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INTRANET AS A CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS TOOL

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ABSTRACT

In a corporation with eight different businesses, autonomous among them, but in a certain way linked through the same Corporate offices and common values, is very difficult to guarantee that the information flows at the appropriate time with accuracy and pertinent content, this information can include a wide variety of topics as letters from the Director of the Corporation, Publications of internal magazines, quality standards, maybe the most important thing is to share our values, beliefs, Mission and Vision. But not only the raw documents but also how we live these values in the day-to-day business. This is particularly difficult in our corporation with more than 4,500 employees, in almost 50 facilities in six countries in four continents. One of the main things is to have these information so well structured that can be accessed easily each time is needed avoiding the printing of it. The implementation of this technology is currently taking place at Girsa Corporativo first as an initiative of the Headquarters, looking forward the involvement of the businesses to participate not only in getting the information but also in sharing their experiences through this tool. At this time we are considering one central web site but the idea is to expand this servers through the facilities, and in this way using some standards and rules they would be able to include their own information.

The application of this technology has no limit, this is, one application can be a telephone directory of the company, instead of printing them and sending them through the corporation a unique Telephone-directory depot can exist, so if a person would like to call to facility "A" he can get his extension, furthermore if a person from Facility "A" is today at facility "B" and would like to talk with someone at facility "C" using the application he would have a screen that will ask some information "to talk from__ to__ you should dial ____" and then it would ask would you like to see a directory?

Other applications can be extended to external customers to consult shipments, to order products, etc., not opening the access to the whole world but to only those customers we would like, of course depending on the market. This technology helps to distribute information in a paperless world.

I THE CORPORATION

GIRSA is a group of petrochemical industries with yearly sales of \$700.0 MM USD. Located in different parts of the country, where raw materials are produced; there are also commercial offices normally in big cities (Houston, Madrid, Brussels, Melbourne and Shanghai), and the corporate office or headquarters where most of the policies are dictated. This does not mean that the whole operation is controlled in a centralized way, on the contrary each business is run as independent one but reporting results to the central office. This way of operation have the advantage that in the different areas of each businesses, processes are created, for administrative operations, pollution control, society contribution, industrial aspects, etc. and in many cases the same work is done by two or more businesses, because the people in similar positions not necessarily communicate with each other, thus wasting opportunities of sharing information, accelerating the learning process and improving our competitive position.

This situation requires a formal communications way to distribute announcements, publications, etc. and is an invitation to look for a communications tool to let the information be organized and accessible to all.

II THE INFORMATION

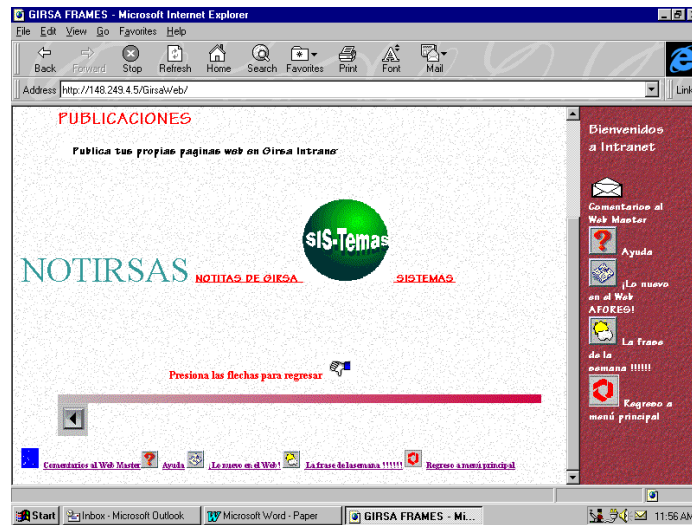
As in many corporations, or most of them, there is a need to share or present information to the organization, about different areas, for instance information about its history, its policies and procedures, human resources, services, facilities locations and access maps, notice boards and specific procedures implanted or investigated about a particular topic. The information is not only kept most of the times in one facility or location but in a specific area or by a specific person, and in most of the cases this is not updated. The problem with this situation is that there is no knowledge of the existence of the material and this in most cases causes a diminish in productivity.

Many efforts have been made to try to have the information accessible. The result has been that no one knows for sure the accuracy of the information that is available; if the Company resides in only one building there is a chance that the information be the correct one. When this scheme moves to different buildings and locations the chance to have incorrect information grows.

The only way to guarantee that the information that the whole corporation will access is to have a centralized depository, this does not mean that everything must reside in one place, on the contrary in many places mainly where it is created and maintained. In this way you can be sure that the information that reaches any person in the organization is accurate and unique so everyone will have the same information.

To succeed in the implementation an analysis has to be made first to define what kind of information the system will handle, who will validate the contents and the company standards and definitions, security issues among others. In our corporation we have included in the first release, an induction manual to help new employees to understand the organization and its policies, information about the different businesses, how are they organized and what is their main purpose, the map to get there, etc. A section with announces of new things and a notice board.

Besides this a Total Quality section is included where the bases are defined and different areas of different businesses can share their experiences and best practices. This is especially important because our group belongs to one of the greatest industrial conglomerates of the Country, with five business sectors and sales of \$1,800.0MM USD. This conglomerate has an internal Quality Award designed with basis on the Malcolm Baldrige Award, which aims to raise our competitiveness through better quality practices. This application has allowed us to share those practices with enough detailed explanations and models so that real benchmarking is being done using this tool.



This screen shows the publications available in Intranet, these two used to be printed and distributed to all the locations.

III THE INFRASTRUCTURE

We have talked about the need to communicate between different facilities located in distant places; the corporation has installed a network to provide an efficient communication channel in accordance to the technology requirements to achieve the advantage of it.

Four years ago we began the migration of our X.25 network to a technology that let us integrate voice, X.25 and TCP/IP traffic, we are using Frame Relay as our transport Protocol. Due to the fact that we were using satellite links of 64Kbytes, when the traffic began to increase the response time was affected. At that time the Digital links began to be available in most locations (supplied by our domestic carrier), this gave us the possibility to redesign the network and increase the number of nodes, change our topology, and increase the channel width among locations. With this modifications we are now able to implement client server applications and handle Intranet traffic with a reasonable response time. Here is a diagram to illustrate how the network is configured in most locations.



Shown here is the Corporate Office (headquarters) where the Internet and Intranet servers are located at this time. The topology here is a Star Network, the two locations must arrive to the central node to reach each other. Because of the distribution of offices of different businesses some nodes not arrive to the central node but to node assigned in the businesses as central. This routing change helped us to reduce traffic towards the central node allowing an efficient Internet access.

At the corporation we began to use Internet approximately three years ago, only few users had a browser at that time and due to technological constrains the user must be at the headquarters to have a good response time. Now this has change, near 70% of the employees have access to Internet. Because of this the concept of Intranet was born in the corporation. If we have an infrastructure and people is accessing information through Internet why do not extend this great effort to share the internal information?

One of the key issues is the security, we do not want external accesses to the Intranet information, at least at this time, and want to use the actual CPUs to be server of Intranet. Just to make this last idea more clear, actually many of our production systems are migrating from the HP3000 platform to the NT or UNIX environment, the idea of course is to use the hardware as much as possible. This was the trigger that made us evaluate the HP3000 as Internet server.

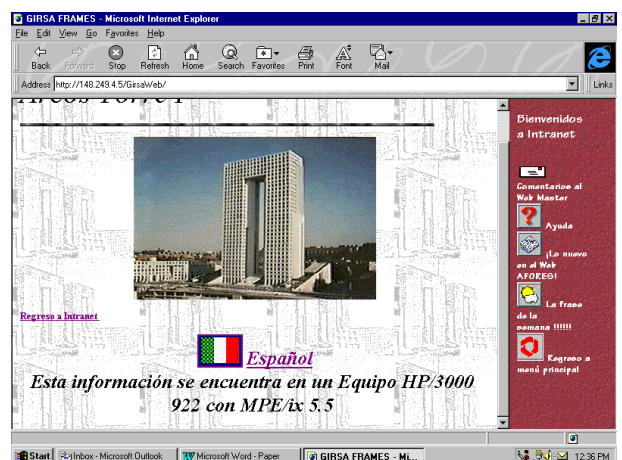
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We developed a set of pages to find out about the access and how to include pictures and text, this functionality will let us in the near future create a distributed Intranet that will be explained in the next paragraph. On the other hand we have an HP9000 that use to have a system that has been moved away. We decided to use the HP9000 as a central Intranet Server and the HP3000 as an external node, doing this we could test the interoperability of both platforms and distribute the information.

The following Intranet printout pages show the coexistence and transparency of these two operating systems.



HP9000



HP3000

Our first Intranet is a 100% centralized, residing in the corporate HP9000 and a small part in the HP3000, we are in the promotional phase of this tool so we are sure that in the near future most of the information will be from the businesses. This will force to change the administration of the intranet and perhaps in each location will be a responsible to update the information, and at that time each one will have their Intranet Server and here is where the HP3000 can fit perfectly.

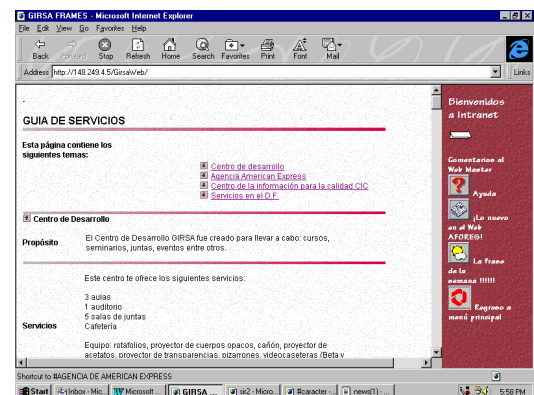
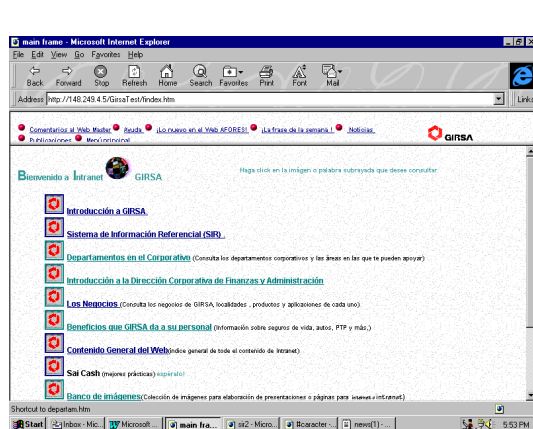
IV THE CONTENTS

As a corporate tool it is very important that all the information that is going to be included in the intranet be validated and updated by the “owner” of it and with the standards that the Company Policies establish. Because of this it is necessary to gather a group that be responsible of the authorization of the information in its contents and form, in this group people from Public Affairs, human resources, Total quality among others must participate. It is important to keep in mind that Intranet will become THE source of information of the whole corporation.

How the tool is introduced and promoted will be a key factor in the success or failure of the whole project, there must be a campaign all over the corporation announcing it and create in the individuals enough expectation to invite them to access it. Everything must be ready and tested to receive users, response time should be acceptable, all links must go to the proper page, the ideas, contents and images must be there. Of course, it requires a reasonable degree of computer literacy in the whole corporation, we think we have a high level of computer culture in place.

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The user will type the address and this first page will be critical, must be easy enough to understand and should present all the contents in one screen. To avoid frustration a very important issue is how the information is organized to find a specific information easily.



The image of the left shows the main page, it contains an index of the general topics that at this time are included, the one on the right part shows a page that at its very top part has the contents of that part and then each one is explained. In both screens frames are used keeping always in view the most useful tools as mail to the Webmaster, help issues, notice board, publications. To keep people interested in accessing the page it is a good idea to include information that is constantly changing, for example, the quote of the week in which a phrase of a celebrity can be included.

In our first version we included general information as History, Headquarters organization, guide for employees, Businesses. Very soon we will implement the phone utility this will help a user from any location communicate with other person in any other location using the private network without the need to have printed directories all over the corporation, and specific information about how to get to a facility (maps).

One of the major benefits we are foreseen is the interchange of information between businesses, specially sharing those activities that have become a “best practice” to solve a situation in production or in the Total Quality processes. For this purpose a special section has been created and is called the Benchmarking Information System in which the Total Quality Area is involved, and we have mentioned the importance of it previously.

As a complement we have included some basic data about what is near the office like restaurants, hospitals, car rentals, etc.

We have covered the justification, requirements and contents of Intranet as a Corporate communications tool, but there is one more thing that must be carefully considered and included, this is a way to know who is accessing the information, which information is accessed and which not, what are the general comments of the users. This takes us to the final phase the evaluation.

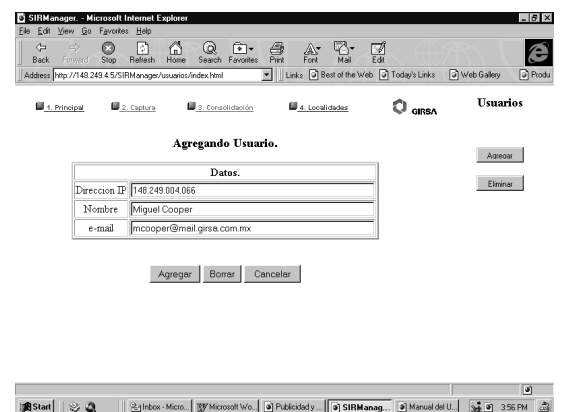
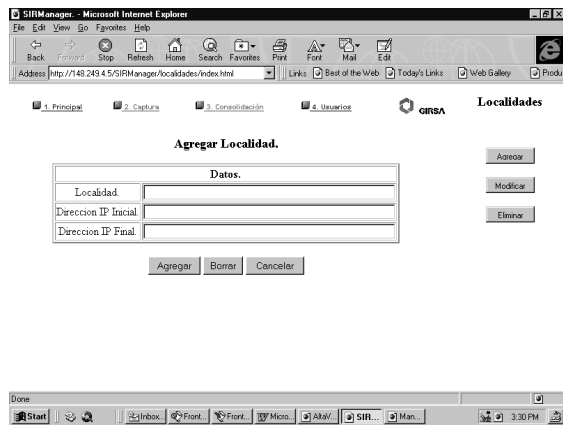
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V EVALUATION

Before entering the evaluation process some activities have to be done.

In order to know from which locations are the calls coming from we have to know the IP addresses that have been assigned to them, and to personalize the access to the evaluations form the IP address of each user can be registered.

The information is stored in a Data-base using a CGI, this is the Location Name, IP address limits. Other table contains the User Name and IP address.



The first figure shows the CGI that is used to capture the IP address limit for each location, the second one is to register the User name, IP address and Email address.

Each time a call is done the calling address is identified and a counter is increased in the data base.

When the user logs into the evaluation model, the IP address is validated, if it does not exist then is not allowed to perform the function, if it is valid then the user name is displayed and can proceed to write his comments.

The statistics module will show how many users answered the evaluation and how useful was the information to them.

This information will let the Web master and the involved personnel the areas of interest and perhaps the areas that need to have special attention.

VI THE FUTURE AND CONCLUSIONS

This is the first step in such a big endeavor, many things have to be learned in the process but we are sure that this tool will provide a more efficient communications way.

We have mentioned that in the future each business should be capable of capturing their information in their Intranet Server, for this reason we have included a practical guide to create HTML pages and a depository of images and logos that can be used. The time will come that the intranet will have many servers and some of them will be accesses by external customers to place orders, follow up them, etc.

The use of this technology is as wide as the imagination can be, the key here is the quality of the information, how useful is for the user and the continuos update of it. Life is not static neither are the information and processes.

