Article

InfoAccess — platform for the distribution of Southern African information

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Abstract: *Local information distribution in electronic form in South Africa is a new and growing industry. Research shows that in any country the needs of users of information are largely for local information and to a lesser extent for overseas or external information. CSIR InfoAccess offers not only a local electronic information service to information seekers, but is also available to database owners wishing to distribute their own information into the market-place. The link to the Worldnet Gateway is critical in this respect since it not only promotes the distribution process but also makes the service available to the non-expert searcher.*

1. Introduction

To understand the development of InfoAccess and its distribution channel Worldnet Gateway, one has to understand two thrusts in the IT world — that of re-positioning of products and services into electronic media for distribution and the continuing thrust to capture the end-user market. These trends are a reflection of the general trends in business of electronic trading, quality as a differentiating factor and the just-in-time approach.

2. Reasons for the development of InfoAccess

Many factors contributed towards the development of InfoAccess by CSIR Information Services.

2.1. A changing CSIR

In the last five years CSIR has undergone a change from a research organisation — often described as a university without the hassle of students — to a technology transfer organi-

sation. One of the favourite similes our President uses to describe the activities of the organisation is that of ' a funnel and bridge' — funnelling in to this country technology appropriate to solutions or needs, modifying it as necessary and then bridging it in to companies and communities within Southern Africa. As South Africa emerges from its isolation, so this activity plays a crucial role in assisting companies to compete in the global market.

2.2. The need for local information to become available electronically

Research shows that in any country or in any organisation, information needs are satisfied in the majority of cases from local or in-house resources and to a lesser extent from external resources. If we look to our local sources of information, electronic availability is not high. Thus a need for information to be organised in databases which are available for distribution in various electronic ways was identified.

2.3. Entering the global village

As South Africa re-enters the global village, not only will local companies seek sources of both local and overseas information, but countries north of our borders and in other continents will seek information about this region.

2.4. Commercialisation of information resources

CSIR has always had databases relating to its research activities and in Information Services these were the basis of several of our information products. Development of our information platform allows commercialisation of some of these databases in ways not possible previously.

2.5. Moving mature products into a new growth phase

Some of our information services were at a mature stage of the product life cycle. The new platform will enable the Division to push these products into a new growth phase through delivery via a new medium. It will also allow development of new products.

2.6. Following information industry trends

The trend worldwide, not only in business generally but also in the information industry in particular, is towards greater speed in delivery of services, attention to quality of services and customisation, just-in-time production and what some call the virtual product.

2.7. Capturing the end-user market

No database or information service can survive in the days of high labour costs without attracting the large end-user market. Such an exercise, however, requires special approaches which were not features of the online industry of previous decades.

3. Features of InfoAccess

3.1. The information management and retrieval software

The development of the information management and retrieval software also fitted the funnel and bridge approach, with a basic information package being purchased and customised to meet our needs of offering an online service and of producing our other existing products in both the same and new ways.

InfoAccess databases are organised into both fixed and variable length fields and allow searching of the same, either individually or collectively. Searching may be done in command mode through a language closely resembling the DIALOG command language or via menus. Thus the service meets the needs of experts accustomed to using sophisticated approaches to focusing on documents they are trying to identify. Searches can be done online or through storing and batch updating for an alerting service.

Usage is also possible by that elusive end-user, the person in his office interested in a do-it-yourself just-in-time approach but who has never done searching before. This is possible because of the alternative of a menu-driven approach to searching with extensive help screens and guidance.

Various views of the database are available and this feature has made it possible for databases to be mounted which contain confidential documents. There is also the potential to design niche market views, an important aspect of the move to end-user usage.

Output from the service is available in various formats and may be received electronically or on paper. An online document ordering facility is also available.

3.2. The client management system

The clients of the online service and of the products coming off the production platform are managed through the client management module. This allows clients to be registered for the service and identifies them as they log into the service. Their activities as they interact with the databases are tracked, thus allowing billing for services rendered.

3.3. The communications interface

The Worldnet Gateway is the communications interface for the InfoAccess service, allowing clients' varying types of computer from the 3270 dumb terminal to various types of PC to be used as a workstation. In addition a Minitel may be used.

Worldnet Gateway is the key to widening the audience for the service from expert searcher to end-user, using a whole spectrum of possible workstations.

4. InfoAccess — a three-pronged service

4.1. For information experts

The InfoAccess service thus offers to experts the ability to search 14 South African-produced databases in command mode via a language very similar to one many know, i.e. DIALOG, or using menus. An alerting service facility and online document ordering are available. Output may be received on screen, printer or disk, or routed to the mailbox facility of the Worldnet Gateway. Training courses are run on a regular basis and there is a help desk facility for client support.

InfoAccess is an information provider to the Worldnet Gateway and in this way contributes a local content offering to the information resource of the Gateway. Fourteen databases are presently available, ranging in subject matter from management and human sciences information to various fields of science.

Experts are thus able to offer to their clients a search, alerting or document delivery service from material highly relevant to the South African environment and for which full text is available in this country.

4.2. A delivery platform for others to use

Equally importantly, the InfoAccess platform is available to database owners who are interested in commercialising their own information through making use of the platform and its Worldnet Gateway links. At present two databases not owned by CSIR are distributed in this way. Thus just as CSIR database owners are giving new life to old products and services, so database owners outside of CSIR have the potential to do the same. Such distribution is handled under a joint venture agreement between CSIR and the database owner.

4.3. Drive into the end-user market

InfoAccess is an important aspect of the drive to provide a one-stop information resource via Worldnet Gateway, through providing a platform by which local information can be fed to the Worldnet Gateway. In order that this service be a viable commercial venture it is necessary that not only the expert market but also end-users themselves become clients of the service.

Strategies already mentioned to promote this drive are:

- Menu-driven search capability.
- The capability of Worldnet Gateway as the communications interface to allow a variety of workstations to be used for searching. Capital outlay for clients is thus minimised.
- The ability to tailor particular views of the information.

In the coming months, alternative pricing strategies and niche market views of information will be addressed. There will be an ongoing drive to identify new local information resources but particularly those containing all the information required — i.e. not only full-text databases, but directories and statistical databases.

The end-user service offers to clients the opportunity for a just-in-time approach to electronic information searching for problem solving and decision taking. It also offers to CSIR and other information professionals a resource for delivery of the virtual product.

The author

5. Conclusion

InfoAccess is the CSIR's information management and retrieval platform through which the Division of Information Services delivers local electronic information to clients, both specialists and end-users. It is an important local information provider to the Worldnet Gateway. It is also a platform made available to owners of information outside CSIR who wish to commercialise or distribute it into the market-place. In this respect the link to Worldnet Gateway is critical. It offers owners of information an opportunity for repositioning products and services. As South Africa re-enters the global village, organisations will need to both retrieve information pertinent to their activities and their environment and to make information available to organisations outside our borders. InfoAccess together with Worldnet Gateway is one way of achieving this end.

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Rosemary McGillivray worked as an analytical chemist in South Africa and in the UK before becoming an information officer at Unilever in the UK. She joined the CSIR Information Services in 1981, specialising first in chemical information management and retrieval. She managed the InfoSearch and InfoScan services of CSIR and was also involved in the production of the *South African Directory of Databases*. She is now Manager of the Worldnet Gateway Service and CSIR InfoAccess.