Launching a Research Repository with Microsoft SharePoint

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Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust (AWP) has set up a digital Research Repository using SharePoint to host the information on its Intranet. Working in collaboration, the Library and Knowledge Service, Nursing and Quality and Research & Development created a new Research Repository database. SharePoint is underpinned by a powerful database and it is a very flexible tool in terms of information management. AWP needed a tool that would facilitate collaborative working, simulate database functions and present information in a number of ways for different user requirements.

There are several databases and specialist information storage and retrieval tools that could be used to host a Research Repository either internally or externally through the Internet. While there is often a temptation in organisations to think of using well known applications and blogging software there are often local solutions that will meet your needs just as effectively. In this article, I will explore how Microsoft SharePoint can be deployed as an effective information solution in which to create and share research across a healthcare organisation.

Before selecting a particular solution, one needs to consider the whole process of how the information is going to be managed. For example, consider questions such as 'What are the information requirements now and in the future?' and 'How can we organise the information effectively

and also cost effectively?' IT budgets in a number of organisations are under pressure with the demands of support agreements, upgrades and migration to new platforms. It is most advantageous if your plans can be incorporated within an existing solution.

One of the key strengths of SharePoint is that it is a web-based collaborative working tool that can be accessed by everyone through an Intranet so there is minimal effort in terms of setting up the solution other than promoting your new tool within your community of users once it has been established. Given that in the majority of cases it will be in use within an organisation there will be no financial cost or licensing burden.

Figure 1: AWP Repository home page

Details of staff research and publications were originally held in a spreadsheet which was imported into a SharePoint List. Almost

everything within SharePoint is organised within 'Lists' and these function in a similar way to spreadsheets. 'Lists' are a very effective way to manage, store and manipulate information. SharePoint provides the opportunity to present the same information in different ways using filters called Views. The Research Repository has several 'Views' that present different aspects of the data relating to the publications. For example, there is a 'View' for 'All Research', 'AWP Sponsored Research' and 'Systematic Reviews' to a name a few. The data that is presented within these 'Views' is filtered according to keywords in the columns within the 'List'.

The data is currently managed by our Research and Development department here at AWP. The 'List' within SharePoint is controlled by a set of permissions so that while most users across the organisation can browse the information, they cannot make changes or add details of new publications. In due course, it may prove time consuming to have members of our Research and Development team update the 'List' every time a member of staff wishes to add details of publications that they have been involved in writing. Instead, an automated form called an 'Infopath' form may be used to co-ordinate the information flow. For example, when a member of staff wishes to submit details of their publication they could complete an 'Infopath' form. The appropriate team members in Research and Development will be notified of a pending submission and will need to make a decision as to whether to approve or reject the information about the given publication. If the team decide to accept the entry, the 'Infopath' form will automatically enter the data into the Research Repository List.
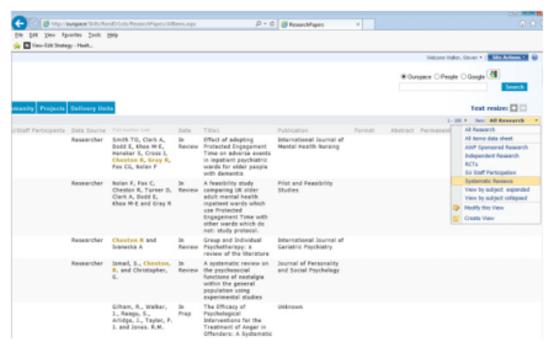
Figure 2: Author list in repository

In the longer term, once the data has been cleansed, organised and managed within SharePoint, it should be possible to present it for inclusion in a wider Research Repository solution across the NHS Library, Knowledge and Information community subject to the requirements of stakeholders here at AWP.

In the future, there may be a need to generate reports in respect of the data that is held within the Research Repository. One of the key strengths of SharePoint is that it integrates very effectively with other Microsoft Office applications such as Excel and Access. Data from a 'List' can be exported into a spreadsheet at the touch of the button for further analysis, or indeed Microsoft Access in order to create a database. As referred to above, it should be possible to import the contents of the AWP Research Repository into a much broader, regional

or national database solution given the integration between SharePoint and Microsoft Office applications.

The fact that SharePoint is a web-based tool allows for the presentation of data in several different ways, especially with regard to filters and views. In this respect, it is possible to try and achieve something that will suit the needs of everyone within your organisation. Often, one of the challenges within an organisation is to achieve the 'buy in' from members of the team. One of the best ways to do this is to show them that there is something positive in the solution for them.
SharePoint is a process improvement tool and there are some limitations. It is not a fully blown out of the box library and information management system. It doesn't have the same look and feel as a structured library system and search interface. Entering long abstracts will be problematic within 'Lists' without technical developments as the wandering text will distort the view of the page, so a concise summary will go better with the 'List'. Nevertheless, impressive, cost effective and collaborative results can be achieved through using SharePoint's features to manage and sort information through mechanisms called 'Lists' and 'Views'.

If you are considering developing a Research Repository do not be deterred by the technical challenge. Your local webmaster or Information Manager should be able to guide you through the process. Start in a structured way and build up a spreadsheet of initial data that can be transferred to a broader solution in due course. Consider what your aims are and how these can best be achieved with your proposed solution. Reflect upon how you would wish to have your data organised and

categorized, the possibilities are almost unlimited with tools such as SharePoint.

Please feel to contact me via email should you have any questions about the design and implementation of the Research Repository.