

Progress on the ACCU website

As some of you may know we have recently suffered a setback on the website redevelopment. I have deliberately not written anything for CVu about the website for the last couple of issues because the situation was difficult. So here is story so far.

My first attempt at writing this article was to produce a timeline of what happened this would have told you what happened and when it happened but would not have given any real understanding and depth. Anyway, much of the project history is already documented in previous issues of CVu. Instead I think I should discuss the issues with only the basic chronology.

In January 2005 we held an open bidding contest to find a company to redevelop the ACCU website. We called this work *Stage 1* and it was quickly followed by *Stage 2*. Essentially this stage was to deliver a new server, a Content Management System (CMS) and port our existing content over.

Stage 1 was delivered in May 2005 and at first looked good. But really it was just the old site on new technology with a slightly new look. At the conference in April Tony Barrett-Powell had accepted the position of Web-editor. However it soon became apparent that the tools available in the CMS system were lacking for our needs. At the time we thought we could address this by accelerating Stage 2 but in retrospect I don't think our subcontract ever really appreciated the difficulties we encountered. Maybe we didn't communicate clearly enough.

We issued a specification for Stage 2 and this is where the problems really began. The subcontractor spent an inordinate amount of time before replying to this specification with a tender. In the meantime I took my eye off the ball as I tried to arrange a new database system for the book reviews. And somewhere along the line summer happened and everything slowed down.

When the ACCU decided to redevelop the site and award contracts we were scared of cost. We tried to deal with this through a specification and a fixed-price contract. However we always knew the specification was weak. We hoped that by building piece by piece with extra specs, and fixed-price contracts we could do the job incrementally.

We selected the subcontractor on the basis of price. We chose an organisation that did not understand the ACCU, its values and the way we work.

Our *specification-work-repeat* approach was bad for several reasons. It made more work for us as we wrote the specifications and attempted to make them whole - if not watertight. The process required group discussion and group decision-making. As a voluntary organisation that seldom meets face-to-face it is a difficult and slow process to have such discussions and make such decisions.

As a result our expectations were different to those of supplier. They were good enough to keep working when they started to make a loss on the contract but they didn't tell us that this was so. And that meant we didn't understand their position.

Quite naturally our work was put to the back of their queue, we didn't know this and perceive them as responding slowly.

The choice of CMS was wrong too. Four out of five original bidders proposed using custom CMS's, only one proposed using an off-the-shelf (Open Source) system. This proprietary system caused several difficulties.

Firstly the system was light on functionality. So we found the need to request more features to be added - something neither side had appreciated upfront - and that added to the subcontractor's costs. The system had, from what we could tell, only been used internally by the supplier before we came along. We wanted more control over the system and it didn't support that.

Secondly: the system had not been as widely used, tested and debugged as a COTS system would of been.

Finally, as the project had problems we got more concerned about the propriety nature the system. If we had to move our site to another supplier it would be a big job and, it would only get bigger the more we worked with this system.

By the end of August it was clear there were problems. In September we regrouped and said: *we know there have been problems let's try and give it one more go*. We set October as our "go live" date and went for it. Our intention was to rebuild our relationship with the supplier over a few weeks and give ourselves the confidence to authorise *Stage 2*.

October became November but we were close. Then our content went missing, our administration rights disappeared and we received confusing messages from the supplier. The trust we had been working to build up over the last two months was gone.

At this point Tony and myself spoke to Ewan Milne (ACCU chair), some things were clear:

1. We no longer trusted them
2. If their support and service was good we could live with the poor CMS, conversely, if the CMS system was good we delivered poor service. As it was neither was good.
3. The ACCU is a voluntary organisation, the time we spend on association activities comes to our free time, we outsourced the website because there was too much work for us to do on this basis. But we found there were spending increasing amounts of our time managing the outsourcing.

Given this we felt we had no choice but to change. This wasn't an easy decision as it meant writing off close to £4000 of members money. However, there is no point throwing good money after bad. One should only ever base investment decisions on future expenditure and not on sunk costs, this money was gone.

(The committee briefly discussed action to recover the money but quickly came to the conclusion this was unlikely and would absorb our time, energy and probably cost more money than we would recover.)

I made contact with the company that came second in our bidding process. Coincidentally not only was this the only bidder to suggest a COTS CMS but it was one of only two bidders with ACCU membership. Luckily for us they were still interested, and amazingly, they could started at once.

So in mid-November we started over again, this time with Gnomedia and Tim Pushman. Some of you will know Tim from his articles in CVu and Overload, others may have met him at ACCU conferences.

This time things are looking better. We learnt from the first time and are doing things differently this time around. Specifically:

- We have our website editor, Tony, in place from the start. He is working with Gnomedia on design and content from day one.
- We are working with a subcontract who knows the ACCU and shares our values.
- Gnomedia are working on a time and materials basis. This puts more risk on the ACCU but also gives an incentive to the supplier to be open with those and prompt with the work.
- We are using an existing, off-the-shelf, Open Source CMS called Xaraya. So far this looks impressive and appears to offer functionality out of the box that surpasses the previous system.
- We haven't written a detailed requirements or specification this time but our goal is clear: a replacement website built on a technology that allows for easy updating. This may lack preciseness of a requirements document or a rigorous specification but it is something we can all understand very easily. Rather than arguing about details we have a shared vision. This is only possible because we share an understanding and value system with our subcontractor.

We have been working - well Tim and Tony really - actively for about three weeks at the time of writing and things are going well. Communication is much freer, plentiful and productive. Problems are being overcome much easier and faster.

The ACCU is not the first organisation to be caught out like this. In fact we were determined to avoid the mistakes we have seen elsewhere: we knew the problems with fixed-price contracts, we knew the problems the specification is, we knew the problem of outsourcing but we went ahead and made many of them. Simply knowing about things that can go wrong doesn't stop one making the same mistakes.

Of course there are lessons here we can all learn, perhaps even relearn: fixed-price contracts are difficult, outsourcing is difficult, even outsourced projects require some management, avoid the temptation to create your own new technology, I could go on.

We could have chosen not to redevelop the website. We could have given up when the first project failed. We could of navel-gazed and wondered about our failures. Instead we did not know these things, we picked ourselves up and started over again.

If the ACCU cannot produce a new website then we're in danger of becoming irrelevant. If we cannot accept failure we will never try to change anything. What choice do we have really?

I am sorry we spent members money and have nothing to show for it, I wish it could have been otherwise. I give you my personal apology. However I do feel it is better to have tried and failed the never to have tried.