

# To a Web Site, and Beyond!

*Andrew Haslam describes how Lovells designed, built and launched their latest web site.*

After the number of years I have been in the IT business, I should have realised that there would be a price to pay for the very nice lunch I had with a Lovells' partner. We had spent the morning talking about a web site we had been thinking about for a while, and by the end of the day I had a much clearer idea about what we needed. In October 2000, we launched what has become a very successful site, and this article describes the process we went through, our lows and triumphs, and the obstacles we overcame along the way.

## **The Strategy**

The concept underpinning the site grew out of the work Mark Huleatt-James, a Lovells' partner, had carried out in authoring a book on international arbitration. Mark is also the Group Manager of a Lovells Practice Area which depends heavily upon technology, and therefore he has exposure to the various possibilities offered by Internet based tools. As I run the small group that provides the IT tools and support for Mark, I was the logical choice to oversee the emerging project. Mark had identified that his work could evolve into a site which provided an informed view on the drafting of international arbitration clauses. As well as a comparison of the various sets of Arbitration rules, provision of commentary on various country's arbitration statutes, and advice on what factors to consider, Mark had also thought of three unique offerings. First, he felt that there was a potential to "automate" the construction of an arbitration clause. Second, a facility could be provided for the individual comparison on international arbitration rules. Third, a "cost calculator" could be created to give an idea of some of the fees involved in the arbitration process.

As far as we could tell, this site would be a first in the legal world, and certainly unique amongst the other Lovells web based offerings. Therefore we decided that we needed to follow a strategy which kept the implementation as flexible as possible, so we could react to any changes along the way. We also quickly realised that, because of other commitments and priorities, the coding work could not be completed within our timescales by Lovells internal IT resources, and therefore we would need to buy-in assistance. This added to our tasks, as we had to plan how best to clear the funding for the development work.

At this point, Mark had created a significant amount of paper and a hand written "decision tree", guiding users through the various facets of arbitration and the drafting process. We decided upon a three stage approach. First, I would turn the design into a more IT focused specification. Second, we would build a prototype to confirm our ideas and act as demonstration tool to the various internal funding committees. Third, we would implement and launch the web site.

## **Design and Tool Selection**

As a firm believer in the power of pictures allied with words, I created a flowchart of the route through the site, with links to the text produced by Mark. Once this was completed, we could describe the concepts we wanted, in what became a well rehearsed 20 minute briefing. At this point we had our first round of discussions with Lovells IT group. As well as establishing the manpower requirement, we determined which technology we would use. We quickly realised that there was enough programming work to take the project beyond a standard HTML publishing tool, but not enough complexity in the drafting element to require the integration of a product such as Hot Docs. This led us to the selection of the SilverStream technology already used by Lovells for both their internal and external web based offerings. In turn, the selection of SilverStream clarified the resources we needed, leading us to bring in external support to build the prototype.

As ever, we had to balance the advantages of availability and speed in using external people, against the costs and the possibility of losing control. However, we felt that our phased approach, coupled with standard project management techniques, meant that the advantages far outweighed the risks.

## **Prototype Phase**

The aim of this phase was to produce a “mock up” of the final site. We wanted to look at the various elements of the site in their on-screen incarnations, and also clarify how the site would operate. It was important to bear in mind that we specifically only built the front end “façade” at this point. Though the end product looked very much like the final version of the real site, it was all example screens linked by HTML code rather than being underpinned by a database or programming code.

We met with the external team on a weekly basis, and spent each session working through the mock-up, confirming the concepts behind what we were seeing on screen, and also exploring ideas and avenues thrown up by the group debates. The iterative process fleshed out our technical requirements, but also helped us determine some wider strategic issues.

On the technical side we considered building all the pages in PDF format, but in the end decided against it. The purpose of the site is to provide on-line reference, but not a formal legal opinion, so we did not need to overly concern ourselves about the quality of printed output. If users wanted to download the reference pages then they could do so, but we wouldn't spend effort freezing them into a standard Lovells style. Similarly, the eventual Arbitration clause was deliberately left in “plain” ASCII format, as we invited users to cut and paste it into their own WP environment, presumably with their own house style for contract formats.

Strategically, we decided that we wouldn't charge for the use of the site, but that we would impose a login process requiring individual's email addresses. We split the site into those elements which would be “hard coded” such as the drafting engine and costs calculator, and the content pages, which we would add and administer via a user interface. Finally, with input from the Lovells' Intranet team, we adopted the “look and feel” of the existing Lovells' developments, giving us a clean and spacious design standard to work to. Alongside the prototype, the external developers also produced a clearly defined Functional Specification which became a jointly signed deliverable at the end of the phase. With these two elements in place, it was also possible for the external team to provide a fixed price for the development phase.

## **Development**

Armed with our working model we were able to demonstrate the site concepts to a number of different parties within Lovells. We started with the International Arbitration Practice Group, who became enthusiastic champions of the idea once they could see what we were trying to deliver. We showed it to Technology who endorsed the technical approach and design, but confirmed that their tasking priorities meant they couldn't develop it within our timescales. Finally, we used it to obtain funding approval from the steering group tasked with examining all of Lovells' electronic offerings.

The development phase itself went smoothly. The time and effort we put into the previous stage paid dividends here. The programming team knew exactly what they had to do and our feedback during the regular progress meetings was mainly confirmatory. However, what was dawning upon us, was the effort we were going to need to add the initial sets of content pages and for the on-going maintenance of the site. We had secured the services of a paralegal for three months as part of the build-up to developing the site, but it was becoming obvious that it was time to bring on board additional resource. We had designed the site so that the content could be managed via a user friendly interface and soon Jo, Mark's secretary, was putting it through its paces. The big advantage here was that the technology allowed us to use someone without detailed technical knowledge of HTML and web design. The SilverStream interface hid all of that behind relatively friendly user screens. Once Jo had got over her initial butterflies, she was soon adding, amending and linking pages with hardly a support call at all.

## **Marketing and Launch**

Before too long we started to plan for the launch of the site. It was decided that the “big day” should coincide with an Arbitration Group evening in the middle of October. With our audience identified, all we had to do was prepare to “go live”. This was the most hectic period of the project. In sequence, we had to formally test and accept the site from the external suppliers,

oversee the transition to maintenance by Lovells Technology group, complete all the content loading, linking and changes, move the software from the development environment to the Lovells.com server on the outside of the firewall, co-ordinate all the pre and post-launch publicity, and arrange for the setting up of a demonstration environment on the night of the launch. To achieve all of this involved pulling together a number of disparate groups within Lovells and number of traditional late nights and weekends. In order to make things really interesting for ourselves, we threw in a server crash on the big day, which tested our disaster recovery planning a bit more exhaustively than we would have liked, but we brought it all back up with time to spare. Well 30 seconds, but that is another story.

### **Post Launch**

We had tested the site in as many ways as we could, particularly using the current versions of the two main variants of Internet browsers, Netscape and Explorer. The development had used generic HTML code as much as possible, though there were the usual minor differences in display between the two browsers. However, we knew that we couldn't test the variety of environments that exist, so we made sure we built an easy means for users to contact us into the site. Sure enough, within a few days of the launch we had a couple of people with problems. SilverStream identified that there were issues with users coming in via proxy servers and applied a code fix which resolved the problem.

We are currently considering where we go next. Our first steps will include the imposition of more formal version and release control. Before the launch we could just change material as we wished, now we need to formalise the quality and legal checking we do before we publish it to the live site. Other than that, we are receiving an amount of feedback from users and their needs will be fed into the on-going maintenance and development process.

### **The lessons we learnt and the things we'd do differently**

In the main, the project went according to plan. The length of time for obtaining internal clearances and co-ordinating the various Lovells functions took longer than we had initially planned, but the effort in gaining the right levels of support was repaid once the project got into full swing.

Having thought about it, my "Ten Commandments" for a successful web project are:

- 1) Have a clear aim that is articulated by a Business Sponsor.
- 2) Implement the project in a phased, flexible manner, with an early view of the concept so you can gather internal support.
- 3) Capture the requirements on paper, and then on screen.
- 4) Choose a tool that does what you need; don't make it too complicated.
- 5) Consider the pros and cons of internal versus external development. If you use external people, find a partner, not a supplier.
- 6) Use a prototype to confirm your requirements, and be prepared to throw it away. Time spent defining your needs is repaid ten times downstream.
- 7) Don't underestimate the amount of internal marketing you will need to do.
- 8) Content is king! Putting it in takes time and effort, and is an on-going task if you want to keep your site fresh and visited.
- 9) A web site is "just" another IT project. The physical infrastructure needs to be as robust and secure as any other business crucial application. Back-up cycles, standby servers, disaster recovery all need to be considered and implemented according to the business requirement.
- 10) If you are successful, then the Launch is just the beginning of more time and effort. But unless you plan to maintain and develop the site, why bother in the first place.