

iFerret measures up to real world information challenges at the City of Gosnells

Making best use of his time at the airport before boarding a Friday afternoon flight, the Chief Executive Officer of the City of Gosnells in Perth's south-east asked his staff to action an information request from the Western Australian Ombudsman.

Just a half an hour later he received a spreadsheet detailing the documents which would satisfy that request: a year's worth of correspondence related to one case which was contained in 550 documents drawn from across the spectrum of the City's information systems.

For Kevin Barnett, the City's Information Management Services (IMS) Coordinator who undertook the process, it was a pleasing result. To satisfy the request, he had used iFerret, the solution for undertaking structured and unstructured searches of all forms of local government information repositories.

Most modern councils deploy a variety of information systems to support business initiatives and client requirements.

"While these systems provide valuable transaction processing capability, they also create islands of information. There's a wealth of information that is not used adequately because staff either don't know it exists or they have trouble accessing it.

"However we had three real world examples in which iFerret delivered exactly what we wanted in minutes. It saved us days of work," Kevin Barnett said.

In a similar way to the Ombudsman's enquiry, the Gosnell's CEO requested the supply of correspondence between the City and a developer from 2010 to 2012, including that which resided only in the email archive.

iFerret located 450 documents, which were exported and zipped. Included in the package

was an interactive html schedule of contents which enabled someone to select one of the documents on the schedule and then be presented with the actual document as a pdf, any of the Office document types, email or image formats. With a managed set of data Mr Barnett was able to go back and check in a timely manner that each of the documents did in fact belong to the developer.

A third example of how iFerret operated came in response to a request from the City's lawyer who in court had to table the costs associated with a development. In minutes the 45 relevant documents were located in the email archive, ECM and on network drives.

That outcome cemented the City's decision to deploy iFerret. It became the first local government in Western Australia to select iFerret, joining users in more than 40 local governments elsewhere in Australia.

Some 17 km south-east of the Perth CBD, The City of Gosnells is one of the largest local governments in WA by population. Serving 125,000 people in an area of 127 km², it encompasses rural zones in the east and south and some commercial and industrial developments, particularly along Albany Highway.

Fuelling the City's high population growth are new land releases and housing developments, particularly in Canning Vale and Southern River, while redevelopment is becoming a focus in the suburbs of Maddington, Beckenham, Kenwick and Gosnells.

The City has several structured and unstructured data repositories in the form of Technology One's Electronic Content Management System (ECM), Land Information System (LIS), Customer Relationship Management (CRM), other corporate systems, email, email archives, file shares and network drives.

In 2015 City of Gosnells Manager of Information Services, Pamela Campbell presented a business case to the City's executive which identified that, despite effective education and improvement programs, the City's information was sometimes not where it should be.

Ms Campbell observed that staff were devoting a lot of time and resources looking for information and even after finding it, there was no certainty that it was the latest and most accurate version.

"We asked how we could make better use of our corporate information and be assured that enquiries were returning holistic, accurate and up to date results. Equally, we needed to be sure we were looking for the information in the right places," she explained.

IMS officers search for information through internal repositories on a daily basis and are well skilled within their specialist application area. Assuming the information exists in ECM they have a high chance of finding it. However, if the information is not within ECM they will generally not know about it. Then there are levels of access to some City information: for example, only the IMS Coordinator has across the board access to the email archive of all staff.

Administration staff look in the corporate repositories such as the LIS and CRM systems on a regular basis, according to their needs. Again, says Mr Barnett, they need a high level of familiarity and education about the systems they are using to locate information. They may need to look in multiple systems to find all the information they require or conversely they will generally not look in the unstructured systems for related or important supporting data.

Other staff or casual users will look on an "as needed" basis and this group of people will generally not have a high level of training across all systems and they may often be a specialist in a given area.

"This creates great challenges for us as we generally do not have the capability to search and discover information across the organisation, relative to a given need. If staff want to attempt a thorough search or investigation it can be time-consuming, resource hungry and costly, and at times we will not find all the information we need. This is a concern in terms of the City's risk management," Mr Barnett said.

A further consideration related to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests is that while possibly only a handful of documents might be relevant to an enquiry from the Ombudsman each one must nevertheless be assessed. Ms Campbell's business case recommended that the City evaluate an appliance solution- deployed out of the box. It was believed this would contribute to a rapid and easy deployment, with lower training costs than a solution built using a toolbox approach.

iFerret is a "turnkey" solution which is delivered to be fully operational with little effort required by the customer who simply needs to provide read only access to the systems to be included in the search. After iPlatinum completed the necessary scanning and indexing it trained staff on a fully operational solution sitting across all information.

Mr Barnett said "we heard anecdotally that those local governments using iFerret were achieving increased efficiency and reduced costs. Conversely, solutions using a toolbox strategy might only achieve limited success for the time and effort which went into their development."

The City of Gosnells set very simple metrics to determine if iFerret would meet its needs; confirm that iFerret could find all relevant documents across datasets and improve efficiency in that process.

"Since the initial deployment of iFerret those using it are very happy. The word is spreading and it is creating a buzz. I see it being widely embraced across council" Mr Barnett said.

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