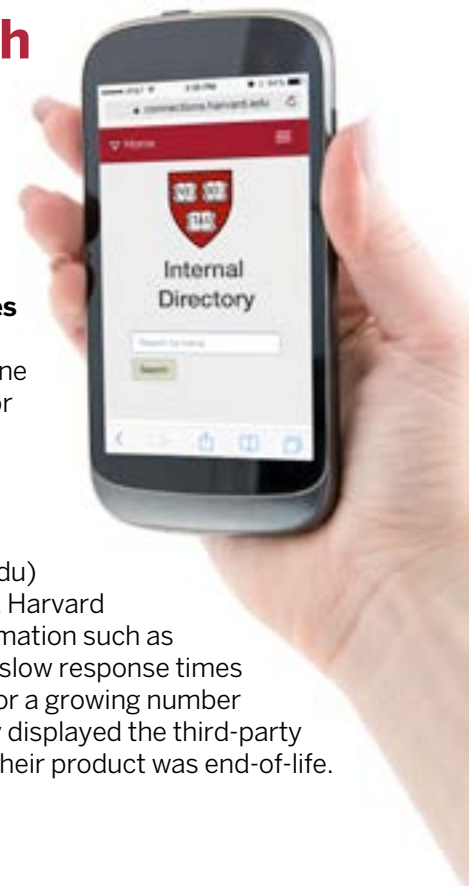




Harvard Connections: New Tools, New Tech

Relaunched Internal Directory Significantly Boosts Versatility, User Experience, and Integration Potential

Even people who have never walked through the Yard know that social media giant Facebook has its roots at Harvard. And what may be the original “facebook,” Harvard College’s famous Red Book of class reports, has been rolling off the presses since at least the mid-1800s. So while the University certainly has a well-established track record in providing both public and internal directory information — including an online directory dating back some 25 years — shifting platforms and user priorities have called for changes to what are now more than just Harvard’s “phone book.”



The Problem

Harvard’s publicly accessible Telephone and Address Directory (www.directory.harvard.edu) served more than 835,000 searches in 2013 alone, but its sibling, the password-protected Harvard Connections internal directory, hasn’t enjoyed such popularity despite offering extra information such as photos, reporting relationships, and social media contact points. The reasons were many: slow response times and poor system performance, incomplete or inaccurate data, and poor user experience for a growing number of visitors on mobile devices. The interface lacked Harvard branding and even prominently displayed the third-party vendor’s name. And the last straw came in 2012, when the vendor informed Harvard that their product was end-of-life.

The Solution

The new Harvard Connections (connections.harvard.edu) went live in March 2014 after a truly remarkable development push: Reflecting the versatility of the tools used and the flexibility of the Identity and Access Management team’s Agile development methodology, the new version of Connections was designed, programmed, tested, and implemented in less than three months. Director of IAM Product Management Jane Hill is proud of her team’s results: “The features are better tailored to Harvard needs — improved searching, simplified display and navigation, and cleaner display on mobile devices. Plus, we have real cost savings!”

Incorporating open source, standards-based technologies including Bootstrap, JavaScript Knockout, Spring MVC, and PostgreSQL, the new Connections also represents the first fully cloud-based end user service implemented by the IAM team — an important lead project in HUIT’s increased commitment to cloud-based resources. Additionally, safeguarding the privacy and security of the “people” data central to this project has served as a benchmark for collaboration between the HUIT security, CTO, and CIO offices, a key example in a climate where personal data privacy and security are of critical importance.

The Result

The new version of Harvard Connections has enabled a variety of projects that would have been difficult or impossible using the old directory. The Harvard Law School communications office issues an annual print photo directory of faculty, and is now able to pull accurate listings for the book simply by exporting data from a search for users with a law.harvard.edu email address. “It’s been a very good cooperation, and we’re hopeful to see the results at the end of the summer,” says Keith McCluskey, Senior Director of Communications and Online Strategy at HLS. HLS also intends to use Connections data as a live feed into a new WordPress directory site slated to go live in September 2014.

Other benefits include improved search capabilities that can help easily identify peer groups based on title, as well as the ability to search email addresses for units (such as Harvard Medical School) who opt not to make that information available in the public directory. Future Connections releases seek to expand functionality even further, with added integration and data extraction tools to synchronize with other directories and applications such as Harvard Catalyst; the ability to offer individuals a subscription service to Harvard publications; and a single source point for addressing University-wide issues surrounding mailing lists. Is there a feature you’d like to see in a future Connections release? Please contact Jane Hill at jane_hill@harvard.edu.