

CASE STUDY

The Regional Co-ordination Unit



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MEDIASURFACE



IAN JONES – HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS, THE REGIONAL CO-ORDINATION UNIT

CASE STUDY


Modernising Government Office network for efficiency and cultural gains

THE REGIONAL CO-ORDINATION UNIT (RCU)

The RCU exists as a bridge between the Government Offices for the Regions (GO), and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Established in 2000, and located in the Regional Development Group of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the Regional Co-ordination Unit provides a centre of operations for the GO network, and works with the GOs to improve the regional and local delivery of government programmes, so that the needs of local communities are met.

As well as managing the network, part of our remit is to promote our ability to deliver Government policies in the Regions. We also ensure that regional concerns and interests are properly reflected in central Government and that area-based programmes are properly designed and co-ordinated to achieve maximum effect.



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TEACHER TRAINING AGENCY

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THE CHALLENGE

Each regional GO was maintaining its own website on a separate IT platform, each using different technologies. This distributed method of maintaining websites was proving costly and complex, making it practically impossible, at a national level, to move content between sites, and to enforce regulatory standards such as website accessibility.

All of the regional offices had their own websites, developed internally, many had put a lot of work into them, but they lacked uniformity. Content with a national theme was being produced 10 times over, each office differing in style, format and quality.

There was a lot of early resistance to this project. The individual GOs were not happy when we took the decision to rebuild the network of sites. The Government Office for London had a really good website for instance. In order to ease tensions, we had to produce something they were all happy with, that was as good as, or better than, the best in the network.

In the long run we wanted a system to ensure quality and depth of regional and local information. We wanted to reduce time wastage from each office producing separate national content and ensure uniformity in these documents. Our overall aim was to make it easier for users to navigate across the regional sites and find information on the same subject in different regions with a single click.

THE SEARCH FOR SOMETHING BETTER

We convened a procurement team to look at content management solutions. The selection took around four months and considered a range of solutions. Comparisons were then drawn up and assessed against other possible systems. It was key to find a system that met our specific and complex requirements. We needed to get buy-in from all users of the system, who ranged from non-technical to experienced web managers, and ensure adequate support at a technical level.

THE SOLUTION

Mediasurface presented us with a solution that would fit well with our needs. Its non technical content authoring tool, Morello, was a big differentiator in the market and it was immediately apparent that this could enable the buy-in we needed across the network.

The main reasons for our final selection were the speed and scalability of the system – its ability to get sites up and running in a short timeframe, and its flexibility. Mediasurface was chosen because the product's capabilities matched the complex requirements of the GOs and because it was good value for money. It was the best choice for our needs and had the potential to grow with us, as well as the option to host GO intranets under the same umbrella if we chose to go down this path in the future.

After selecting a platform on which to build and host our eleven sites, we spent around two or three months in an intensive consultation period, finding out what the GO's regional partners wanted from the sites and getting feedback on the design as it was evolving.

Having purchased Mediasurface's Government Site Pack, we reworked this quite heavily. We looked at the best practice from each of the existing sites and took plenty of time to look at what others were doing (both in public and private sector). The final result was a far cry from any of the legacy sites.



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TACKLING COMPLIANCY

Accessibility was an important focus for us in the design of the new sites. Part of the purpose of the GOs is to communicate with every member of the public and key partners, making sure they are fully aware of the range of services, government programmes and initiatives the regions have to offer.

After initial website proofs we moved away from the boxy accessibility-driven look, to a more design led approach. We didn't want to sacrifice looks over ease of use or vice versa and were confident that we could set an exemplary standard. Aware of differing expectations on website accessibility standards in the public sector, we aimed to produce the best network of sites that we could possibly manage. Our goal was to exceed government targets and achieve WAI AAA status on the entire network of sites. External auditors have checked the sites and in-depth examinations have included extensive user testing. In addition, we convened a group of our own staff with varied disabilities and carried out some informal testing, making further adjustments based on their feedback. We have achieved AAA status.

A NEW SITE

In September 2005, a new family of eleven websites, made up of a National entry site www.gos.gov.uk, nine regional GO sites and the RCU website was launched, pretty much hitting both budget and timescale. The launch was hindered slightly by the General Elections as we were not allowed to launch sites during this period.

Using Mediasurface has allowed us to replace 10 disparate websites. We now have a set of websites with a uniform, corporate feel - they look like part of the same family and can talk to one another. This gives us the ability to look across the regions and make comparisons. Initial feedback has been that the sites are a huge improvement over the previous ones. These enhanced websites are a very powerful tool for direct communication and reputation management with our key partners and the public

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The RCU web team now maintains both the national and RCU websites, as well as setting standards and producing relevant national content for use across the board. This system ensures quality, currency and depth of regional and local information, whilst the need for the regional offices to produce their own versions of national content has been eliminated. There is now common national content available to all, plus a central library of images and each GO office has its own team of content authors developing specific regional information.

There are currently 30 content authors, a figure likely to rise into the hundreds; all the content authors are from non-technical roles and it was for this reason that we chose Mediasurface's innovative user-friendly content management application Morello.

Currently, with a few thousand web pages in total - another number that is expected to rise dramatically - we have editorial systems in place and Plain English training available, to assure uniformity and quality of content.

CULTURAL GAINS

There have been cultural benefits across the network. A lot of the IT staff have now



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moved on to separate, more technically specialised projects and many have become more editorially literate. The new system has enabled more buy-in from both business users and IT staff.

The content management system has driven a cultural change across the network. People are beginning to think more about their websites and what to put on them. In-depth site statistics are now available and can show the best performing sites and areas that people are visiting most. Thinking about how to improve their sites and being able to compare with what works well on other sites, is keeping the GOs on their toes and spreading best practice across the entire network. We now also have a 'mystery shopper' specifically to improve individual sites which is helping to maintain standards across the network.

HOW IT HAS BEEN RECEIVED

Internally and across the Government Office Network, it has now been accepted that we have successfully raised standards. Staff are all really pleased with the new system and the look of the new family of websites.

Initial feedback from external partners and the public has been that the sites are a big improvement and page impressions have more than trebled compared to the old sites within the first six months. Favourable comments are coming in from a wide variety of users, most recently from the Teacher Training Agency which commented: "A modern interface for the public sector – easy to navigate, contemporary in look and significantly enhancing stakeholder communications. What a breath of fresh air!"

BENEFITS

In terms of return on our investment, we should start seeing significant savings in the 2006/07 financial year, with efficiency gains right across the network as well as infrastructure savings on the 10 previous hosting and server contracts which had varied in price dramatically.

The family of new sites outwardly presents us as a joined-up network, as opposed to the individually operating government websites that were previously in place. It is an instrumental means of communicating with our external partners and the public. Our content management system is a communications system for the entire network of offices - not just another IT system.

A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

A policy group has now been convened to take requests for new services. These may include such services as digital TV and WAP, as it is relatively simple to repurpose this content through the Mediasurface system. We are also looking at the possibility of hosting GO intranets on the same system. The new sites are central to what we do as a network, and a massive cultural change is happening. If we decide to undertake the intranets project then I am confident we will not have to cope with the same initial resistance barrier.

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