iFerret uncovers the facts to ensure good corporate governance at Randwick City Council

They are not uncommon problems reported to council call centres: the damaged footpath which results in someone falling and sustaining an injury or a tree in a public space that drops a large limb and damages private property. If such incidents are consequential enough they will set in train a search for information stored across numerous data repositories. That information may be required to satisfy insurance claims, assemble the facts for subpoenas in judicial proceedings or in some instances, respond to Government Information (Public Access) requests. In short it's information to help ensure good corporate governance.

Not only are such searches time-consuming but in the end they may not locate all the relevant information.

Randwick City Council in suburban Sydney got its first taste of the productivity benefits of streamlined search technology when, in 2008, it became one of the first councils to adopt iPLATINUM's WebWombat, a purpose-built search engine for local government. But this raised a major question: once the information was located in any of a number of data repositories how could it be collated in a readily accessible electronic format to be made available to those who needed it?

It followed therefore when iPLATINUM introduced iFerret, the successor to WebWombat, that Randwick was keen to see if it could secure further productivity gains in the area of corporate governance.

The Council's Manager Administrative Services, David Kelly, said "without doubt the benefits of improved searching that we achieved with Web-Wombat helped establish the business case for iFerret. It has solved a number of important problems we've had in locating specific information. The new process for providing GIPA and subpoena responses has been significantly enhanced and is far more productive," he said.

A major function of iFerret is its Managed Results Set, which enables the user to prepare a "package" of documents in an electronic form to address such things as formalised GIPA and subpoena or court-related requests. The solution allows the creation of a narrative for the document package, as well as the ability to store the result electronically for future reference. "This and its core discovery functions make iFerret an asset to improved corporate governance," Mr. Kelly said.

One of the first local government areas to be proclaimed in NSW, Randwick today is a busy council. Its population of almost 140,000 people live in a number of suburbs to the south east of the Sydney CBD. Substantially residential as well as home to major education, medical and sporting facilities, its beachside suburbs also attract large numbers of visitors.

Randwick's Access to Information officer, Gina Garios, says a typical example of the use of iFerret is one related to an insurance claim for an injury sustained when a shopper tripped on damaged pavement in a retail precinct. This incident resulted in more than 120 files comprising PDF, TIF and JPGs of images and documents produced for use within the Council as well as with external parties. For example, the files included correspondence from Council's mayor, head of engineering, customer call centre representatives and other administration personnel.

Another typical incident cited by Ms. Garios concerned damage to private property resulting from a fallen tree. In this case 35 files represented all the information that was relevant to an insurance matter. This even included communications between Council about letter box dropping of information to residents who might be affected by the pruning or removal of trees deemed to be dangerous.

David Kelly said very good feedback has been received from Council staff about iFerret's contribution to them doing their jobs. Among the Council staff who see the benefits of the Managed Result Set on a day to day basis is insurance officer Stacey Jeffries.

Of the claim related to the damaged footpath she said "it took between two and three hours to search through everything related to the footpath on the particular road so I could be sure I captured all relevant documents.

"For insurance purposes however, the real benefit of doing this kind of search comes with use of the Managed Result Set. It means that all documents can be placed into a folder and then quickly sent to the relevant parties, either legal advisors or insurers," she said.

Previously staff would have had to undertake separate searches across four separate Council applications but they would still be unable to see documents located on public network drives or in the Council's email system.

"Before iFerret," said Ms Jeffries, "if I had to search the Council's Pathway system which is used for service requests I would have to print out the relevant documents and scan them. It was a tedious process, as well as using a lot of paper."

Today iFerret is deployed to search across Randwick's TRIM document management system, PATHWAY land information system, customer request management system as well as email applications and its network environment.

To help deploy iFerret, iPLATINUM consulting staff assisted in the evaluation of a prototype system, staff training and support, as well as provision of documentation and quick reference guides.

After trialling iFerret in a pilot program, in August 2011 Randwick decommissioned WebWombat one day and brought iFerret online the next. A total of 15 people, including all of Council's governance staff as well as a number of other staff who respond to expanded query requests, now use iFerret.

Gina Garios who oversaw staff training in iFerret explains that understanding how to formulate search criteria is the key to becoming proficient in the use of the application. It can take some months to learn the correct search functions.

The functions provided by the iFerret Managed Result set include:

- The ability to create a narrative regarding the Managed Result Set e.g. reference, organisation, purpose, additional comments.

- The ability to select appropriate documents and save them as a package.

- Uploading of redacted documents as a replacement for an original document (using Council redaction capabilities).

- Recording of notes and comments against the various documents e.g. Explaining reasons for redaction or providing additional information.

- The ability to store the final result for future reference.

In addition to the Managed Result Set, iPLATINUM believes iFerret represents a quantum improvement in search technology for local government.

iFerret enhances the users' ability to respond to issues by delivering access to information from a wide reach of data sources, all from a single point of access and as intuitively as searching on the internet. It inherits the security and permission rights to information from the native applications.

Other improvements to the discovery process include OCR support, searching using synonyms, duplicate documents recognition and additional user configurations of 'administrator' and 'super user'.