

Sutherland Shire streamlines the search for its Information assets

Records are an asset and should be seen as such by any organisation says Ellen Whittingstall.

So much is she a champion of the need for good record keeping at Sutherland Shire Council that she stages “Ellen’s Rant” as a precursor to training staff in the use of iFerret, the search engine deployed to locate even the most elusive records and data for local government.

It’s an opportunity to remind staff of their responsibilities about the importance of good record keeping says Ms Whittingstall, the executive officer, privacy and access to information, at the fifth biggest council in NSW.

With her self-titled “rant” a fixture on the Council’s internal training agenda, it is no surprise that she has championed the uptake of iFerret which highlights the inability of conventional search engines to address Sutherland’s indexing protocols and in doing so has heralded the replacement of a swag of older technologies for customer requests and document management.

Until Council executives saw their first demonstration of iFerret the time taken to search Sutherland’s data repositories and uncertainty about the comprehensiveness of search results were tacitly accepted as a fact of life for Shire which is home to more than 220,000 people on the southern coastal border of metropolitan Sydney.

iFerret, developed by iPLATINUM to meet the specific needs of local government, gives users the ability to locate and retrieve information that might otherwise remain hidden in databases, networks and document management systems. It does so using simple search methods and filtering techniques.

Sutherland’s business case to evaluate iFerret was based on the fact that Council was using a Lotus Domino system for both document management and customer relationship functions. This presented significant pain points in terms of data search and retrieval. In Sutherland’s experi-

ence Domino had very limited search capacity. A proprietary archival tool also added a significant time lag to the retrieval process. The Council had trialled several search engines across the DMS without success.

All these issues disappeared however following implementation of iFerret which now provides instant search results across multiple data bases.

Ms Whittingstall said one staff member’s success in locating a document, created four years previously but since lost, exemplified the benefits which came with the deployment of iFerret. A previous search over four weeks had failed to locate the document. Once trained in the use of iFerret the staffer found the elusive document in just 20 seconds.

“We engaged iPLATINUM to provide a pilot application indexing across the Domino data base and based on that success we progressed to a full implementation. iFerret provides a tool which not only indexes our network drive data or property and rating system but also the DMS,” Ms. Whittingstall said.

To determine if iFerret would meet its needs Sutherland set a two-fold objective of reducing the time taken to undertake searching using conventional methods and to ensure result parameters are correct.

iFerret was initially trialled by Sutherland’s governance and records units which provide advice to the whole of Council, in addition to processing Government Information Public Access (GIPA) applications and subpoenas.

Ellen Whittingstall was a member of the group that trialled iFerret in a 10 month pilot project during which all technical issues were tested and resolved. Since its deployment she has provided training to various Council units and has been involved in user group meetings to discuss future requirements.

It was decided to deploy iFerret progressively rather than in one big step, providing Sutherland with an opportunity to remind staff across the entire organisation of their record keeping responsibilities.

“iFerret is only as good as the records kept by the organisation so ahead of training staff in its use, I run a session called Ellen’s Rant in which I reiterate the importance of good record keeping,” Ms. Whittingstall said.

Taking only about half an hour, including Ellen’s Rant, training involves an overview of the product, a case study using the search parameters and a brief self-explore session. Ms. Whittingstall explains the training process has been straightforward and obstacle-free.

iFerret is used by about 200 staff for basic searching within their area of expertise as well as by records staff locating records held across all Council units. These users save an estimated hour a week with iFerret.

In her own case as an executive officer Ms Whittingstall estimates the use of iFerret saves an hour a day carrying out her responsibilities to provide records under the GIPA Act. Four other executive officers with different responsibilities are estimated to save up to half an hour each week.

GIPA, known in other jurisdictions as Freedom of Information (FOI) can place major demands on Councils depending on how active a community may be in regard to finding information, how problematic the Council may be from an administrative perspective and even the political motivation of groups or individuals.

Through a function called Managed Results Sets iFerret plays a key role in satisfying GIPA requests. It can be used to locate records for a court subpoena, insurance matters or an internal request for bulk information – in effect anything where there is a need to provide bulk information, as well as man-

age the information itself such as annotations and redaction.

“iFerret has given me the confidence that I have captured all requested documentation. In addition the dataset management function has allowed streamlined reporting. Further it has reduced the time taken to search for documentation,” Ms. Whittingstall said.

The staged rollout of the solution across the Council has resulted in proactive and very enthusiastic feedback. Staff not yet trained in iFerret are actively seeking information about and requesting access to it. With the release of the latest version of iFerret Sutherland hopes to make a more concerted effort to train staff who have indicated their desire to use the system.

Using iFerret has also delivered productivity benefits in unforeseen areas Ms. Whittingstall explains.

“During the rollout of iFerret we discovered that some units do not use Council’s corporate records system. iFerret now enables searching of all council networks including those created for units not using the corporate system.”

Ratepayers and others seeking information from Council have also benefitted from faster turnaround due to the use of iFerret.

In the pilot project and during the implementation of iFerret, iPLATINUM consultants trained the core staff and have been available to answer any subsequent queries. Since iFerret was deployed in a production environment iPLATINUM has provided regular on-going support and upgrades of both for the operating system and the application. Additionally it provides on-site training for new features and documentation associated with new releases.

As Sutherland progressively replaces older technologies for the management of key repositories such as document management and customer request management iFerret will be configured to scan and index the new data repositories.

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