

Montana puts barrel-loads of know-how on intranet

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While those with a nostalgic bent may regret the passing of the Purple Death days of the New Zealand wine industry, the emergence of local wines good enough to compete with the rest of the world has also meant the passing of hit-and-miss wine making.

This is especially so for Montana, the producer of more than half the country's wine exports. Becoming the market leader in an industry that combines volume production with a demanding and sophisticated international market requires know-how.

"For us the problem was data storage," Montana winery service manager Dennis Robinson said. "When we took over Corbans we inherited a huge amount of information on individual PCs and servers, distributed around various wineries."

The need to combine this with Montana's own store of information was pressing, so Montana called in the help of Crossware, an Auckland-based specialist in knowledge management systems using IBM tools.

"We've created a repository of information," Mr Robinson said, "a way of tracking our research projects and standardising information across the company."

Montana's intranet is really a virtual private network using the internet to give country-wide but controlled access to authorised users.

"We've pulled everything together so that anyone who needs access has it they're validated at local domain level with NT-type security permissions. There are some sections that contain sensitive data and which are closed off to most users."

The hardware demands of the system are not great a single NT server with a 30GB hard drive in Montana's Auckland office is enough to serve Montana's 750 staff in sites across Gisborne, Hawke's Bay, North Canterbury and Marlborough, with Mr Robinson handling administration from Napier.

The primary information Montana stores in its repository is about how to grow grapes and convert them into wine. The company is constantly engaged in research into this process, endlessly tweaking its procedures to take account of local variation of soil or microclimate in its many wineries across the country.

Research data from wineries and journals from other parts of the world is also included in the store, giving the Montana intranet a look more reminiscent of a university department's website than a business portal.

"All our research and development, projects, historical reports and operational procedures, including laboratory analysis and engineering procedures it's all here," Mr Robinson said. "The knowledge base ensures that everyone in the regions knows what research work is going on, is up to date and won't duplicate work that's already under way elsewhere."

Crossware sales manager Kenneth Fairgray said, "In developing this system, we were able to utilise the superior search functionality built into Lotus Team Workplace. As Dennis loads in new documents they're automatically indexed and made available for searching."

Lotus Team Workplace (formerly called Lotus QuickPlace) is based on Lotus' Domino server but does without the Lotus Notes front end that usually accompanies Domino in favour of a browser interface.

Which probably helps Montana. Although Lotus Notes has an easily-understood user interface, browsers are even more familiar to most users while being easier to configure.

"The subsections are all set up the same way," Mr Robinson said. "The logic behind it was to make it easier to go from one section to another, totally mouse-driven. Full details of research projects can

be displayed, including time-lines generated from information entered into a template."

Crossware director Per Anderson said, "Lotus Team Workplace was developed to allow this kind of document and information sharing. A single workplace can put all documents, projects, tasks, meeting schedules and so on in a single workspace available from anywhere in the world. It allows asynchronous collaboration, where users can access the information and add to it in their own time, as opposed to synchronous collaboration. That can be added on top of Team Workplace, and can allow real-time chat, shared whiteboards and so on, but that's something for later.

"Setting up is easy out of the box the interface resembles the sort of websites users will already be familiar with, with links down the left side of the screen and boxes containing information. The user can completely customise the appearance from there and import page designs from programs like FrontPage, Dreamweaver and GoLive. It also comes with a converter to automatically import and index data from Word documents."

Mr Anderson said, "One of the reasons for Team Workplace's success is that it's user-driven. After the initial set-up the user takes over. It's outstandingly easy to maintain user groups, passwords, everything.

"Even professionals who don't want to learn how to use IT tools can pick this up we've sold it to lawyers who've then gone on to manage all their documents and users without seeking any help from us."

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