

Millions Wasted on FOI Compliance

Submitted by: WiseTiger - DO NOT USE

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Are public sector organisations are being convinced to spend a fortune on document management systems to manage Freedom of Information (FOI) enquiries? For most a powerful internet search engine would suffice, according to System Associates.

System Associates, specialists in the delivery of enterprise-wide internet technologies for the public sector, is extremely concerned about corporate software vendors that are persuading public sector organisations to splash out on enterprise-level document management systems which are superfluous to their needs. According to Kable, a public sector research organisation, the typical cost of a document management implementation in the public sector in 2002 was between £80,000 and £500,000.

David Macken, Managing Director at System Associates explains, "The situation is nonsense. Some large public sector bodies are spending millions. Software vendors are justifying the sales of document management systems exclusively on the basis of the FOI Act, which is like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Where the full features of a document management system are not required, there is a much more pragmatic and cost effective solution."

Coming into force on the 1st January 2005, the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act will introduce new rights to access information held by public authorities and will have a significant impact on the 100,000 or so public bodies discharging public functions in the UK.

David Macken comments: "When the Act comes into force, we can reasonably expect a significant volume of FOI enquiries to be registered online, thus realising administrative and resource savings" continued Macken. "For those made by post or telephone, a good search engine can still be used to great effect by public sector employees interrogating their corporate intranet. This technology is not rocket science any more, it has been around for 10-15 years now and public sector bodies should be recognising and embracing it. Archaic 'key word' search functions are now woefully outdated and inadequate. They retrieve too much irrelevant information and make it difficult to resolve specific queries. The basic standard should employ more sophisticated filtering systems to search by topic, for example."

System Associates also urges public sector information managers to exercise vigilance when selecting IT partners. Macken explains, "This sector has very specific requirements and works within dozens of standards and regulations. They would be wise to work only with organisations that can demonstrate extensive experience in the sector, and with companies that fully understand all government guidelines, including those related to search terms and organising online data."

"Not all FOI enquiries will necessarily even involve the formal search of documents. If all 100,000 public bodies spend up to £500,000 on a document management system – we'll be witnessing public spending out of control. All just to manage FOI enquiries - it is madness," concluded Macken.

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About System Associates

System Associates specialises in the delivery of integrated software services including advanced web management such as high availability hosting, security and support. Working for organisations such as HM Treasury, British Library, Greater London Authority, Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, Buzz Airlines and Deutsche Bank, its product portfolio includes a bespoke content management framework, search engine, media asset library, Freedom of Information workflow, single sign-on and large online registration solutions. System Associates boasts particular expertise in e-GIF and government-related specifications, accessibility, technical architecture, project management, databases and integration.

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