New Economy, New Partnership: New DocShare

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ABSTRACT

DocShare, born at SIGUCCS User Services '95, has gone one step further in its evolution to take advantage of the new digital economy and partnership opportunity. DocShare is a consortium composed of staff members at higher education institutions who produce computer-related documentation and newsletters. Members share their own publications in exchange for the opportunity to use other institutions' productions. DocShare provides a Web site, a discussion mailing list for members and a search engine to help members find just the right publications.

A presentation at SIGUCCS '99 revealed that, in order to meet the changing needs of IT staff, DocShare needed to expand its services and features. After examining and evaluating operational feasibility, the DocShare Consortium voted to transfer the DocShare title and service to a higher education community building company located in Palo Alto, California. This presentation discusses the future direction of such a partnership.

Keywords

DocShare, Partnership, Cooperative, documentatin, ASP, Application Service Provider, GoCampus.

1. A NEW LANDSCAPE

Helping students or faculty use computers is not a new discussion for the hundreds of technical writers, documentation specialists or lab technicians in higher education technology staffs across the country. By sharing a common goal and documents among institutions, DocShare established a new community and a new partnership among technical writers. Since 1995, technical writers helped each other through the ebb and flow of academic software deployment lifecycles. Software lifecycles, once limited to major upgrades of administrative systems or course support applications that took two to three years to release, now occur at an increasingly rapid rate. By 2000, the semester or quarter was compressed into a half-life of months or weeks due to changes in how faculty and students gained access to software – over the Internet.

The new landscape embraced new applications, new methods of delivering software and a renewed interest in written documentation. After all, how would the thousands of students use software introduced by Information Technologies or other departments found on *Tucows*, *DaveCentral* or *SeekSoft*? The time between software deployment and the preparation time needed to develop written materials was compressed into shorter and shorter timeframes. When "speed is god, and time is the devil," according to many Silicon Valley pundits, the rate of change will be further compressed to shorter and shorter timeframes. Documentation specialists are faced with the need to prepare documentation throughout the year, instead the usual push for new materials at the beginning of the academic cycle. The time needed to prepare materials and speed required by the introduction of new courses and applications for college faculty, staff and students, pressed colleges and universities to seek other methods to communicate and collaborate. For this reason, colleges and universities are looking for options, both internally and externally. Once restricted to a few major systems or relegated to facilities management functions, outsourcing is becoming an increasingly useful option.

While directors of college computing services considered outsourcing as an option throughout the 1990s, the increasing complexity of Internet based applications gave rise to a new layer of businesses. The Application Services Providers (ASPs) deliver services over the Internet for organizations that rely on Web-based applications primarily outside of their local domain. ASPs are attractive to organizations because they don't require local staff support or technology resources. More importantly, they support applications that cut across organizational lines, or within groups of organizations, like a cooperative. With the rise of ASPs and Internet startups, comes risk. As of July 2000, many "dot coms" have lost 20% to 80% of their assessed value. However, many "dot coms" have changed how people learn and work. By building applications that improve a business's functions, such as constituency management for non-profits, organizations are able to provide expected services using Web-enabled technologies. This creates an opportunity for DocShare members and companies like GoCampus — a partnership opportunity.

2. DocShare

DocShare is a consortium of staff members at more than 60 higher education institutions dedicated to producing computer-related documentation and newsletters. The goals of the DocShare Consortium are threefold:

- To provide a forum by which members can discuss common issues and concerns

- To facilitate the exchange of members' internally produced computing documentation and newsletter articles for adaptation or reprinting by participating academic institutions
- To encourage collaboration between member institutions in the development of additional documentation.

Staff at DocShare's member institutions recognized the need to share and collaborate as early as 1995. They needed new tools to expand the bottom line for technical writers – high quality products that meet local needs. By using the Internet and basic communication tools such as listservs, Web pages and search engines, DocShare members benefit by adding their selection expertise to thousands of Web pages on member Web sites.

The project, which started as a voluntary effort by its members, had finally reached the point where, if the project is to grow any further, it needed a more formal support structure. Establishing a formal support structure is not an easy task. For one thing, it required funding—for hardware, site maintenance and development. A brief survey of 12 member institutions revealed that only five institutions were willing to contribute a small amount toward supporting DocShare. Some even questioned the value of DocShare, if there were cost involved. Thus the consortium was faced with a situation where it needed funding to improve service.

Finally, with funding assistance from Northwest Academic Consortium (NWACC), George Fox University, Pacific Lutheran University, Reed College, University of Puget Sound, University of Portland, Whitman College and Willamette University, DocShare found a temporary reprieve at Whitman College, and started to seek a more permanent solution to its dilemma.

DocShare remains closely tied to its original mission – to provide assistance for technical and documentation writers in colleges and universities. As colleges and universities shift staffing and technology resources to expand and sometimes to react to changes in enrollment, delivery, or services to faculty and students, their computing needs will be at the forefront. Clearly, the support for technology use will continue to rise and the expectations of faculty and students will match the frenzied pace of Internet-enabled companies.

3. GoCampus and the Cooperative

GoCampus, Inc. (1999) is an ASP and value-added reseller of Internet-based systems and services that assists colleges and universities in relationahip management and building communities among students, faculty, alumni and parents to establish lifelong bonds. GoCampus offers a new approach to campus Web site development to help address issues around communication, attracting and retaining students and raising non-tuition funds. GoCampus believes that developing Web-based communities provides greater economic and academic value than selling merchandise on a campus Web site.

GoCampus firmly believes that developing Web-based communities provides greater economic and academic value. Also, through collaboration, colleges and universities can reduce the costs of technological innovation. To accomplish these goals, GoCampus established the GoCampus Cooperative, a membership organization for campuses and companies. Cooperative members share their collective wisdom, determine needs and priorities, develop applications, allocate development funds and explore models of the on-line community.

4. GoCampus and DocShare Partnership

While DocShare was seeking a more formal support, GoCampus, as a startup company, was seeking conversations with both non-profit organizations and higher education institutions about relationship management and community building for feedback and market understanding.

The DocShare Steering Committee appreciated GoCampus' philosophy and its focus on building relationships and understanding of educational community. GoCampus recognized the value of the longstanding and successful relationship established by DocShare member institutions. Hence, DocShare and GoCampus agreed to examine the possibility of partnership to deliver service through GoCampus Internet-based services. This resulted in signing a one year agreement in May 2000. As a partnership the DocShare/GoCampus agreement provides a test-bed for new relationship- management technologies.

5. Future Directions

GoCampus will continue to offer DocShare existing basic services and focus on support for technical and documentation specialists. The agreement and subsequent partnership between GoCampus and DocShare offers members access to new resources and the GoCampus Cooperative:

- DocShare Steering Committee – the Steering Committee will assume the role of the GoCampus advisory committee. For the initial year of the agreement, DocShare/GoCampus will maintain the organization's founding mission and focus.
- *Transfer of services – GoCampus will assume responsibility for the DocShare Web presence including listserv, Web pages and search-engine management.*
- GoCampus technology transfer – GoCampus will provide the DocShare/GoCampus Advisory Committee non-disclosure access to new products and services scheduled for release in January 2001.

Based on feedback from the DocShare Advisory Committee, a list of potential project and activities for 2000-2001 was compiled:

- eNewsletters and improved communication with DocShare membership
- Use of dynamic Web pages or portals to support the DocShare Community
- GoCampus initiated support documentation for use by the DocShare Community
- Constituency management resource tools available to DocShare to understand how DocShare site is used
- Improved search-engine functionality
- GoCampus non-disclosure meetings with the Advisory Committee

At the end of the first quarter of 2001, the DocShare Advisory Committee and GoCampus management will review joint activities and determine if the partnership will continue.