
DocuSend – the experiment and the experience



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A long time ago we had the Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER) and in 1999, under that umbrella, JISC issued the JISC 5/99 Call. One of the proposals to receive funding through that call was DocuSend: the one-stop, integrated, document delivery broker service. DocuSend ran from April 2001 until October 2004 and this is its story.

DocuSend sought to bring together a wide variety of document delivery services into an integrated 'one stop shop', transparent to the user. In doing so, it would initially build on the work of Lamda, originally an e-Lib project but a full cost-recovery service from 1998. It was then planned to build a network of other suppliers – higher education libraries, special libraries, commercial suppliers and then JISC portals.

But the document delivery world went through a time of quite radical change while the project was being conducted and this in turn affected the project and its outcomes. For example, when DocuSend was conceived the British Library's well established document supply service was beginning to experience a decline in traffic. This was later well documented in the 2004 Auditor-General's Report 'The British Library', which referred to a drop in demand from the UK higher education sector of one third over the last five years. Over the period of the DocuSend Project, the BL service has been revolutionised by the introduction of their Secure Electronic Delivery (SED) service, made possible by a very large investment in capital and major changes in workflow.

On a broader perspective, the whole concept of the journal, comprising of a number of articles,

was being called into question by the emergence of the concept of single article supply, the development of the e-print movement and the growth in what might generically be called open access. Access to articles was being greatly enhanced by open linking software such as MetaLib and SFX. The number of open access journals was growing steadily and initiatives such as SPARC were acting as a catalyst for change.

DocuSend started strongly, working in partnership with the Lamda libraries and purchasing and installing Fretwell-Downing's VDX system - FDI having been selected by the project team at the time of the bid as being the only viable provider of the integrated inter-library loan software required. However, there were some delays in training and when the original project manager left after eighteen months to take up another post it was six months before a suitable replacement could be recruited.

To cope with this gap and the complexities that were emerging, the project management sought and received permission from JISC to extend the term of the project by six months and to reprofile the project to deliver a proof of concept rather than a fully operational service. Another key factor taken into account at this time was the lack of progress in the take-up by library management system vendors of the ISO/ILL standard, which made it problematic for requests to be routed into DocuSend, as well as the emerging difficulties in securing the involvement of commercial content providers.

Unforeseen human elements entered the equation too. A key item in the DocuSend system was a load balancing rota of supply libraries, to spread the request load among them. While this was fine in theory, it turned out that many document delivery operatives did not like and did not want the rota. The reason they gave was that they liked to choose where a particular request was sent, because they wanted it to go to a library which might have strengths in that subject area or be known to be a good performer in handling requests. They were reluctant to run the risk of it going to a poor performer. The document delivery world is a tightly knit one, where many of the key people know each other and often special working relationships have been built up between libraries over the years.

Over the last eighteen months the project team worked hard to deliver this new commitment to demonstrating proof of concept, with some

success. It did so by extending the range of libraries beyond Lamda to the libraries of the British Medical Association and the Royal Society of Chemistry, although strenuous efforts to recruit a commercial publisher ultimately failed. One key element, to demonstrate end-user requesting, was particularly successful, where the combination of the FDI's VDX software and Zportal open linking product worked very efficiently.

Although the proof of concept for a DocuSend type service was demonstrated successfully, there would still be significant barriers to the establishment of a fully operational service. A DocuSend style service would require the purchase of a VDX licence either by individual participating libraries or by a central agency on behalf of the whole sector. The necessary hardware and software would also need to be purchased and customised, a training programme in its use developed and implemented and staff hired and accommodated. It is by no means clear which source could provide such funds.

DocuSend might be seen as perhaps the right project at the wrong time. Certainly the document delivery environment has changed since the project started and it will continue to change radically. The main contender in the field, the British Library, has lifted its game significantly and, it is understood, has further innovations planned. If nothing else DocuSend has demonstrated how difficult it is to develop a new service almost from scratch. For readers wishing to read the full history, the DocuSend Final Report is at <http://www.docuSend.ac.uk>

REFERENCES

The British Library: providing service beyond the reading rooms. Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General. HC 879 Session 2003-2004: July 2004.

Peter Brophy (2003) 'Single article supply. A report to the Joint Information Systems Committee'. January 2003.

Directory of Open Access Journals

<http://www.doaj.org>

JISC Common Information Environment:

http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=wg_cie_home

Open Archives

<http://www.openarchives.org>

SHERPA

<http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/>

SPARC

<http://www.arl.org/sparc/>