ISYS
SEARCH SOFTWARE

USING SEARCH SOFTWARE TO PROVIDE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION

This document outlines how search technology is used to provide effective, easily deployed and cost-effective solutions for Freedom of Information ("FoI") compliance.

Public service organisations throughout the United Kingdom are currently working with ISYS Search Software to ensure that they implement FoI systems by January 2005. These include Local Government, Police and National Health Service clients, as well as other government agencies.

This document is divided into five sections:

1. What is FoI Compliance?
2. Two ways to provide FoI services: Self-service or request-based
3. Benefits of search technology in delivering FoI services
4. Selecting search technology: Important considerations
5. Introduction to ISYS Search Software

1. WHAT IS FOI COMPLIANCE?

Freedom of Information ("FoI") compliance is defined as the following:

"From 1 January 2005, people will have the right to make a request for any information held by a public authority (although this right is subject to a number of exemptions which permit the withholding of information) and the authority will have to comply with the Act in responding."[1]

This means that public organisations within the UK will, upon request, be required to provide details of any information they hold about individuals. This information could include personal records detailing address and contact details, histories of transactions that an individual has undertaken with the organisation in question or copies of correspondence relating to the individual. They can request any such information, as long as providing that information will not compromise national security or law enforcement. They may make an extremely open-ended request, such as "What information do you hold about me?" This would require a total sweep of all data repositories for any reference pertaining to a specific name or ID, with no predefined outcome or answer.

For most organisations, FoI compliance necessitates the implementation of a technology solution and supporting processes.

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[1] http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/eventual.aspx?id=74

2. TWO WAYS TO PROVIDE FOI SERVICES

There are two ways in which FoI-related information can be obtained.

1. Self-service

2. Request-based

Self-service enables individuals to conduct FoI searches themselves, using a medium such as the Internet. This route is only as good as the mechanism provided for finding information. If citizens are unable to find the information that they require then there will be increased use of the request-based method. The inherently lower security of the self-service method means that there will always be some FoI requests that need to be handled manually by the public service organisation.

The request-based method requires the individual to make a request to the nominated public sector body. Once the request has been received, the respondent then has 20 days in which to issue the information.

3. SEARCH TECHNOLOGY FOR FOI – KEY BENEFITS

Search technology benefits both types of FoI service delivery.

In the case of self-service, an organisation can make information quickly available to the public by publishing it on its website and providing a search utility for that information. Visitors to the website use the search functionality to find the information they want, without requiring intervention from the organisation's staff. For private information this may be inappropriate, unless user authentication is used, such as a user login and password.

In the case of request-based FoI delivery, search technology enables staff within the organisation to quickly and easily search the various data sources that might contain relevant information. By typing in a key word such as the applicant's name or identification number, they can find every reference of that key word that exists within multiple data repositories.

Search software provides a single view into all enterprise data, regardless of its location or format. The information can be retrieved whether the data is held within Oracle, SQL or Lotus Notes databases, MS Office files, HTML pages, or legacy data systems. An index can be created so that a question can be asked of all repositories in a single instance. A single screen is used to present the results to the user for selection of the most appropriate data.

Almost a third (29 per cent) of UK public sector bodies foresee difficulties in fulfilling their obligations under freedom of information laws due to come into force in January 2005, according to research published in E-Government Outlook 2004-05[2].

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[2] http://www.headstar.com/egovoutlook

Search software overcomes the following impediments to successful FoI compliance:

Multiple Systems – Departmental and task specific systems hold information all over the enterprise, from large systems such as mainframes through to Excel worksheets acting as databases. The manual task of collating information from all of these sources is time consuming and inefficient. Although some systems have search functionality for their own data, most do not provide access to other systems. Search software provides a single view of all data sources, so that a single search retrieves information from many different systems.

Multiple File Formats – Most organisations use many different types of documents in their day-to-day operations. Search software is able to interrogate almost any file format. Importantly, search results can be displayed without the need for the original application.

Speed of Information Retrieval – Many inbuilt search functions within software applications are slow or limited in functionality. Purpose-built search software is specifically designed to find information quickly and accurately. Regardless of the size of the data repository, search software retrieves information in seconds.

Limited Timeframe – The deadline of January 2005 leaves very little time to implement a solution and train staff to deal with requests. Search software is quickly and easily implemented, and most people are familiar with the concept of using a search engine.

Unspecified Scope of Requests – As we've mentioned, some FoI requests may be as open-ended as "What information do you hold about me?" Search software provides the option to be as general or as specific as required. Staff can restrict their search to specific types of documents or areas, or use a very specific combination of key words. Alternatively, a more general query enables staff to retrieve all relevant documents.

Other Priorities – Given that FoI is one of a large number of IEG directives, to some degree, budget and resources may already be accounted for or awarded to higher priority projects. Search software is inexpensive and requires minimal maintenance. Many organisations will find they are able to fit this type of solution into existing budgets to meet FoI compliance deadlines without impacting on other projects.

4. SELECTING SEARCH TECHNOLOGY: IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

We've outlined how search technology helps in meeting FoI compliance   However, not all search technology is appropriate for your particular needs. Some areas to consider when evaluating search technology include:

- **File formats:** Does the search software support all the file formats that need to be searched?
- **User interface:** Is the software user interface intuitive and easy to use? Are there different ways to create queries, suiting different types of users? For example, check that users are able to enter queries as a Natural Language question, or use a menu-assisted toolbar to help them construct their query piece by piece.
- **Intelligent searching:** Does the search software recognise and interpret dates and numbers, pre-compensate for typing or scanning errors and understand word forms and tenses?

- **Refining the Results:** Once a set of results has been returned, are users easily able to manipulate the results and navigate to the information with the highest relevance? Tools that you should look for include the ability to sort search results by various criteria, such as file type, title, date or size. Also, 'search within' enables users to narrow down their search by conducting another search on the current results list.

- **Viewing and Navigating Results:** Does the software enable users to easily see where the relevant information is located? Features that provide this functionality include hit-highlighting, where key words are highlighted in different colours, as well as context view, where users can see a brief extract of a document in the results list. This enables them to determine if the document is relevant before exploring it in further detail. Hit-to-hit navigation is an essential tool in negotiating large documents – it enables users to go straight to the next instance of the key word, without having the scroll through pages of irrelevant information.

- **Scalability:** Will the system scale to include other areas of the organisation, additional data repositories or the growth in data that occurs over time? Will increasing data volumes impact on the price of the solution, or the infrastructure required?

- **Security:** Will the software respect security settings?

- **Implementation and Maintenance:** Is the software easy to install and maintain? Some software requires consultants and systems integration projects to implement a solution properly. Make sure you find out what is required to implement the various solutions you are considering. Also, ensure that you understand what ongoing maintenance will be required.

- **Infrastructure** – how will the system be deployed? Solutions exist for both web-based environments as well as network or desktop-based systems. Determine which suits your organisation best.

5. INTRODUCTION TO ISYS SEARCH SOFTWARE

There are many issues to consider when implementing systems to meet FoI compliance requirements. Search software addresses many of these issues, while still providing a cost-effective and quickly implemented solution.

ISYS Search Software distributes a range of enterprise search products that can be used for FoI compliance solutions. ISYS is designed to find information fast, regardless of its source or format, and is available as web-based software for an intranet, website or portal application, or as a network-based solution for individual PCs or LANs.

ISYS meets all of the requirements outlined in this document:

- **File formats** – ISYS supports over 125 different file formats, and over 30 languages.

- **User interface** – ISYS provides a range of intuitive user interfaces, including Natural Language, Boolean or Menu-Assisted.

- **Intelligent searching** – ISYS uses intelligent date and number recognition, can do searches for the same word with different tenses, date and number range searching, and provides thesaurus options including a custom thesaurus where synonyms specific to your organisation can be defined.

- **Refining the Results** – ISYS provides the ability to sort results, filter by file type and search within the current results.

- **Viewing and Navigating Results** – ISYS uses hit-highlighting to make it obvious where key word 'hits' are located, and provides hit-to-hit navigation tools to enable users to quickly jump from one hit to the next. ISYS displays results in 'context view', with an extract of the relevant section of the document shown. In addition, ISYS has a Fast PDF

Preview function that enables the user to quickly view relevant extracts of a very large PDF document, without having to wait for the whole document to load.

- **Scalability** – ISYS is scalable from a single machine to thousands of PCs across multiple networks, VPNs or intranets.
- **Security** – ISYS respects inbuilt security settings.
- **Implementation and Maintenance** – ISYS can be implemented in a matter of days and does not require an army of consultants to install. It is easily maintained, reducing the load on your IT staff and your reliance on external consultants.
- **Infrastructure** – ISYS is available for individual PCs, LANs, intranets, websites or portals. ISYS solutions exist for most relevant environments.

SUMMARY

ISYS Search Software is an invaluable tool in complying with Freedom of Information requirements. It plays an important role in the effort to provide openness and accessibility to information and is a positive move toward achieving FoI compliance.

TO FIND OUT MORE…

Contact ISYS Search for more information on FoI search software solutions.

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