

UCISA Award for Excellence 2001

Project: Project SPECMAIL (Specialised Mailing Service)

Institution Name: University of Bradford

Originating Department: Management Information Services (MIS)

Contact Details: Graham Hill, MIS Director
g.c.r.hill@bradford.ac.uk

Objective of the Project/Service

The business driver for Project SpecMail was the need to improve internal University communications, which had been highlighted as a key area of concern and a priority in the University's Corporate Plan. The objective was to reduce the number of untargeted paper circulars. These were to be replaced with a timely, once a week, email bulletin with web links, while retaining a paper copy for ancillary staff without web access facilities. After the projects initial success, the project scope was extended to include targeted mailing services, and support for an electronic voting application for internal elections. The project was developed at no cost, using existing resources and with no additional investment in hardware and software. The staff briefing element of the project has saved £15k per annum recurrent in print costs.

Description of the Project/Service

There are three related elements:

1. Staff Briefing

The University has eliminated the use of untargeted paper circulars to individual members of staff. These were sent around the organisation to various groups of staff, clogging up the print service with uncoordinated requests, and clogging up the internal post with multiple sheets of individually addressed paper. It was an inefficient way of communicating with staff incurring delays between message conception, and actual delivery to the individual's post room. For staff away from the University it could be several weeks before the messages were picked up.

To begin with, the individual paper sheets were collated together at the start of each week, and a single front sheet summarising the details was stapled to the front. After a short period, the individual sheets were eliminated in favour of a single summarising sheet with links to further information on the Staff Briefing web site. This enabled staff to get used to the idea that a change was imminent, cut down multiple circulations during the week, and highlighted the significant environmental resource implications of saving paper. This new approach supported the University's published environmental policy. The next stage was elimination of the paper circulation to all staff with e-mail addresses, by creating an electronic mail summary of the Staff Briefing with embedded links to further information in the web Staff Briefing. The circulation method for this e-mail had been continuing in the background and involved the use of existing shareware called Majordomo/MajorCool. The technically innovative elements of the implementation were in four parts:

- Automatically subscribing staff to the Majordomo list, and automatically dealing with staff leavers and new starters from the University Human Resource System

- Creating a single unique ID number for all staff (sounds easy when you say it quickly but very difficult indeed for staff that leave and return within a tax year, and who do not give the University – or do not have – a National Insurance number).
- Providing a re-usable and flexible way to create new distribution lists as required
- Identifying all staff who did not have active e-mail accounts and providing a mechanism for delivering the Staff Briefing on paper.

This part of the project was implemented in March 2001. Each week Staff Briefing now reaches approximately 1,500 staff electronically, and 450 staff on paper. If required, urgent messages can also be sent to the Staff-Briefing list. This has been used very occasionally, but it enables all staff with electronic mail to be contacted within an hour if required.

2. Targeted Mailing Services

The next stage of the development was the creation of targeted mailing lists, and the creation of a simple supporting web site called Specialised Mailing. Lists were created for each of the major Planning Unit (School) structures and departments, so that more targeted mailings could take place within an Academic Schools. We were also asked to create lists for different groups of staff by pay scale (Academic, Academic-Related, Clerical-Technical etc). In fact, the lists are produced using simple criteria with data extracted from the Human Resource system. In fact, there are any number of groups, which could be created (all female academic staff, all Grade 2 Academic Related part-time staff over the age of 50 etc). So far, we have not been asked to create these types of list although the flexibility exists. This service is also able to differentiate between staff who have active email accounts and those staff that will require printed circulation. The service was launched in October 2001.

3. Electronic Voting

The availability of targeted lists was then used to support another related initiative which we called electronic voting. For many years, the University had struggled to implement a complex Single Transferable Vote system for its internal elections to Senate, Council, Court, and other University Committees. Paper was used to circulate notices of election, nomination forms, followed by Paper ballots and then results. The whole process was clerically intensive and required careful preparation of electoral lists. Over twenty elections were required as a result of new School based structures implemented in Session 2000/1. A new electronic voting system using the web was launched in October 2001. This enabled the whole process to be conducted electronically. The targeted mailing lists were used to circulate the right election materials to the right electors, and were also used as the basis for verifying the elector when they were ready to vote. Electoral turnout for the elections was at least as good as the paper system, and final results of the election were published within two hours of the poll closing (also distributed electronically).

Supporting documentation about the Project/Service

The Specialised Mailing Site can be viewed at:

<http://www.brad.ac.uk/admin/pr/mailing/>

Current and archive copies of the weekly Staff Briefing are available on-line at:

<http://www.brad.ac.uk/briefing/>

The electronic voting web site can be found at:

<http://www.brad.ac.uk/briefing/elections.htm>

Names of Staff involved:

Graham Hill – Project Co-ordinator (MIS)
Dr Stephen McCain – MIS Technical Consultant
Ms Clare Gibbons – Web/New Media Officer
Mrs Diane Dewhurst – MIS Service Desk Clerk
Mrs Susan Carroll – MIS Service Desk Clerk
Mrs Michelle Warren – MIS Development Team
Ms Paula Burnett – MIS Support Team
Technical Staff in Learning Support Services
University of Bradford Print and Copy Centre

g.c.r.hill@bradford.ac.uk
s.mccain@bradford.ac.uk
c.s.gibbons1@bradford.ac.uk
d.c.dewhurst@bradford.ac.uk
s.m.carroll@bradford.ac.uk
m.j.warren@bradford.ac.uk
p.j.burnett@bradford.ac.uk

Support of Institution UCISA Representative: Mr G Hill and Dr S J Houghton