



Australian Chess Federation

Individuals and communities Australia-wide using ICT around a game

The Australian Chess Federation (ACF) is using ICT so that players can find useful, current information and access archived records.

A static website is transformed into a lively, news-driven resource

Comprising state and territory chess associations, the ACF functions as a national chess coordinator. It provides a rating service for players, organises the Australian championships, selects teams for international events such as the Chess Olympiad, and fosters the development of the game through publicity and by training junior players.

The federation and state associations are volunteer organisations. The federation survives on a rating fee levied on tournament organisers, while state associations raise membership fees from individual players. A few state associations own or lease premises to provide a chess centre; the federation does not have any such facilities.

The federation communicates through a comprehensive website with chess news, results from tournaments, an archive of tournament results and games, and details of upcoming tournaments and events. Until recently it ran a lively bulletin board, and it continues to experiment with an online game-playing service. It also sends out a weekly email newsletter.

The federation developed the website and newsletter about five years ago to provide players with useful, current information and access to archived records. Many clubs and individuals have established websites, some of which are stored on the ACF site. Costs have been kept low. The federation has received some advertising but these payments were tied to specific expenses rather than web development. The income from a small amount of regular advertising funds software upgrades and purchases and graphics production. Developing and maintaining the website has involved many hours of volunteered time and virtually no money.

The site was initially static and brochure style. In the past three years it has been transformed into a news-driven site with regularly updated material. The site now features daily games and weekly news updates. Providing information remains the site's primary objective; secondary objectives were abandoned because they were too time-consuming or expensive.



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Federation Inc.**



There had been plans for an online chess game service but early efforts were abandoned because plenty of high-quality Internet playing services are available, it would have been time-consuming and expensive to set up, and a proposed partnership between the federation and an overseas company did not proceed.

The bulletin board was recently disbanded because of the risk of defamatory or obscene messages and because of the time needed to police it. Another Australian chess site had established a high-quality bulletin board, so the federation decided there was no need to duplicate.

A website is never completed, and the ACF website will continue its principal function: providing news. Most of the static information archives were well established within a few months of the website's launch and remain so. The federation is beginning to explore web-conferencing using Microsoft NetMeeting, to save the cost of telephone conferencing.



However, it must also consider whether the 'fairly average, non-technical person' will be able to participate easily and comfortably.

Membership of the chess community is homogenous in that they all love chess, and it is heterogenous in that the membership is diverse. Members are from a wide range of racial backgrounds, and are rich and poor, young and old. Male players greatly outnumber female players, a worldwide phenomenon, though the junior leagues report some success in attracting more girls to the game.

Chess players tend to be individualistic. The federation's members are state associations, not individual chess players, and individual players belong to the state associations. A sense of community, where it exists, has tended to be highly localised at the club or state level. A major aim of the website is to foster a broader, Australia-wide sense of community.

Benefits

The federation believes that its website and email newsletter provide high-quality events coverage compared with the sites and newsletters of similar organisations. It also

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believes that, when players see their names on the site or in the newsletter, they are tending to identify increasingly with the Australian rather than their local chess scene. Internet chess competition between the states, where teams competed via email and the federation website, was an experience which suggested that it was helping foster a sense of community.

As in any organisation that has national and state administrations, politics sometimes intervene. But there also seems to be a belief that chess players generally have a more positive attitude to the federation because they can see from the website and newsletter that it is doing something productive.

The ACF website has been very successful: the website averages hundreds of users a day, while the newsletter has more than 1000 subscribers. This is encouraging, given that there are 3000 active adult players, many of whom do not have Internet access.

The federation has recently set up a chess wiki—software that allows users to freely create and edit web page content using any web browser—which would provide information about all aspects of chess but which could be written by others and accessed through the website.

Barriers

The federation acknowledges that many chess players rarely go online. There is a privately run, paper-based Australian chess magazine, but circulation of such publications has generally been declining over the last 20 years. Also, there are many other chess websites.

Individuals become involved in chess networks across Australia in various ways. Schoolkids tend to learn about tournaments because the junior chess leagues actively promote junior and



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school chess. Adults might hear about a local chess club and turn up. Some people seem to learn about the chess federation through stumbling across its website or having a news bulletin forwarded to them.

Chess officials around Australia are keen to gain publicity through the media, but they have had limited success. They are often limited to taking advantage of other opportunities such as publicity through the ACF website.

Although the input of volunteers is significant, further development of the website is limited by the organisation's resources—for example, time, money and people. The federation hopes to attract experienced web developers to help maintain and develop the website but has not yet succeeded. Links on the federation's website give members easy access to other chess-related services on the Internet.



Key lessons

- Email newsletters are a great medium. More people will see them than access the website, and they can reach people without Internet access if, say, pinned to a notice board. However, it is now becoming difficult to avoid being filtered out by spam filters.
- People will come back to a website only if the content is kept up-to-date. It is important for the website to avoid the mistake of focusing on the website's appearance rather than fresh content.
- Bulletin boards are a mixed blessing. They are a convenient medium for communicating, but the difficulties are considerable. Censoring unsuitable posts takes time, and maintaining reasonable control is difficult.
- There is a range of opinions on how liberal the censorship regime should be. Also, there tends to be a hardcore of bulletin board posters who dominate proceedings. The most successful policy seems to be to make the most frequent posters into board censors. This creates a committee environment and distributes responsibility.

Reference

Australian Chess Federation www.auschess.org.au

COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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