PARTNERSHIPS IN THE SUCCESSFUL CORPORATE INTERNET PROGRAMME: THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL'S ROLE

Della Jacobson, Information Specialist
Sherritt, Inc.
Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta

Abstract

Responsibility for a corporate Internet programme will typically go to an individual within the information services or computer resources group. The information professional given this responsibility must have the communication skills needed to forge effective relationships between a diverse array of individuals, functional work groups, and departments. The opportunity to establish effective working relationships is realized when common goals are shared, roles are defined, information is communicated, and conflicts are resolved.

The number of corporations establishing Internet connectivity is growing exponentially. In many cases little consideration from a corporate wide perspective has been given to what this tool can and cannot do, the impact that it will have on the organization, and how the service will be implemented. Once a company has jumped on the Internet bandwagon, responsibility for the programme will typically go to an individual within the information services or computer resources group. The information professional given this responsibility must above all else have the communication skills needed to forge effective relationships between a diverse array of individuals, functional work groups, departments, and agencies external to the corporation. The opportunity to establish effective working relationships is realized when common goals are shared, roles are defined, information is communicated, and conflicts are resolved.

Ideally, the motive for establishing an Internet programme would be determined prior to acquiring the technical connections. However, a reality for large companies is that pockets within the organization will acquire access through commercial providers or the computer resources group will acquire an Internet
connection as part of a bundle of telecommunication fibers, when creating links to remote corporate locations. Consequently, companies often discover the need to address the Internet issue after one or more groups within the organization have already begun to use the tool. The information professional charged with the task of creating an Internet programme can use the experience of these people to the advantage of the programme. By working with these people, the initial reasons for their pursuit of this technology, their satisfaction with their current level of service, and their insights into how it could be put to use throughout the company can be determined. By establishing a relationship with the company's "Internet pioneers", the programme coordinator will have experienced users as a source of information and the opportunity to ensure that the needs of these employees are met by the programme.

If widespread support for the programme is to be achieved, the goals must be defined and the value must be communicated. From the most sweeping perspective, the goals of any Internet programme must fall in line with the business objectives. Pushing the paradigm down to the lowest common denominator, the primary business objective for all corporations is to make money. In stating the obvious, one of the greatest challenges facing the programme coordinator is brought to the fore. Broad, non-operations based objectives are of particular concern to upper management. The Internet programme coordinator must be able to communicate how the programme adds strength to the pursuit of dollars. Because upper management is focused on the bottom line, it is imperative that value be shown in terms that are meaningful to them. In other words, upper management needs to see a quantifiable measure of success. Upper management buy-in is an essential factor in gaining support for the programme at the departmental level.

Measuring the success of the programme in terms of impact on the bottom line is a task that requires some creativity. In the corporate environment, the Internet has two fundamental uses; data retrieval (information resource) and communications (information exchange). Each of these uses requires separate
valuation methods. The financial impact of the Internet as an information resource is best treated within the arena of quantifying the value of information no matter what the source. Quantifying the value of information is one of the greater challenges confronting the information profession today. The work of Jose-Marie Griffiths and Donald King is perhaps the best step towards measuring the value of information available. If the Internet programme coordinator uses the information and methods outlined in "Special Libraries: Increasing the Information Edge" to analyze the Internet programme, the value of that programme can be presented in terms that are meaningful to management (Griffiths and King 1993). Fortunately, even upper management understands that placing a value on a subjective resource like information is a tricky business. Consequently, the desire for proving impact on the bottom line, might be satisfied by the more straightforward valuation of Internet information exchange or communication. By comparing current fax and long distance telephone charges to the email communication and file transfer costs, the Internet programme coordinator can communicate value in dollars; a measurement that is invariably meaningful to management.

The advent of the Internet in corporations has strengthened the relationship between the information professional providing information from an information centre and a broader range of information related activities like corporate email strategy and file transfer. The expansion of the information professional role from information provider to facilitator of corporate information exchange will require enhanced connections to the computer resources group. The information professional must establish a relationship with the computer networking specialists if the goals of the Internet programme are to be achieved. As a corporate service group, computer specialists will support the Internet programme when directed by their managers. Nevertheless, if an effective working relationship is to be achieved between the Internet programme coordinator and the computer specialist, two significant issues must be
addressed; the role of each team member must be defined and the unique concerns of the computer specialist must be heard and responded to. When the connection between Internet programme coordinator and computer specialist is initiated, some territorial struggles can ensue. An overlap in the skill sets of these people can be expected. In addition, if both individuals believe that they "own" the project, some wrangling to take the leadership role can occur. However, if the focus can be directed toward a common goal the programme plan can move ahead. With some negotiations and compromise, the Internet programme coordinator and the computer specialist can define their roles and create a relationship that uses individual skills to full advantage. For example, if the corporation has acquired full Internet connectivity or become a node on the Internet, a customized front end might need to be built. The Internet programme coordinator and the computer specialist will need to work together to ensure that a quality service is delivered. This is most readily achieved if the team members agree, for example, that the computer specialist will design the technical structure behind the menus and the information professional will design the menus and provide the wording for the help screens. This arrangement uses the technical skills of the computer specialist and the information specialist's knowledge of customer needs to create a user friendly and technically viable front end. When the computer specialist accepts that the information professional is better able to deal with customer relation matters and the information professional bows to the technical expertise of the computer specialist both parties can find the relationship mutually beneficial. Each person is doing what they do best while respecting the skills of the other. Certainly, this is a strong foundation for an effective working relationship.

When engaged in an Internet programme, the computer specialist will have an ongoing concern with network security. According to a CIO Magazine survey, security breaches and viruses make up 61% of the what worries Corporate Information Officers the most about Internet involvement (CIO Magazine, 1994). Security out ranks concerns about cost, employee misuse, training difficulties,
and falling behind competitors. These are very real and legitimate concerns that the Internet programme coordinator will need to address. Due to the level of technical knowledge required to manage high-end security issues, the computer specialist will take the lead in this arena. Maintaining the integrity of the network falls within the mandate of the computer specialist and the Internet programme coordinator must ensure that these concerns are sufficiently assuaged if the programme is to have the support of the computer specialists.

Although the computer specialists will take the lead in addressing security issues, the Internet programme coordinator must acquire a thorough understanding of what steps have been taken to protect the network. Logically, this information will come from the computer specialists addressing these technical issues. Therefore, it is imperative that the Internet programme coordinator and the computer specialist be able to communicate. Without that rapport, the Internet programme coordinator will not be able to field the security related questions from middle managers.

Although network security is not the first concern of middle management, the individuals at this level of the organization have a vested interest in network integrity. Middle managers will want to ensure that departmental and project information residing on the network will remain secure. When selling the Internet programme within the corporation, the programme coordinator must be able to assure individuals that their work is "safe" from tampering, destruction or unauthorized perusal. The challenge for the Internet programme coordinator will be that computer specialists rarely believe that a networked environment is completely secure. For computer specialists, adding Internet connectivity to "their network" is analogous to sleeping in a brothel. This does not mean that computer specialists will be opposed to the proposition. They will however require additional precautions if the Internet brothel is to be entered with minimal risk. It is up to the computer specialist to ensure that the precautions are in place. And, it is up to the Internet programme coordinator to relieve people of their concerns.
It is possible that the computer specialist will bring forward concerns about the increase of traffic on the servers and modem lines. With mass media's continuing hype related to the Internet, there will be plenty of employees that will embrace the corporate Internet programme. The enthusiasts, therefore, will tax the servers and modem lines provided by the corporation. The increase of traffic on the network will concern the computer specialist in particular. Together, the Internet programme coordinator and the computer specialist, will need to decide how this increase of traffic will be handled. There are two basic alternatives: access to the network can be limited or additional hardware can be purchased. If access is to be limited, the Internet programme coordinator will need to gain management support for this strategy and will need to work with management and the computer specialist to ensure that an appropriate policy is in place. If additional resources are to be sought, the Internet programme coordinator will need to support the computer specialist's application for increased resources. The computer specialist's cause is best support by reiterating the goals of the Internet programme. The Internet programme cannot succeed, if the infrastructure is inadequate. Therefore, the computer specialist's concerns must be heard and responded to.

Although many middle managers and department supervisors could be calling for the programme to be in place, others will need to be convinced. The people holding back do so because of a lack of information about the value the Internet can add to their operation and because it is seen as a potential "time-waster". The Internet programme coordinator can alleviate these concerns by communicating the goals of the programme and outlining the benefits each department will see. To be able to outline the benefits, the Internet programme coordinator will need to acquire a basic understanding of the activities of each department. This information can easily be obtained from an Internet enthusiast within the group or in discussions with managers. When the primary concern is that employees will waste time on the Internet, the programme coordinator can discuss sample usage policies, and the training programme. When goals, usage
policies, and training programme are presented, middle managers and
department supervisors have information that all allows them to see the Internet
programme as a beneficial low-risk venture.
The training and ongoing support components have an impact on every partner
in the Internet programme. Managers require assurance that time will not be
wasted. The computer resources group will want their role in supporting the
programme defined. Employees need to know what they can expect and where
to turn for help. Training and support are endless challenges with the Internet.
Training and support might be offered by the Internet programme coordinator, an
internal designate, by outsourcing or by any combination of these. In any case,
the Internet programme coordinator will need to organize the programme and
ensure that it meets user needs. To accomplish this, the programme coordinator
must assess the skills of the new users and discover the objectives of each
persons work. Without this information, the Internet programme coordinator will
not know where the training should begin and what skills and knowledge the
users should have at the end of the programme.
If the corporation is large resulting in a significant requirement for user support,
the Internet programme will be well served, if an advocate for the programme can
be found in each department. This can be an informal arrangement.
Nonetheless, it will help promote the programme by word of mouth and afford the
opportunity to deflect some of the support work. The Internet programme
coordinator can establish an informal group of advocates by discussing the
service with enthusiasts, asking for feedback, and asking if specific individuals
are willing to assist colleagues with questions. If the programme can be created
so that departmental advocates act as an interface, a certain level of quality can
be assured for the programme. Departmental advocates are the people best
situated to communicate with their colleagues; they know how their colleagues
work and they understand the nature of the tasks at hand. The departmental
advocate can ensure that responses are tailored to users’ needs, offered in a
timely fashion and available on an ongoing basis. Because user support requires
significant resources, the use of departmental advocates will help spread the task throughout the organization thus ensuring that the Internet programme coordinator has the time to provide support for users with unusual or difficult requests.

Working from the "give them an inch and they'll want a mile" school of thought, as soon as the basic Internet programme is in place, the users will ask for more. Two potential areas for programme expansion are acquiring Internet access for users at remote corporate locations and creating home pages on the World Wide Web. When a company operating in a global market, obtains Internet connectivity at a central location, the smaller offices in various countries have the opportunity to realize cost savings by acquiring Internet access from a local access provider. Instead of dialing up the corporate network and incurring long distance charges for email and file transfer, the Internet can be used for many information exchanges at a significantly reduced cost. The challenge for the Internet programme coordinator will be to locate a local access provider in a remote location and to convince a potential user from that location to negotiate the contract and finalize the connection. Locating an access provider is best achieved by using the resources on the Internet and by sending email requests for information to people on the Internet that are in that remote location. With some persistence, local access providers if they exist can be found. The success of having someone from a remote office location negotiate a contract and actually create the connection depends on the perceived need of the service. In some cases, it is just a matter of timing. Consequently, the Internet programme coordinator might as well be prepared for the inevitable desire for all corporate locations to be connected to the Internet.

The desire of some work groups to create home pages on the World Wide Web will require numerous partnerships throughout the organization; managers will need to agree that this an appropriate marketing method; the corporate communications office must ensure that the corporate image is maintained at every turn; employees must be prepared to work with the contacts created by this
new tool; computer specialists must prepare the network for the provision of the service; and, the owners of the Web page must be brought together with the designers of the page. Like any project that brings together a myriad of individuals, a Web page project will succeed only when goals are defined and all stakeholders are focused on the goals.

From ARPANET to Internet, from media hype to corporate information strategy, Internet related activities have connected a diverse assemblage of people, organizations, systems and information sources. Nevertheless, it is a network of people that is driving the Internet toward the dream of the information superhighway. At every level of this phenomena, there are leaders working to create partnerships that will drive this technology into the future. When challenged to lead a cooperative effort in a corporate environment, the information professional works to ensure the success of the programme by forging relationships with disparate groups and ensuring that the needs of the partners are addressed. Communication is the mechanism for negotiating the definition of roles, defining goals, resolving conflict, and exchanging information. The role of the information professional, then, is to be a communicator and coordinator of partners.

References