

Finberg prescribes publishing systems

Howard Finberg speaks this afternoon on pagination systems and the future of newsrooms. He proposes new ways of thinking about setting up systems for newspapers and information companies. The following excerpts were taken from a speech at Seybold San Francisco, last month.

By Howard Finberg

Phoenix Newspapers Inc.

Unless you are lucky enough to be at a newspaper or information company that is hiring 50, 60, 70, 100 new employees over the course of the next 10 years, we have got to figure out ways of eeking out a living using our existing resources, and that means both staff and equipment.

To state the obvious, you know that we are going to do more with less and we are going to be doing faster; there is no way things are going to slow down. There is no breather coming on the net, and there is no breather coming on whatever comes after the net, because if you think the Internet is the end of it and we could just master the Internet, what about screen phones? What about delivery of information through wireless? What about going directly through satellite?

Yet the whole purpose of where we are trying to go is to integrate systems, not separate them. Because if we are trying to do more with less, then we need to do many processes, and I sort of do something and I pass it off to that guy down there who passes it off to that woman over there who then passes it off someplace else and then it gets done. Question is, can we leverage all the skills of these people throughout the process and where good ideas come together?

The real challenge is to get them to understand what happens when you put new systems in your organization, what it does to the workflow process.

Pagination is here, it just takes five years to get people to make a decision. So it's here, it can be done now. You can do it on proprietary systems, you can do it on desktop systems, though I contend there is very little difference between the two.

We (at Phoenix Newspapers in the mid 1980s)

asked ourselves this fundamental question and if you have ever talked about this, you really have to ask "Do we want to paginate?" and I contend quite frankly, that the answer is no. We wanted to do something that allowed for the collaborative sharing of information, only we didn't know it was called "database" at the time.

So we got to thinking about what a publication database means for an information company. How are we going to take advantage of it if we are no longer limited by the technology that we have at our fingertips? We started thinking about multiple products from the same information. We really wanted to end this assembly line process ... to see if we could develop a team concept, which is not a very familiar one within organizations like newspapers.

We came to several realizations over the course of experience.

Cheaper is more expensive — you will spend it later if you don't spend it now. Factor in training, factor in support, factor in integration.

Resources are not just machines. When you are building a new system, whether it is Internet or classified or pagination, don't forget to factor in the people resources. Those are far more valuable than having more machines. One of the things that we found is that finding the right chemistry for the team is as important as finding the right technical skills.

Making unnatural systems work together is like mating cats and dogs. That is a big lesson and if you are going to do that, just remember that it is tricky and there will be a lot of screaming and yelling about integration of systems.

Training is more than textbook lessons. Training means getting people to feel involved in the process. You need to make sure that there is a follow-up consultative basis where people are like, "How is it going? Would you like a refresher course?" Make sure people really listen to what is being discussed in the implication. And finally the number one thing we learn: TEST, TEST AND TEST. All software needs to be tested to know what its impact is going to be.

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