IRIS: A STUDY IN CO-OPERATION, COLLABORATION AND FUNDING IN THE INFORMATION FIELD

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After the technical success of the collaboration to create a database searching and document supply service, the IRIS project team faced the problem of making the service relevant to its intended customers, libraries and business users, and of ensuring the long term viability of the service. The solution lay in a development strategy following a clear set of criteria established through an independent commercialisation study.

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Cooperation to develop: the IRIS project

What is IRIS?

IRIS is a database searching and document ordering service for libraries and business users initially based on the catalogues of six of the major Irish research libraries and the UnCover service. It uses the ANSI (American National Standards Association) Z39.50 protocol to link physically distributed databases in a single searching mechanism. Its services are aimed at the business user as well as the more traditional library market.

Why IRIS?

IRIS originated in 1990 as a recommendation from COLICO (Committee on Library Co-operation in Ireland) that the future of library resource sharing and document delivery lay in transparently linking diverse computerised library catalogues rather than in developing a centralised union catalogue.

The background factors influencing COLICO and individual library authorities were:

a)   the costs of journal acquisition which led to a desire to exploit these journals more fully;

b)   the possibility of income generation by Irish libraries through document delivery services (in 1991, some 85% of Irish interlending traffic was with the BLDSC).

c)   While remote access, Telnet, to most academic library catalogues was already available to library users, little traffic was generated. This was partly because of the necessity to understand the protocols and especially, it was because follow-up services were not being provided.

The clear conclusion was that remote access to library catalogues has limited value unless it is supported by service agreements between the user and the libraries, specifically in relation to document delivery.

A funding proposal to the Commission of the European Communities was approved under the Telematique programme in

April 1992. The deadline for project completion was December 1993.

The objective for December 1993 was that remote access to the databases would be available as a single search, that there would be access to a table of contents service and that there would be a document delivery service utilising local resources.

The project time-table was largely achieved and the IRIS Service was formally launched in 1994.

Who was IRIS?

Partners

Dublin City University

A new university library with comparatively small stocks and a strong emphasis on access to satisfy its user needs. The library is fully catalogued on a Dynix system.

Forbairt

A state agency established by the Government of Ireland to facilitate the development of Irish business and to provide a range of science and technology services, including a technical and business information service. The library operates the ORACLE Library System.

Trinity College Dublin

TCD has a very large historical collection arising from its status as a legal deposit library for the UK and Ireland. All of its monograph collection acquired since 1970(1,200,000 items) and its periodicals collection of 12,000 titles are included on its Dynix library system. TCD is the only net provider of inter-library loans among the Irish academic libraries.

University College, Dublin

The UCD collection comprises 500,000 monographs and 6,000 periodical titles, all catalogued on the BLS system from BLCMP.

University College, Galway

UCG library has 225,000 monographs and 1,500 periodical titles catalogued on a Dynix system.

University of Limerick

Another new university library with a stock of 140,000 monographs and 2,300 current periodical titles, all catalogued on a MDIS Urica library system.

Project Managers

Project management was provided by An Chomairle Leabharlanna (the Library Council), the official body which advises the government and local authorities on the development of public libraries. The Council operates the library inter-lending system for all Ireland and provides the secretariat for COLICO and for Euro-Focus on Libraries.

Client software developer

Fretwell-Downing, a UK-based software development company specialising in client-server Z39.50-based systems and ORACLE-based library systems.

Software support and development

Euristix, a Dublin-based software development company.

Hardware (client machine) support

IEunet, a Dublin-based commercial Internet services provider.

IRIS Service Agency (user support and administration)

Forbairt

This mix of "actors" represents many facets of co-operation:

- economic/political: Europe/Ireland (Telematique Programme)
- political: Ireland North/South; COLICO
- sectoral: academia/SMEs (Forbairt)
- libraries: academic libraries/special library (Forbairt)/public libraries (Library Council)
- technical development and support: academic libraries/commercial technical developers (Fretwell-Downing/Euristix/Eunet)

Collaboration to deliver: an IRIS service

Technically the IRIS Project was extremely successful. The IRIS client is still one of only two Z39.50 clients capable of simultaneously accessing dispersed library catalogues. The various library system suppliers involved succeeded in producing Z39.50 server software within the project time-frame. Access to the Uncover service was included in the overall package in a reasonably integrated manner.

However, the translation of a technical project, however successful, into a sustainable service is a very different and difficult task, requiring a fundamental change of attitude and a new set of skills. Accordingly, the Project Management Committee decided in 1993 that IRIS would require a business-oriented management structure, independent of the individual libraries. In order to achieve this, a company, IRIS Document Delivery Services Ltd.(Registered company, limited by guarantee) was formed to manage the IRIS service with its own administration, user service agency, and technical service agency. IRIS Ltd is owned by the IRIS institutions and managed by the IRIS Board of Directors, who are the Librarians of the five IRIS university libraries and Ms Joan McCluskey of Forbairt as a personal director.

Following its launch it was soon apparent that IRIS was:

a) a good technical product;

b) an imperfect commercial product;

c) a limited marketing success; and

d) lacked a dedicated service management structure.

In addition, there was resistance to the operation of IRIS in libraries because of:

a) lack of ILL facility within the software (a major irritant);

b) worry about cost control;

c) potential by-passing of established inter-library loan mechanisms.

Given this situation the Board commissioned a Commercialisation Study from an independent body with experience in the commercial information services domain. The conclusions from this study were that:

a) IRIS had a limited future as a purely commercial (revenue generating) body;

b) additional investment was required if the client software was to be developed to the necessary level of functionality in the administration and ILL areas;

c) IRIS would require a firm income/subscription base to sustain it.

Funding to sustain: IRIS MkII

Despite the difficulties encountered in transforming IRIS from a successful project into a self-sustaining service, it is recognised that what has been achieved to date is of major strategic value in terms of technology and improved library services. As with all new developments, a major challenge was to identify and implement the business base on which to develop and sustain the opportunities provided by a major technical development.

Consequently, the Board agreed a revised development plan to address the obstacles encountered, taking advantage of the positive potential of the IRIS service and technology, in which the Board has full confidence.

In devising a plan the Board identified fundamental criteria essential for success and acknowledged a major constraint.

Criteria

Any development scenario must address real issues, be achievable and result in:

a) a relevant, value-adding service;

b) a real market/customer base;

c) a credible and effective support agency;

d) an acceptable and sustainable funding structure.

Constraint

IRIS must remain true to the original objectives of the Telematique Programme, particularly in relation to service to the business community.

Conclusions

While there is, and there will continue to be, a need for the provision of information and document delivery services to the commercial

sector on a revenue-earning basis, the major immediate source of continued support and funding is from the library community, initially the academic libraries.

Having carefully considered the strategic options open to it the Board finally agreed on the following scenario as the immediate future for the IRIS service.

a) IRIS will become a value-adding service to the library community throughout the island of Ireland.

b) IRIS will eventually include all relevant libraries, North and South, all of whose library systems will have Z39.50 capability. The service will be a component of the National Research Network (NRN). The IRIS client will provide access to any Z39.50 server available over the Internet.

c) Initially, users will be able to simultaneously interrogate the OPACs of all of the Irish university libraries from their desktop devices as part of the set of services available over the NRN. They will be able to request the delivery of particular items of interest through the normal inter-library loan service. This facility will eventually extend to all relevant libraries.

d) Library managers will be able to make better acquisition judgements for individual items or in the context of a joint acquisitions policy.

e) Library managers will have an additional potential source of information resource records available to them, particularly valuable in the case of some Irish and other materials falling outside the net of the current records suppliers.

f) One of the university libraries will become the central agency for the development and support of the service, which will be funded on the basis of subscriptions from participating libraries.

Current status

Some absolute necessities were identified if this scenario was to be translated into a viable operational service. The nature and current status of these necessities are:

a) Agreement on the function of, and an appropriate organisation to act as, the management agency; TCD will house an IRIS service management unit and a manager is being recruited.

b) Identification of the means to continue the programme in respect of services to business. The IRIS service will be offered to the business community through the mediation of approved information brokers.

c) The involvement of all of the Irish university libraries. All of the southern university libraries have indicated their intention to join an IRIS consortium. Discussions will shortly commence with the northern universities.

d) All of the relevant libraries now have, or will shortly have, Z39.50 server capability.

e) The availability of the National Research Network. While agreement on a comprehensive national research network has not yet been reached, all of the Irish universities now have broadband linkage through HEANet and/or SuperJanet.

f) The potential to have a positive influence on development funding bodies. The Committee of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) of the Republic and Conference of University Rectors in Ireland (CRI) are actively encouraging co-operation and collaboration among the library, computing and media services of the universities. IRIS is seen as a suitable vehicle to underpin such developments.

g) Positive acceptance by library staff. The positioning of the IRIS Service Management Unit within one of the university libraries, and the provision of document delivery services through the established inter-library loan mechanisms should address the concerns of staff.

Lessons learned

There is a fundamental difference between co-operation in the management of a technical project and collaboration on the delivery of a sustainable service.

- The operation of a service to the business community cannot be run as a marginal activity.

- Technology can radically improve service potential but it can also seriously threaten organisational culture.

- Participation in major projects carries heavy overheads, but can have major beneficial outcomes.

- While initially concentrating on the academic library sector, IRIS has a bright future as a vehicle for the development of

resource sharing among Irish libraries of all types and as an information and document supply service to the business community.

Further reading

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