iFerret Search engine ferrets out the information for Lake Macquarie City Council

By understanding everything that Lake Macquarie City Council knows about a topic - be it a customer, a property or a Council asset - its staff have the edge in delivering great service to its customers.

So it is that the Council's decision to implement iFerret Enterprise Search technology has been vindicated many times over. It is enabling staff to better understand a given situation, make correct and timely decisions and achieve superior outcomes.

Developed by iPLATINUM to meet the specific needs of local government, iFerret gives staff 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.

Less than 12 months after its deployment, iFerret was dramatically increasing the speed with which staff at Lake Macquarie City Council could find and deliver information in response to both internal and external enquiries.

Having used iFerret to discover a ratepayer who was using several names to avoid paying full rates, a customer service officer says simply "iFerret is brilliant".

Project manager in charge of the implementation of iFerret, Julie Walker, said many coordinators who had initially received training in the search technology saw the benefits of the product and immediately requested training for their staff.

Seventeen of the staff in a pilot scheme were saving an average of more than 2 hours a week searching for information across the Council's digital assets. Greatest time savings were achieved for the Council's corporate services and governance area and required searches of its records management and email systems.

"Typically people had been unable to remember where they put a file in the document management system or into which Outlook folder they saved an email," Ms Walker said.

Several factors arrived concurrently to make iFerret attractive to the Council. First it knew it was not making full use of the information it held due to separate information repositories and that metadata was inconsistent.

Meanwhile customers were expecting more timely responses to their enquiries and there was increasing awareness in the wider community of its rights to access information under Government Information Public Access (GIPA) act.

"Finally within Council we wanted to ensure better informed decision-making by using existing resources and putting knowledge in the hands of every staff member," said Mark Piper, Council's Corporate Information Manager.

With a population of more than 200,000, which is expected to grow by some 30 percent over the next 20 years, Lake Macquarie City Council lies between Sydney and Newcastle, embracing such towns as Belmont, Cardiff, Charlestown, Morisset, Swansea and Toronto.

To confirm the business case for iFerret, Mark Piper determined that a prototype system should be established which included the organisation's most used data repositories. iFerret was configured to search the Council's main four applications and five shared network drives. The applications included the TRIM records management system, Oracle's Customer Relationship Management system, the Pathway land and information system and Microsoft Outlook for email.

The prototype would be tested for systems' security compliance and the software would then be trialled for a set period by a pilot group consisting of 50 people representing all divisions of Council. Each person was trained in the use of

At the end of the trial, this pilot group evaluated the software. Analysis of this evaluation by the project group enabled a well-informed decision to proceed with a full implementation of the software said Mr Piper.

"Following the trial, we surveyed users to determine estimated time savings. This enabled the financial calculation of a return-on-investment. "The more users who become involved, the greater our future savings, given there are fixed costs to setup infrastructure and perform indexing," he explains.

In the 12 months from when iFerret was initially deployed Council had in excess of 200 staff trained in its use, thereby completing the first phase of its implementation. This phase was focussed on supervisors and coordinators, customer service centre staff and some key administrative staff from each department.

Among the questions asked in the trial were how frequently members of the pilot group used iFerret and was it easy to use. Additionally, they answered whether its speed met their expectations, helped them locate information more quickly and easily and whether they would recommend it to other members of staff.

Project manager Julie Walker played a pivotal role in the implementation of iFerret. Along with the project team, she performed user acceptance testing and consulted with system administrators to ensure iFerret security matched that of the Council's core systems and that metadata being searched was relevant to user needs. She also went on to facilitate training across the organisation.

Of the wide range of research and investigation tasks which illustrate iFerret's capabilities, a customer service officer's search for a particular subdivision is an excellent example says Ms Walker.

She explains that the Council's Pathway property system requires searching by application number, by the property or applicant's name or by the full address. Of these the customer knew only the sub-

urb. Using iFerret and Pathway as the data source, the customer service officer searched using three phrases, "suburb name", " "developer name" and "subdivision". This immediately located the correct application number for the subdivision enabling the customer to view the application from an application tracking page on the Council's website.

"The customer service officer would have never been able to locate it in Pathway without the full property address," Ms Walker explains. She says Council staff value the overview iFerret gives of customers through the hyperlinks provided in the CRM and Pathway systems search results. These hyperlinks provide details of all service requests a customer lodges, or all applications and property ownership details relating to a specific ratepayer. This helps staff form an understanding of the customers with whom they are dealing and allows a quick insight into a customer's history with Council.

Ms Walker says "this is an advantage for us over a system that would just search for documents that were stored on our shared drives and in TRIM. iFerret also provides the benefit of duplicates reporting functionality and a measure of business continuity in the event of a native system outage."

Does using iFerret mean that staff who may not be proficient in using certain applications can use iFerret and make a greater contribution to customer service for Council?

Ms Walker says yes. "Because iFerret reads documents, it's much easier to locate information. There is no requirement to understand TRIM's classification system or the folder structure or different record types to be able to search and locate information. If users understand how iFerret's summary filters work, it's easy for them to access rating information, or application information through a Pathway search with iFerret."

iFerret, purpose built for Local Government, has enabled Lake Macquarie staff to quickly locate important information across the organisation.