the internet, and in 2000 it was ranked the most

valuable company in the world. In a BBC radio interview broadcast in March 2009¹ Chambers reflects on the pervasive role of “command and control” in steering such successful companies. However, looking forwards, he forecasts a sharp shift:

“I think if you look back in a decade from now, command and control will be a dinosaur. There will be times when you command and control, but the majority of decisions will be collaborative. They will be equally as fast, probably better thought out. Command and control will be more 20% of how you run a company, as opposed to 80% or 90%”.

Software tools that allow people to communicate and share knowledge over networks will enable this surge in collaborative working. They promise to alter the fundamentals of work, permitting better flows of information and more open, distributed decision-making. The potential exists to unleash fresh waves of creativity and productivity at every level of organisations. Information professionals can and should lead this transformation.

That is the promised land – one probably all too familiar to journal readers and delegates at library conferences over the last few years.

But enough now of the promise: the remainder of this article takes an honest look at how the reality has stacked up for one organisation. As we all know, gaps and obstacles tend to separate ideals from realities.

Who are we?

Knowledge Services (KS) is a small team that provides a hub of information expertise and innovation for the College of Law. We work closely with the Information Officers who run libraries in each of the College’s seven Centres, providing infrastructure and support, and involving them in projects as appropriate. Many recent projects have focussed on connecting the College’s vision and activities with Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, start-up pages, social bookmarking applications and wikis. Our method has been to use new tools, to gauge their impact on established ways of working, and then to seed interest in the wider College community through example and advocacy.

LESSON 1: Dare to experiment ... and to fail

There can be no benefit from Web 2.0 unless you plunge in and dare to experiment. This is true of any service innovation, but Web 2.0 is such a rapidly shifting landscape that there is little point waiting for a settled paradigm to emerge. This also means that there is a higher risk of failure than many managers are accustomed to (for example, we devised downloadable podcast tours for each College library – take-up among students was so tiny that we soon abandoned the idea). In

our profession, hesitancy is often more of a risk than recklessness: just throw the tools out there and see what happens!

Blogging – a timeline

Blogging has been a fruitful social networking application for us. Here is a timeline:

- 2006: Management increasingly aware of social networking phenomenon, but lack time to keep fully up-to-date and uncertain which tools to implement; time allocated for colleague to maintain a current awareness blog, to sift options/track trends/ease information overload; active until 2008.
- 2007: Member of KS staff becomes first College employee to work entirely from home; begins blog to manage/record activities, shared with line manager; software: Blogger; still active.
- January 2008: Launch “KS and Tell”; blog written by KS manager, for invited audience of KS and library staff; software: Blogger; still active.
- September 2008: Separate library blogs directed at students at each College Centre; software: Wordpress; all still active.
- January 2009: KS staff using blogs within MS Sharepoint, for example to share news and hearsay among the senior management team.
- March 2009: Pilot blogging tool within the virtual learning environment (VLE); used by Bar Vocational Course students to discuss ADR case studies; also used by Careers staff to communicate with students and used between students to discuss outcomes of Staff/Student Forums.

LESSON 2: Keep tabs on security

Discourse within social networking tools tends to be informal. Often (as with all the pre-2009 examples listed above) they are hosted outside institutional firewalls. Both these factors sharpen the risk of people expressing themselves in a way that may be inappropriate for the potential audience. They also increase the chances of commercially sensitive information leaking out. We have learned to plan for, and then to keep close track of, who can access different applications. Security considerations do not disappear because applications come within the firewall – as anyone tangling with MS Sharepoint access rights will confirm!

KS-ing and Telling

The “KS and Tell” blog is now embedded as the mainstay of information sharing among the College’s knowledge and library staff. Spread across seven locations, these staff seldom have the chance to meet face-to-face. Blogging provided a breakthrough in team communication and in



Figure 1: Web 2.0 applications at the College of Law

fusing a community of practice across this multi-site environment. It means fewer emails, especially when all staff are invited to respond to a proposal. Building a single archive makes it easier for people to check back on news and guidance. The archive function also assists the process of inducting new recruits, who can easily glean the topics that preoccupied their new colleagues in the weeks and months before they arrived.

One KS manager is responsible for maintaining KS and Tell. New posts appear daily, around one quarter submitted by other staff. The style is informal, and everyone is invited to make use of the comments facility. Although most staff are enthusiastic about the blog in principle and read it regularly, the two-way traffic of informal social interaction has perhaps been sparser than anticipated. Staff choose other media, such as social messaging, for light-hearted work banter and gossip – just as student Facebook groups are alive and well, in parallel with the College's formal Alumni scheme.

LESSON 3: You can choose the tools, but users choose how to interact with them

Web 2.0 tools are democratic and socially adapted tools. Expect users to surprise you with how they choose to engage with them (or not!) Do not mandate how the tools are to be used more than is absolutely necessary.

Start-up pages

As with blogs, our use of start-up pages has followed a trajectory from personal to institutional. Some KS staff began to experiment with Netvibes and i-Google for organising their private web resources around 2006. The following year we began to see in external blogs themselves a fresh and diverse resource for vocational legal education, and we wondered how best to showcase this emerging content for students and staff.

We chose Pageflakes as a flexible and user-friendly solution. An information officer mapped a range of external legal blogs to the various Compulsory and Elective subjects (now termed Stage 1 and Stage 2) on the Legal Practice Course. The result is a directory under broad subject headings, embedded within the library services page within our VLE. Soon afterwards, we were encouraged that course designers began to recommend individual blogs within teaching materials.

LESSON 4: Web 2.0 will keep your users up to date – but you have to keep up with Web 2.0

Social networking applications are ephemeral. Blogs especially come and go. It is essential to allocate staff time to maintaining discovery tools such as start-up pages that are provided for users, weeding out dead wood and adding-in emerging resources. Also plan for the risk of the publisher of free social

software itself going bust, for example by backing up your content.

Social bookmarking

Going into 2008 the KS team detected a growing problem. Valuable needles of electronic content, such as practitioner e-books, were becoming less and less visible to users in our growing digital haystacks. We had maintained lists of links to free legal web resources for some years. But how could we avoid users missing our most expensive content?

Including links to electronic titles in our OPAC was only part of the solution. Being limited to teaching and to one discipline, we could not justify the cost of meta-search tools (which permit cross-database searching in many university libraries). We wondered whether free software might provide the answer once again, and so we started to look more closely at the functionality of the social bookmarking tool Delicious.

In Summer 2008 we bookmarked and tagged a wide range of digital resources (both free and subscription) within Delicious. We used the tags to structure groups of links, arranged by legal subject and also by College course. Using Javascript, these groups were then dragged from Delicious into HTML pages and posted to various locations within our VLE. Users have responded positively to the outcome and now, when we test them, we no longer have to fix broken links in multiple locations.

LESSON 5: Why pay?

It is astonishing how much sophisticated software is available on the free internet to facilitate social networking. Besides staff time, there is little cost barrier to experimenting.

The role of Delicious is invisible to users in this context: our pages of links mirror instead the familiar feel of the VLE. However when we then resorted to Delicious to index policy documents on the staff-only intranet, we incorporated tag clouds which link into the Delicious site. Many staff users responded with bewilderment and scepticism. Adding some explanatory text on-screen helped, but this approach still has not caught on; for some staff, this device is too far outside their comfort zones.

Wikis

A small group of KS staff tried out a wiki for team collaboration in early 2008, focusing on developing the capability of our OPAC. They continue to use PBworks (formerly PBwiki) to share ideas and documents and are impressed with the functionality it offers.

Late in 2008, KS staff gained access to Microsoft Sharepoint. Wikis have proliferated in this context, including a knowledge-base on how to use Sharepoint

effectively, and another to gather ideas for the conference presentation upon which this article is based.

In 2009, a wiki tool was purchased for the College's VLE. Various pilot projects have followed involving Bar students in aspects of mock trial preparation and a process of evaluating these is ongoing.

In a separate VLE initiative, all staff at one College Centre were broadly invited to contribute ideas to a wiki concerning the content of new pages about their Centre. The response to this was mixed.

LESSON 6: The first time people are introduced to a social networking tool, clearly define your purpose

People feel apprehensive about new technologies. This feeling is magnified when they are asked to build its content with contributions that fellow staff or students will read. To get people on board, start with a narrow and limited purpose, and state this clearly.

Cultural conservatism

Professional lawyers will feature prominently amongst the client base of most readers of this article. Although there are many exceptions, it is safe to say that lawyers tend to be wary of change and informality and very sensitive to risk. A senior lawyer colleague summed it up pithily recently when he appealed for staff to "ask permission before they use their initiative"! This inevitably leads to some cultural resistance to social networking, characterised as it is by devolution of control, lack of ceremony and recurring negative publicity in the media.

LESSON 7: Confront lawyers' caveats head on

If your environment is characterised by lawyerly conservatism, be pragmatic and proactive. Begin by experimenting within the information team. Lawyers respond positively when proposals are accompanied by a tangible prototype. Nurture legally qualified colleagues who happen to be IT enthusiasts and ask them to advocate new schemes. Anticipate and answer risk-related concerns before they are raised. Finally, keep abreast of initiatives at competitor organisations. These can provide valuable leverage to win over sceptical management.

The future

Looking ahead, we expect the Web 2.0 landscape to continue to shift rapidly and in unexpected ways. The rise of microblogging is an example. Some of us are experimenting with Twitter and Yammer and thinking hard about how to harness them for the College. (I was struck after delivering this presentation to discover that colleagues back in the office followed what I said via live Tweets from the hall.) We have so far held off from establishing a library presence on Facebook, on the basis that students may resent institutional intrusion into "their" social space, but debate over this continues. On other fronts, we are preparing for RSS to play a growing part in current awareness for teaching staff. We expect management to drive increased cross-functional working across the College. Finally, we are very excited by the potential of virtual classroom technology and webinars to enhance the learning experience of students.

Web 2.0 is a journey with no fixed destination. The pathways continue to unfold, and to multiply.

Footnote

¹Broadcast available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0028gcl>

Biography

Tony Simmonds began his legal information career at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies. He has been at the College of Law since 1998 and is currently Deputy Director in the Knowledge Services Department. He is based at the York site.