

My IT News

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NEED/OPPORTUNITY / Cisco employs over 6,000 Information Technology (IT) employees and contractors in nearly every country in the world. With the multiplicity of projects, programs and departments within IT, the need to communicate thorough information in a timely manner is critical to the organization's success.

Too often, however, the chosen communication approach was to broadcast project-specific e-mail newsletters to large e-mail aliases with the goal of hitting the largest possible number of recipients. With every project following suit, the resulting deluge of 20+ inconsistent and disjointed e-mail newsletters delivered monthly, quarterly or bi-annually became overwhelming for employees, and ultimately decreased the value of communication within IT.

In fact, IT executives became so inundated by IT newsletters that they stopped reading them, and looked to the IT communications team to resolve the issue. The IT communications team took a two-pronged approach to solve this problem. First, it instituted a policy that forced all newsletters to be approved and published through the team. Second, it established the My IT News project, chartered to develop a long-term solution aimed at improving e-mail newsletter communications within IT. Other factors played part in the issue, including:

- ▶ A majority of IT employees received at least 50 new e-mail messages per day—information overload was a major concern for reduced productivity.
- ▶ IT newsletters were often informally distributed by IT employees to business clients within Cisco, creating further confusion about the IT organization throughout the company.
- ▶ Creating, editing, formatting and distributing the newsletters was usually performed by IT employees who were not communication specialists, which meant they were focusing on work not core to their role.
- ▶ E-mail aliases, favored by many newsletter authors, were impossible to manage to provide consistent and reliable audience targeting.
- ▶ IT employees used different applications to read their e-mail. While Outlook users could read either HTML or plain text formatted e-mail newsletters, Pine, Elm or /var/mail (all UNIX-based text

editors) users could only read plain text formatted e-mail. In fact, when a UNIX-based e-mail user received HTML formatted e-mail, all of the HTML code would appear in the e-mail body, making it nearly impossible to read the content.

- ▶ Many IT employees preferred to read news in their native languages. In many areas of the world, local IT staff would receive one of the 20+ newsletters, translate it into their local language and then redistribute the translated version to the local employees.
- ▶ Communicators were bound by the newsletter publication schedules to distribute news, and often had to either rush or delay announcements to meet the delivery deadlines imposed by newsletter owners.
- ▶ Some information delivered within IT was deemed internally sensitive and should only be delivered to regular (full-time) employees, not to contractors, vendors or temporary employees (temps).
- ▶ Delivery of HTML e-mail needed to comply with internal Cisco Web standards as well as accessibility standards for electronic content as outlined by Cisco's accessibility initiative.

INTENDED AUDIENCES / My IT News was designed for use by two primary audience groups within IT. The first primary group was the global IT workforce, who needed to receive time-sensitive information, but had diverse reading interests and delivery format preferences. The IT workforce was split into several departments in the organization, and was comprised of regular (full-time) employees, contractors, vendors and temps. Additionally, each IT resource had a specific title, work type (traditional, mobile or full-time telecommuter) and performed several responsibilities (not always directly associated with their title). The second primary audience group was made up of every communicator within IT who needed an efficient and effective way to distribute organizational-, project- or process-related information within IT. A secondary audience group included any Cisco employee who wanted to consistently receive IT-related information, but had diverse reading interests and delivery format preferences.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES / The primary My IT News goal was to consolidate IT communications—where possible and appropriate—into a centralized and consistently delivered newsletter. The primary My IT News objective was to develop a newsletter delivery application that could decrease IT-related e-mail volume delivered to IT employees so that each recipient saved up to 10 minutes per day previously spent sorting through various forms of IT communication.

My IT News business requirements included the need to:

- ▶ Provide consistency in messaging and appearance to improve the IT organization's image.
- ▶ Ensure that every published article had an expressly selected information security classification to help prevent the erroneous dissemination of information.

- ▶ Support multilingual delivery in Chinese Simplified, Chinese Traditional, English, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese and Spanish.
- ▶ Automate a repeatable and scaleable newsletter delivery process to minimize the editorial team's time spent publishing the news.
- ▶ Deliver e-mail newsletter content in either HTML or plain text format, depending upon a given user's delivery preference.
- ▶ Provide the means for communicators to target discrete audience groups based upon available human resources data, and establish information tags associated with an article using the established news categories.
- ▶ Design My IT News to fit within the enterprise's communication architecture, ensuring appropriate links to and from the already established communication delivery channels.

SOLUTION OVERVIEW / The IT communications team had a unique opportunity to implement a communication application, process or channel that could dramatically improve internal communication. To begin the project, the team reviewed all industry-standard solutions that could possibly meet the IT organization's needs. After thorough industry analysis, the project team settled on two options: the first was to utilize RSS (a relatively popular Web 2.0 technology for distributing news headlines), and the second was to create a custom e-mail newsletter delivery application. After further investigation, the IT communications team realized that, at the time, no enterprise RSS vendor could meet the dynamic nature of the project's stated goals, objectives and requirements.

As a result, the project team decided to design, develop and deploy a custom news channel, yet utilize the Web 2.0 concept that audiences should have an equal stake as communicators in defining the type of information they receive. This relatively simple fact is often the hardest lesson for experienced communicators to accept. My IT News offers the best of both worlds, allowing employees to subscribe to specific news categories (guaranteeing they won't be spammed with news from other categories), while also allowing communicators to perform the time-honored practice of targeting news to specific audience segments. In essence, if a news article's content and target audience tags match an employee's news interests and demographic profile, then the application delivers the news to the employee along with all other matching articles. The tool also frees communicators to choose the timing of their article's delivery, rather than being tied to a strict publication schedule.

SUBSCRIBING TO MY IT NEWS

To personalize their My IT News profile, employees log into the My IT News application and navigate to the "Subscribe to News" section. Subscription selections include: demographic information, electronic newsletter delivery options, news categories and location. The news categories selections provide further levels of granularity (e.g., if "Cisco on Cisco" is selected, the user is given the option to choose additional news selections within the category, such as "Cisco Product Implementations" or "News and Events").

Once submitted, My IT News sends a confirmation e-mail to the user and is then ready to utilize the saved news preferences in the “automated news delivery process.”

SUBMITTING NEWS VIA MY IT NEWS

To submit an article in My IT News, employees log into the My IT News application and navigate to the “Submit News” section. Authors select a news category, preferred publish date, information classification (level of confidentiality) and the language(s) for the article (every article must have an English version). The author then inputs the article’s title, subtitle and body by using the ActiveEdit® form, which automatically creates HTML and plain text versions of the article. Next, the submitter chooses the demographics of the target audience by selecting any combination of employee types, work types, roles, Cisco organizations, IT sub-organization, IT title, IT responsibilities, theater or country/state and/or Cisco buildings. Finally, the secondary news categories associated with the primary news category that is selected. Once submitted, the article can be updated or deleted prior to the editorial team approving or denying the article for publication.

EDITORIAL PROCESS

Select individuals designated as My IT News editors can review and approve (or deny) any articles pending review. After approving all articles, the editor uses the application to review the day’s news and then publishes the newsletter for the given day. In addition to managing the daily news, the editorial team can use the web application to update any news category and sub-category, organizational and theater naming structure, roles, responsibilities and available languages.

AUTOMATED NEWSLETTER DELIVERY

The keystone of My IT News is the automated newsletter delivery process. Every night at 2 a.m. PST, an automated process launches to search the published article records and compares them to every subscriber’s profile to find matches between their news interests and demographic profiles and the attributes assigned to published articles. If article(s) match a profile, My IT News bundles the articles into a dynamically generated newsletter—either in plain text or HTML format, assembling it in either the full newsletter or synopsis newsletter format—and delivers the e-mail newsletter directly to the user’s e-mail inbox.

MY IT NEWS BENEFITS

- ▶ Estimated 10 minutes saved per IT employee per day.
- ▶ Consolidated information flow and eliminated duplicate information distribution.
- ▶ Better information organization and increased relevance of information by organization, theater and content categories.
- ▶ Consistent appearance and messaging of all IT newsletter content.
- ▶ Fewer resources dedicated to producing newsletters, and a centralized editorial team.
- ▶ Easier for communicators to select target audiences.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES / The My IT News application was implemented in a joint effort between the Cisco IT communications team and a Satyam Computer Services development team. The project followed the standard Cisco project life cycle format and took a total of 10 months, including: two months of assessment, two months of analysis and design, four months of development, and two months of implementation and testing. Satyam Computer Services Ltd. of Andhra Pradesh, India, is a leading global consulting and IT services company and a key development partner for Cisco with existing infrastructure, access processes and pre-negotiated rates.

CHALLENGES

The only real challenge during the project was implementing the application functionality that captured and delivered double-byte character (DBC) content. First, the DBC requirement was added to the project scope by key stakeholders late in the development cycle, and accounted for approximately US\$40,000 in additional budget and three more months of development and testing. While the ability to deliver in the local language is very important, and much appreciated by employees outside of English-speaking Cisco locations (particularly Japan), including this requirement in the initial scope would have saved a great deal of time and re-work.

MEASUREMENT/EVALUATION / There are currently 6,590 subscribers to My IT News, and the subscriber base represents 14 percent of the global Cisco employee and contractor base, with 368 subscribers outside of IT. Outcomes will be measured and evaluated through quarterly subscriber surveys, the number of articles and daily newsletters published, and the ROI of the tool.

QUARTERLY SUBSCRIBER SURVEYS

Surveys are conducted once every quarter. A subscriber survey was conducted in December 2006 and found that subscribers are most interested in priority announcements (83 percent); IT services and support news (73 percent); and education, development and training announcements (68 percent). Sixty-three percent know how to update their profile. The survey also indicates a low level of interest in RSS feeds (number seven when ranked).

NUMBER OF ARTICLES AND NEWSLETTERS PUBLISHED

The goal is to provide content when there is relevant news for the audience, so a target metric would not accurately reflect the outcome of this goal. However, from the time My IT News launched in October 2006, through the end of January 2007, 87 articles and 49 daily newsletters were published. The tool's flexibility and ability to push content when the communicators require it, not based on a publication calendar, allowed more relevant content to be published to an interested audience more quickly.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Project costs included four consecutive fiscal year quarters of development work and one IT project management resource. Third quarter costs equaled US\$31,584. Fourth quarter costs equaled US\$112,978. First quarter costs equaled US\$52,500. In addition, IT project management resource costs equaled US\$120,000 for the duration of the project. Total project costs were US\$317,062. The benefit of My IT

News was valued as the time saved per employee per year. Using Cisco's standard resource cost accounting, 6,228 IT employees and contractors worldwide cost US\$36,000 per quarter each or US\$144,000 annually. After the annual paid holiday time, each resource works 48 weeks per year. As a result, each employee works 115,200 minutes per year. The project team initially estimated the "minutes saved per day" would be 10 minutes per employee. The post-implementation survey did receive enough responses to provide statistically significant data to validate this assumption, so a very conservative estimate of 10 minutes saved per work week, rather than work day, is included to show the possible range of return on investment.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT TABLE COMPARING INITIAL ESTIMATE VS. CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATE

METRIC	INITIAL ESTIMATE	CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATE
IT Resources	6,228	6,228
Estimated Minutes Saved per Day	10	2
Resource Salary per Minute	\$1.25	\$1.25
Total Minutes Saved per Year per Resource	480	480
Total Project Costs	\$317,062	\$317,062
Total Estimated Savings	\$18,684,000	\$3,736,800
Return on Investment	5893%	1179%

Based upon the actual communication application project budget, US\$317,062, and the initial and conservative estimated savings from US\$3,736,800 to US\$18,684,000, the My IT News communication project ROI ranged from 1,179 to 5,893 percent.