Concise paper

IT Phone home – an Alumni Community

Catherine Snell-Siddle Bridie Atkins Danette Whitehouse Tama Randell

UCOL
Palmerston North, NZ
c.snell-siddle@ucol.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

In 2004, in conjunction with a student industry project, the School of Information Systems and Computing investigated the establishment of an Alumni.

The project involved identifying the needs of stakeholders in regard to the establishment, implementation, maintenance and use of an online alumni community of graduates from the Bachelor of Information and Communications Technology (Applied) degree. It was envisaged that this project, if implemented, would act as a pilot for all UCOL courses and ultimately lead to an organisation wide alumni service.

An analysis was conducted in which all stakeholders including the office of the chief executive, marketing, support services, lecturers and students were able to identify their vision and requirements of an alumni community. This was by way of face to face interviews and focus groups. A review of existing alumni from other institutions both in New Zealand and Australia was also undertaken.

Investigation of the infrastructure required to host and maintain the alumni and website was performed. An evolutionary approach to developing the website prototype was taken to further pinpoint stakeholder requirements. Analysis identified that there was a strong demand for an alumni throughout the organisation. In response to this demand, a database and website application was developed to include the facility for online registration and updates.

The application is ready to be deployed, however, a decision from the Office of the Chief Executive as to hosting and maintenance issues is pending. This paper will discuss the desirable features and perceived benefits of an alumni as identified through the undertaking of this project.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'alumni' is technically for males only; females are alumnae. The singular is alumnus (male) or alumna (female), although none of these terms are in common use. An alumni association can be defined as a confederation of alumni and alumnae who have joined together to support their alma mater in various ways. Alma mater refers to the institution which one has graduated from (Degree.net, 2000).

Most alumni associations include former students, former and current staff, and other friends of the institution (Swinburne, 2005). An alumni association enables graduates to stay in touch with former students and staff and provides opportunities for networking, mentoring, reunions, and keeping up with latest news. As well as providing these services to graduates, benefits to the institution include fundraising opportunities, obtaining feedback on policy making and education issues, strengthening ties with the business community, and graduate profiling to enhance the reputation and status of the institution.

2. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

For the past few years, there have been calls for an alumni community from Bachelor of Information and Communications Technology (BICT) graduates. In addition to this graduate demand, the external monitor for the degree has repeatedly encouraged the tracking and profiling of past students to better promote the degree, as well as being able to report on graduate successes in order to meet Ministry requirements.

UCOL does not have an organisation wide alumni association. This seems to be the prevailing situation with members of the Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics of New Zealand (ITP). A recent observation of New Zealand polytechnic and institute of technology websites reveals that only three institutions appear to have an alumni centre. Because the ITP sector strongly promotes industry ties and recognises the needs of business when developing course curriculum (ITP Profile, n.d.), the establishment

of an alumni to strengthen links with its business communities would be of great value. The lack of effort from ITP members to establish alumni associations contrasts strongly with New Zealand universities which make effective use of their alumni associations to promote their courses, showcase research activities and to profile successful graduates.

In 2003, academic staff from the School of Information Systems and Computing developed a terms of reference for an alumni web presence project to be put forward as a third year industry project (Toki, Ralston & Whitehouse, 2003). In 2004, a project was sponsored by the Head of School to identify stakeholder needs in regard to establishing an online alumni community via a website and database. The project was focused on establishing an online service for the School of Information Systems and Computing. It was envisaged that if appropriate, and in conjunction with further stakeholder consultation, the model could be adopted institution wide. A third year BICT student completed the project over 18 weeks and produced a prototype of a website and database.

3. DATA GATHERING

In addition to the initial research undertaken to identify the need for an alumni, user needs analysis was conducted by the student.

Users included academic staff, support staff, marketing, senior management and existing students of the Bachelor of Information and Communications Technology (Applied) degree.

3.1 Staff feedback gained

Staff members were interviewed on a one-to-one basis via a structured questionnaire to identify desirable functions of a potential alumni. Through this analysis a number of themes were found:

- Communication with, and between graduates
- Promotion of computing courses
- Building reputation through the establishment of a community
- Stronger links with industry partners

3.2 Student feedback gained

The benefits perceived by the students were identified through a focus group of existing degree students across all years. The themes identified through this analysis included:

- Sense of community
- Employment opportunities and career paths
- Mentorship
- Access to library resources
- Staying in touch with friends

4. FEATURES

Based on the analysis performed, a dynamic website was proposed to consist of the following features:

- Course information
- Links to UCOL website
- Discussion Board for registered members
- Electronic newsletter
- Graduate profiles
- Showcase of industry projects undertaken by students
- Research publications by staff
- Staff information
- Directory of members with eMail contacts available
- Photographs
- Link to library site with access to online resources (ie. Safari)

A database was also proposed to store registered member information including member testimonials and account details. This information was to be stored for access by registered members and for the population of the web site.

5. DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Website

An evolutionary prototyping approach was taken to develop the alumni website. As there was no existing model or example present within the organisation, an initial website was developed and regular meetings held with stakeholders. The meetings were used to collect and document feedback related to content, visual appearance

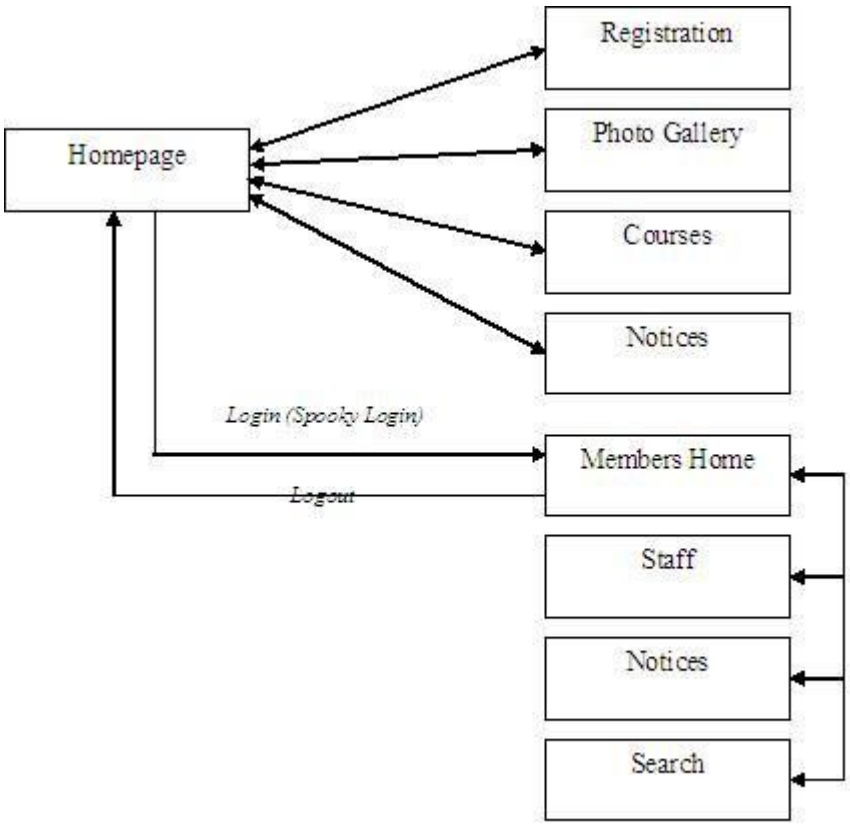

Figure 1. Sitemap for developed alumni website.

and navigation.

The website was developed in Frontpage. It consists of a number of public access pages and pages viewable only to registered members. The public pages display general information to advertise the alumni and the School of Information Systems and Computing. These include a link to the UCOL website, a photo gallery, course information and general notices.

Registered users are given access to a dynamic member homepage which includes regularly updated testimonials, staff information and notices specific to the Alumni. Registered, logged in users are also provided limited access to the accompanying database which allows them to perform searches for other graduates registered.

A large and time consuming task related to this deliverable was the collection, creation and modification of content. The required content was sourced from a variety of people and departments ranging from the School of Information Systems and Computing, senior management, the marketing department and graduates of the Bachelor of Information and Communications Technology. Information was gathered, written and presented in a manner that was suitable for the site and compatible with the hosting and viewing requirements.

Upon review of the project, the student recognised that Frontpage had limited the functionality of the site. The website would have been better developed in MySQL and PHP to perform the registration and searching functions required without the need to source third party software.

5.2 Database

The proposed database was to store and maintain member and registration details. This database was to be accessed via the website by registered users. Information stored in the database, including testimonials, pictures etc., could be used to populate the website.

Initially, the database was to be developed in Microsoft Access however upon considering the registration process, research was undertaken into third party software to perform registration on-line. The required software would be required to be compatible with Frontpage and the hosting

capabilities of the chosen ISP.

A login and user management system, called Spooky Login was identified and purchased. This ASP based software offered the ability to perform and maintain registration payments, emailing of passwords when lost, redirection, email templates and the ability to modify data-fields to suit the application for which it is used. (Brunt, 2005)

Once purchased, Spooky Login was modified to store the relevant information and to make the data accessible to registered alumni members and administrators.

6. WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The project as it stands is a workable solution to a well identified need however there is some way to go before a UCOL wide alumni can be established. This would require a wider stakeholder analysis to be undertaken in order to determine and overcome the organisational constraints present in a large institution, eg. re-sourcing and infrastructure issues.

The authors are currently liaising with other schools within UCOL to co-ordinate and develop an institution wide alumni. A web steering committee has recently been established by the Deputy CEO and it is anticipated that this will be a vehicle to allow progress of the alumni initiative.

The desired outcome of this project would be to deploy this alumni website as a pilot. It is envisaged that this pilot would form the basis for further development of an established alumni to represent UCOL as every graduate's Alma Mater.

REFERENCES

Brunt, T. (Ed). (2005). Thomas Brunt's Outfront. Retrieved May 6, 2005, from http://www.outfront.net/spooky/login.htm

Degree.net. (2000). Glossary. Retrieved May 11, 2005, from http://www.degree.net/guides/glossary.html

ITP Profile (n.d.).A profile of Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics of New Zealand. p 26.

Toki, I., Ralston, S., & Whitehouse, D. (2003). Information systems graduate profiles: on-line and alumni implications. Paper presented at the proceedings of the 16th Annual Conference of the National Advisory Committee for Computing Qualifications, Palmerston North. (Poster).

Swinburne. (2005). Alumni. Retrieved May 6, 2005, from http://www.swin.edu.au/alumni/index.html