Title:

“The use of controlled electronic communication to enhance visibility and impact; a case of the University of Nairobi”

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AT
ASSOCIATION OF COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITIES
PUBLIC RELATIONS CONFERENCE (14 – 16 JULY, 2008)
SOUTHERN SUN ELANGEJNI
DURBAN - SOUTH AFRICA
Abstract

E-communication has brought about a revolution in the way people communicate in the modern society and in a sense reducing the world into a global village. The University of Nairobi utilizes the website, email and VOIP services as the major forms of e-communication among the staff and student fraternity. Recently, the University revitalized its system of websites and implemented VOIP phones for inter-campus communication within the University intranet. The main objective of the website upgrade drive was to improve support for information sharing within the University community, with partners and associates, and the general public. Email communication has also been enhanced and extended to all staff and students within the university. This is in line with the University’s priority of achieving a paper-less office.

This paper argues that the revitalized system has enhanced content dissemination and interaction among students and staff. The University thus, has been able to maximize on productivity, enhance teaching, learning and consequently improve the quality of research. The cost and time taken for communication has effectively been reduced and the level of service delivery improved.

The University of Nairobi has blended the use of computers with telephones and terminals-VOIP in the outlying campuses to enhance centre-periphery communication. This has greatly enhanced service delivery within the University community and promoted the image of the University as an organization at the cutting-edge of embracing new technological developments.

The paper concludes that for the modern institution, electronic tools used to communicate or to facilitate academic discourse must be strictly controlled, monitored and upgraded including merging new and old technology in order to facilitate communication. The University has also faced a myriad of challenges in implementing e-communication including: funding, resistance to technological advances and the cost of bandwidth.
Definition of Terms

(a) **College IT Experts** – These are college staff with ICT skills appointed to be in charge of coordinating website updates at the college level.

(b) **GSM** – Global System for Mobile communications - is an open, digital cellular technology used for transmitting mobile voice and data services.

(c) **ICT** – Information & Communication Technology

(d) **IT** – Information Technology - is the use of computers and software to manage information.

(e) **VoIP – Voice over Internet Protocol** - Voice over Internet Protocol – is a technology that allows you to make voice calls using a broadband Internet connection instead of a regular (or analog) phone line.

1.0 **Introduction**

E-communication is a system for the transmission of information using electronic technology like Internet, cellular phones, digital cameras, email and VOIP phones. E-communication has tremendously changed the way people communicate and interact with each other. The internet, cellular phones and email globalize communication by allowing users from around the world to connect with each other and in a sense turning the world into a global village. The cost and time taken for communication has been effectively reduced and communication become more reliable than before in both the developed and developing countries.

For the modern institution, electronic tools for communication and facilitation of academic discourse abound. As an academic institution committed to promotion of academic excellence in research, the University of Nairobi recognizes that an important and necessary vehicle to achieve this objective is through electronic communication. At the University of Nairobi, the brief inventory of facilities that support e-communication includes Personal Computers (PCs), Application Servers, Voice Mail; Electronic Mail; network infrastructure; printers; modems for telephone line communication etc.
New and old technology has merged such that computers have blended telephones and terminals. The introduction of VoIP in our outlying campuses has facilitated centre-periphery communication. However, the use of the system of websites at the University of Nairobi has not always evolved in tandem with the need to share information within the University community, with partners and associates and the general public. Indeed, it has been noted that previously the University had consistently been rated poorly in international rankings due to lack of sufficient and up-to-date content on the system of websites.

2.0 Website

A website, it is believed gives an objective indication of strategic plans, activities and achievements reflecting the status on the ground. Consequently, the University faced the challenge of considering indicators that are used in the international ranking and incorporate them into a new design for the website.

The highlights and key functions of the improved design included:

2.1 Restructuring the website colleges, schools/faculties/institutes and departmental websites - This, it was hoped would encourage improvement in the quantity and quality of content made available.

2.2 Prominence of rich content from both the students and staff of the university - To operationalise this, top management visited colleges and ensured that all members of staff prepared and posted their Curriculum Vitae (CVs) on the website. It was interesting to see professors trying to upgrade their CVs to reflect publications, research and areas of specialization. It was also interesting to see an upsurge in the number of professors who wanted to deliver inaugural lectures. Once everybody understood how they stood to benefit by having their CVs on the web, then all of them wanted to maximize on the opportunity.

2.3 Emphasis on publication, research, collaboration and links between the University of Nairobi and other academic and non academic regional as well as international institutions - Once it was emphasized that all departments, academic units must post research, publications, collaboration and links, there was a deluge of information and College IT
experts had to sift through information that was relevant for the system of websites. Thereafter, acceptable information was posted on the system of websites. The result of this was a general improvement in the visibility of the University.

2.4 Continuous updates - The University in its quests towards world class status must give current information. The task at hand was to be met by all stakeholders, but the college IT champions were crucial in monitoring and updating the system of website content. Currently, college IT experts are moving the process whereby selected technical staff are being trained at our Information & Communication Technology Centre (ICTC) on posting of information. Deliberations on the best designs and on interactivity have been the highlights of such training.

3.0 Electronic Mail (Email)

The University of Nairobi has made tremendous effort in promoting the use of e-mail within its fraternity. This has been through a number of ways including the recognition of e-mail as a formal means of communication and ensuring that every member of staff and student has been issued with a university e-mail address for effective, efficient and timely communication.

This is in line with the university’s priority of promoting the achievement of a paperless office. The University has indeed committed itself towards achieving 50% of paperless communication among staff. Moreover the University has also adopted the use of e-mail for communication of important circulars, events and notices to the University fraternity. Moreover, the introduction of the University intranet as part of website system enhancement has ensured that the University achieves the objective of a paperless communication.

The official e-mail addresses handbook has been published and distributed to key offices. Further through the Rapid Results Imitative (RRI) theme on increasing the utilization of ICT facilities, we have worked on tools and mechanisms to enhance the use of integrated e-messaging facilities within the university.
E-mail use has had a significant impact on the improvement of service delivery since it has minimized the physical movement and time wasted on delivery of documents from one office to the other. Moreover, the university has witnessed an improved turn-around time in terms of the time taken for its officers to respond to issues.

E-mail has also improved the exchange of ideas, knowledge and communication among researchers within and beyond the university community, therefore, promoting the dissemination of knowledge. Communication with stakeholders, partners and donors has significantly been enhanced through embracing e-mail as a mode of communication. Consequently, this has had the impact of improving visibility of research and other on-going activities both within and beyond the University.

Resistance to embrace new technology and techno-phobia has been an impending factor among some cadre of staff though strategies are already in place to overcome this. Training of staff on computer literacy skills is an ongoing process. The cost of expanding the infrastructure and low bandwidth are also great challenges. These challenges are being addressed through the process of upgrading all our wireless links to fibre and connecting all offices to the University network.

4.0 Voice over the Internet Protocol (VoIP)

The University has completed Phase I of the VoIP project. This phase has already put in place all the infrastructural devices and installed up to 172 IP phones in all the campuses.

Towards this end, the University has made the following achievements that have had a great impact on the University community:

4.1 Inter-Campus communication is eased up since the entire University is seen as one uniform cloud.

4.2 Free calls on the entire network since there is no transiting third party network specifically for voice communication.
4.3 GSM Gateway has already been installed to enable cheap access to GSM networks.

4.4 Integration with legacy voice systems such as PABXs. Calling from legacy phones to phones on VoIP network has also been automated in most campuses.

5.0 Lessons learnt

5.1 The academic community at the University had for a long time lived in isolation – an ivory tower. They were faulted as being contrary-they did not appreciate IT and the importance of institutional IT in their work. IT was also not understood as a tool for working.

5.2 The University Management had to take firm and visionary level stand to institute and revitalize the University web content and promote the use of IT. Critically, part of the vision was to understand and accept that the University was not as well known as it would like to believe. In the University rankings, University of Nairobi was not well known as it would like to believe. Its visibility tended to suffer because people did not have much information about who or what the University of Nairobi did.

5.3 The revitalization exercise was a revolution in terms of what scholars and managers of institutions of higher learning can achieve in terms of effective service delivery. IT is always a critical tool of work; this has its challenges of sustainability and funding. But because these issues will always be with us, it is better to start from a humble beginning and upgrade from time to time.

5.4 Partnerships with donors help to bridge the gap. A lot of support from donors and potential partners has come up because of the revitalized website content and improved email communication. Nowadays, members of staff report that the number of “hits” on their particular web pages has improved. There has also been an increase in the number of calls and e-mail enquiring on how donors and partners could participate and collaborate on research activities of the University of Nairobi.

5.5 New ways of financing academic programmes. In an increasingly competitive world with international standards, we must endeavor to be above the rest. This calls for new ways of financing academic programmes. One avenue as suggested for the use of IT is e-learning
which the University has put into use. E-learning is now touted as the new way to finance academic programs and cutting a niche for the University to expand in the international market.

6.0 Conclusion

ICT has been critical for the effective service delivery and communication in the University. We have noted that computerized systems for instance in the management of resources, library facilities and student record has ensured better control. The level of service delivery to our clients and record keeping has improved tremendously through the use of electronic communication and IT.

There is a dire need to overcome the constraints such as, poor connectivity, low bandwidth and resistance from members of staff to embrace technological changes. The University has sensitized staff such that the old practice of keeping computers closed, in tight corners under the perception that a computer is to be used sparingly and to be accessed by very few no longer holds sway. “We have reversed the culture of fear of technology”.

The revitalized system has enhanced content dissemination and interaction among staff and students. The University thus, has been able to maximize on productivity, enhance teaching and learning and consequently improve the quality of research. Electronic communication offers numerous advantages including high speed, efficiency, cost effective and provision of worldwide interactive communications among large numbers of people.

END

Acknowledgements
Director ICTC
Technical Staff at ICTC
Deputy University Librarian in ICT Services
University of Nairobi 2008 - 2013 Strategic Plan
University of Nairobi/Government of Kenya Performance Contract Document
Interviewed Member of Staffs