Brooksby Melton College: Using SharePoint in a FE college

Summary

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About Brooksby Melton College

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The challenge

One of the big questions for many learning providers is how to manage the wealth of data that they have. Often they also have more than one system that they are using. So what is the solution to this?

Many learning providers are turning to Microsoft Office SharePoint Server (MOSS), more commonly referred to as SharePoint, as the tool for achieving integration and a simpler system.

SharePoint 2007 can be used to facilitate collaboration, provide content management features, implement business processes, and supply access to information that is essential to organisational goals and processes.

For further information on how SharePoint works go to the Microsoft website.

Brooksby Melton College was one such learning provider who hoped to introduce a system that would provide an ‘all-in-one’ solution for e-based communication, collaboration and learning.
Other driving factors behind choosing this system were that:

- A regional schools partnership in the area was likely to feature a shared system based on a SharePoint platform.
- It integrated strongly with existing Microsoft software within the College.
- And it offered advanced functionality and features straight out-of-the-box.

This case study looks at the initial stages of implementing SharePoint into their organisation and what tips they have to give to others.

**The activity**

The College first started to use SharePoint in Spring 2007 with three-month trials in an academic and a business support department.

Other initial considerations at the time were:

- To give SharePoint a name – this helped overcome the barrier that some staff had of working with a Microsoft product
- Only four main permission levels were used - Reader, Contributor, Designer, Administrator – from the larger selection available
- Permission groups were linked to Active Directory groups
- A private company was contracted to help with installation and the development of an initial structure
- Focus was given to development of content, rather than the style and themes
- Consideration was given to mapping SharePoint libraries to existing file shares

But it was not until the end of 2007 that the project really got going.
The site structure was developed like this:

This formed the basis of rolling the system out across the College, but with the aim of concentrating on a few features and getting them right rather than using all the capabilities of the SharePoint system.

The College focussed on using the following functions:

- Various surveys, taking advantage of the branching logic available
- Exams calendar & colour-coded Technician and Machinery calendar
- Infopath forms, e.g. to book rooms and minibuses, making queries to IT Support
- Complete College meeting schedule, linked to Workspaces
- Staffing tasks for example requisitions or contract variations, with workflows configured via web interface and SharePoint Designer
- Parking permit registration – this got almost 200 staff responses and was a quick-win to show the simplicity of the system
- Assessment & Verification forms converted to xsn format
- Implementing the SharePoint Learning Kit (SLK) - although this has not had the uptake expected
- Using video tutorials and EXE Learning web materials

A lot of focus was put on to staff training and various briefings were arranged before the system was launched. SharePoint is now introduced to new staff at their initial induction sessions and a quick reference guide for staff covering the most common actions has been produced.
The staff training run at the College is very practical to increase levels of engagement, for example by adding live information and documents into SharePoint and using quizzes.

One-to-one sessions are also offered and there is a ‘Training’ site used to encourage staff to explore a site that can be broken without fear!

**The outcomes**

Whilst the implementation within the College is still on-going there have already been several benefits including:

- Using the portal as a central point of focus for day-to-day activity and administration
- A form of document version control, enabling interested parties to develop documents without the need to keep sending versions back and forth by email
- A meaningful structure biased towards users
- Improved communication

Like any major project there have been difficulties along the way. These have included:

- One major outage was experienced, but no other system failures.
Staff were often apprehensive about the system – due to a combination of lack of time, knowledge and technical expertise.

Problems ensuring that the SharePoint site had full accessibility. The College used free resources available from JISC TechDis to help overcome these.

Integration with the College MIS systems.

The impact

Alastair McGann who oversaw the development of SharePoint 2007 at the College has kindly come up with five top tips for helping other learning providers going down the same route:

- “Take an ‘organic’ approach to development – it proved far more successful than a rigid roll-out plan.”
- “Drag the converted along with you! They have loads of enthusiasm towards the system and when peers are singing its praises during training sessions other staff take more note.”
- “Make sure there is plenty of beneficial information on tap before making sites and workspaces available.”
- “Give staff freedom! The frustrations of having limited access and availability far exceed the time taken to resolve issues caused as a result.”
- “Install the ‘Fab 40’ application templates.”

The College is still in the fairly early stages of developing SharePoint and has many future plans to consolidate on their learning journey so far. Items on the horizon include:

- Moodle being introduced from September 2008, signaling a re-focus of SharePoint.
- Planning to implement MySite, with Exchange features, allowing a more personal experience.
- Development of Media Libraries
- Google search to be integrated into site frame
- Development of more appealing designs and templates
- Development of video tutorials
- Configuration of SharePoint Search scopes
- The College’s finance department is to switch to using SharePoint

If you would like further information, or wish to gain guest access to the Brooksby Melton College SharePoint portal, please email sharepoint@brooksbymelton.ac.uk.

Update

Brooksby Melton College is currently in the process of re-building their SharePoint site - a lot has changed since the original portal was released.

The staff working on SharePoint have recently decided to build a brand new SharePoint site alongside their existing portal so that they can take and update the
content without having to take down the existing portal. They are hoping to have a seamless transition (for the most part) to the new SharePoint site very shortly.

Since the original portal site was created, Brooksby Melton has moved some of the functions into other systems:

- the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) functions, including Assignments and Areas of Learning have moved over to Moodle;
- the Human Resources (HR) functions, including contract variations and other workflows, are now available via a web-based version of SelectHR, which the College is currently making available for self-service.

With the new SharePoint site, they are concentrating on using it as a way to share information across various departments within the college and making use of Announcements, Calendars and Document Libraries to start off with, so that each department area has a similar look and feel.

Going forwards with the new SharePoint site, they would like to replace traditional methods of sharing information (e-mail, file shares) with SharePoint so that information is always available in one place.

They would also like to make use of SQL reporting services to share information from their various systems in a clear and uniformed manner, but this is not a priority.

The new site structure currently looks like:

- **Main/Home** - (used to share announcements, events and documents to ALL staff)
- **Academic** - (For academic staff, includes frequently used document templates)
  - Additional Learning Support
  - Higher Education
  - International
  - Learner Services
  - Skills & Business
  - Partners
- **Business Support**
  - Estates
  - Finance
  - Health and Safety
  - Human Resources
  - IT Support
  - Marketing
  - Performance/MIS
- **Commercial**
They hope to have their new SharePoint site up and running in Autumn 2011.

**Useful links**

- Brooksby Melton College website
- JISC TechDis
- What is SharePoint? Visit Microsoft's website to find out

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