

Pioneering solutions in internal & external communication: first results of the SAO's news portal

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Abstract

In line with the SAO's official website we created a continually updated news portal to be able to publish more news, pictures and videos. It offers a creative and innovative solution to show the usefulness and the values of the auditors' activities. This communication channel enables to decrease the distance between the organization and the citizens. At the same time the website's main aim is to provide the media with information and serve as a reference point for the press, the members of the parliament and the professionals. The news portal is not only an important tool for external communication, but it is a crucial element of internal communication. Reports, news and pictures are provided and uploaded by the departments individually. Compared to other Hungarian public institutions it is a unique initiative, so we would be pleased to present our novel communication method. We hope that our system will be inspiring for other organizations as well as for other Supreme Audit Institutions.

Introduction

It is a common misbelief that public organizations do not try to provide easily understandable, user-friendly news to make their results and activities well-known. Today indeed, because of immediate publishing, existing organizational frames of communication have to be stretched, and this is often not possible for very strictly organized institutions, such as the State Audit Office or other supreme audit institutions. Therefore in these cases it is better to adopt a fresh, novel approach to reach the targets of communication.

On the basis of this concept, realizing the importance of online communication and its potentials, we created a news portal in line with the official website of the State Audit Office of Hungary, which is continually updated. This is a unique initiative compared to other Hungarian public institutions, and we are pleased to introduce our novel communication method.

The official website of the State Audit Office of Hungary

The contents

From now on, pieces of information and documents which are laid down in acts and laws (e.g. Act on the State Audit Office of Hungary, Act on Freedom of Electronic information and the so-called "glass pockets" act) are available on the official homepage of the State Audit Office of Hungary [figure 1]. Our communication team prepares and publishes brief news articles about the whole organization here and visitors can also find important "products" such as the

audit reports, the official speeches of the president, studies and presentations. We also publish the SAO's financial and functional statistics here.

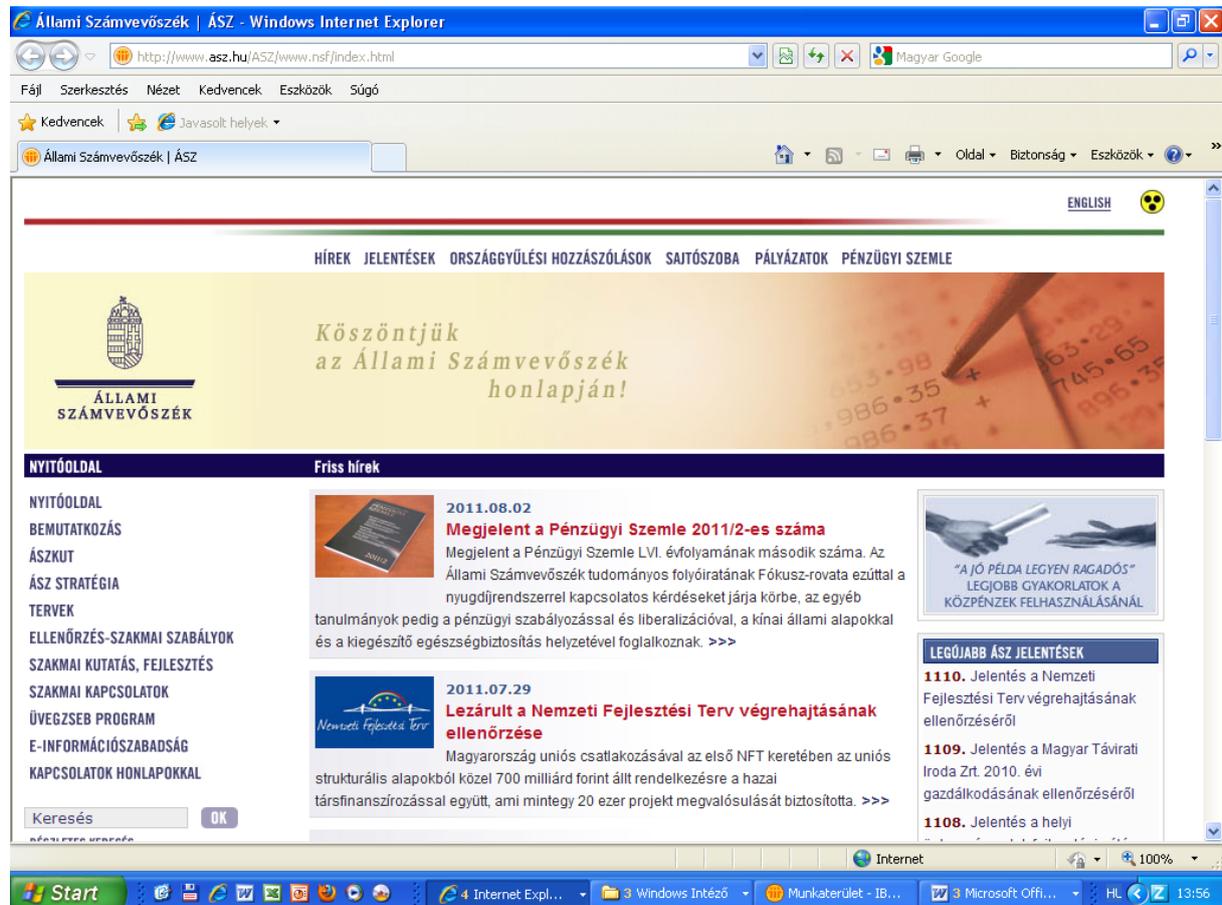


Figure 1. The official website of the State Audit Office of Hungary(www.asz.hu)

In 2009, the SAO created a so called 'obstacle free' version of its website that meets the special needs of the blind and visually impaired. Besides the font size, colour and special design we also paid attention to make the site clean and accessible for the reading programs used by the blind.

The official website of SAO also has an English version. This does not only include a general introduction in English, but also provides English versions of the internationally related news stories and summaries of all the audit reports together with many other professional documents.

Publication process

While creating the publication process one of the most important points was security. With a multi-level control mechanism it was possible to create a strictly checked and easily traceable system. The key principle was to keep the whole system under control (upload, deletion, databases, processes, definite responsibilities).

The departments have their own databases in the LotusNotes based intranet system.

We had to identify:

- Who was responsible for producing the various document types

- Who was the data provider and content administrator
- Which documents were intended for publication only via the Intranet, and which could go out to the worldwide web

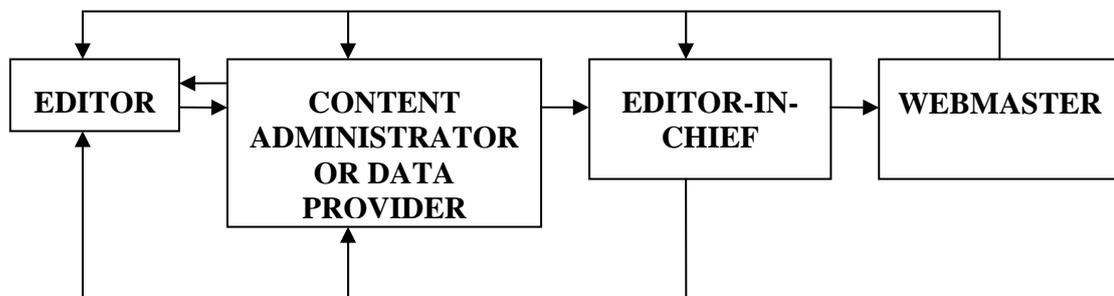


Figure 2. Publication process on www.asz.hu

The documents which are intended for publication via the Intranet do not have the same multi-level publishing process as the documents which can go out to the worldwide web. For documents to be published on the website, the approval action made by the communication team is not just a simple technical step, but rather a full (formal) control for every single document. The documents can only be approved and published after passing this control. The last control point in the publishing process is the webmaster: in case of a technical problem they can refuse the document, otherwise they publish it on the homepage of the SAO. When the publication is complete, an automated message is sent to all of the participants in the publishing process.

A complete document history is available which shows all actions and records, as well as the name of the person who took the action, so there is inherent system-based traceability. Version control and safety are ensured with an additional element of the closed system: only editors can change their documents.

Nevertheless, this very safe system does have some weaknesses. As the uploading-approving-publishing process involves many people, it is slower than direct immediate uploading. It is time-consuming to check all the documents, moreover, the system is inflexible: the correction of errors found after a document has been published or even the amendment of a simple typing mistake can be difficult and slow, because they have to go through the whole publishing process again.

The news portal of the State Audit Office of Hungary

Chronology

The communication team of the SAO started the preparation of the news portal in November 2010. The SAO's pieces of news are also published on 19 websites of cities with county status and on "Domestic News" nationwide professional news portal.

Developing and running the news portal did not need extra capacity from the IT department, because a contractor was responsible for these functions. The news portal's dynamic index

page and subpages were ready in December in accordance with the publicity and visibility guidelines of the SAO. In January 2010 the communication team started to test the site, made the necessary corrections and actions to upload the contents.

The news portal is available since 14 February, 2010.

Changed attitude, new system, novel approach

To run a news portal we have to pick up and prepare all the required information and enable the process of immediate publishing. To complete these tasks the whole organization has to be able to change its attitude.

The operational centre of the portal is the communication team. However, the departments, experts and auditors individually upload the edited news and the reports along with pictures before and after the event. They close each article with the name of the department and the writer. In this way we can provide direct, immediate first hand information, which is credible and free from distortions.

The fact that the employees do the publishing process without the previous control of the communication team can change the way they feel about their job and professional activities. Humans are self-justifying beings and their published statements, especially the written and signed texts create a stronger commitment to the published contents (Aronson, 2001, Freedman&Fraser (1966). Thus there is a tighter bond between the publisher and the organization in our case, as well. If we ask someone to write about their professional activity, to show its importance, results and social benefits, they will feel that their job is important and has a great value.

Targets

With the recently launched news portal one of our main targets was to become the first source of our own news, and to gain the ability to give up-to-date, authentic information as swiftly as possible [figure 3]. In addition, we aimed to set a good example for other public institutions. It was an important principle that the SAO, as an institution financed from public funds, has to show its activities, results and professional performance and suit the requirements of 21st century communication. This way we can enhance transparency to the citizens and to the media.

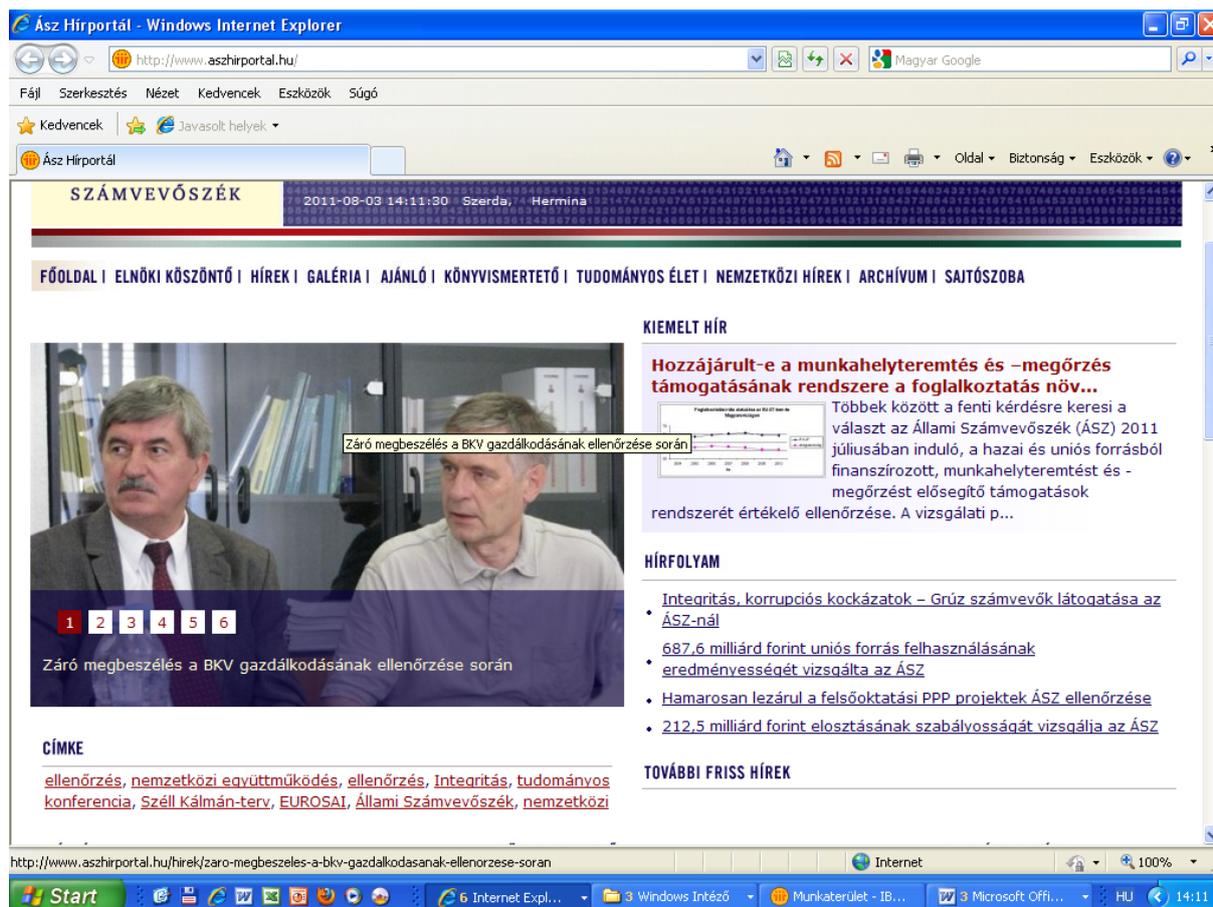


Figure 3. The news portal of the State Audit Office of Hungary (www.aszhirportal.hu)

Using this new communication tool we are able to publish more news, pictures and videos. It offers a creative and innovative solution to show the usefulness and the values of the auditors' activities. By using an online communication channel, which is always available, the distance between the organization and the citizens also decreases. At the same time, the website is able to provide the media with immediate information and serve as a reference point for the press, the members of the parliament and the professionals.

The communication team of the State Audit Office of Hungary also prepares news and reports about SAO events. Besides the pictures and the illustrations, they record and upload videos to create more interactive news, optimized for online communication.

Training for authors and uploaders

In order to be able to publish relevant, interesting, easily understandable and well-illustrated news, it is obviously necessary to train the participants. We organized courses which included both technical and subject-matter information for those involved in writing and publishing articles. Those taking part in the training learnt the technical skills to upload news and pictures. Auditors were also given training on news-writing and editing; which was not an easy task as they were used to producing extremely long and detailed documents full of technical terms. We had to teach them how to write short, clear news stories in a fluent style. It is an important skill to figure out what details to give a reader, so we had to give them advice on how to choose the right level of information, and identify the key elements within a story that readers may be interested in.

Publication process

The publishing system of the SAO's News Portal is much faster than the system of the SAO's official website, and the editors have much greater responsibility. There is no multi-level approval process, but it requires the persistent monitoring of the communication team.

The publishing process of the news portal is perhaps a little unusual and certainly dynamic. Its advantage is that the news editors upload their own pieces, so fresh news is published at first hand on the website and it does not have to go through a multi-level publishing process



[figure 4].

Figure 4. Publication process on www.aszhirportal.hu

This simplified process requires a higher level of creativity from its contributors, because editors have to consider the layout and the design, not just the content. They are responsible for creating the text, choosing the picture and organizing the layout of the article or story. As they are directly involved and accountable for the content, employees have a higher level of responsibility, and create and publish well designed, attractive and newsworthy articles.

Sharing the rights to upload and publish news stories while removing the pre-publishing control process creates a safety risk which has to be evaluated by every organization. The key principle is that the employees who have the right to upload news have to follow the internal regulations.

Stories published on the SAO official website are deliberately and judiciously edited, always taking into account the interests of the organization. From this perspective the State Audit Office of Hungary is in a good position. Even so, it requires a great effort to reduce the level of risks. The communication team constantly checks the published documents and take immediate action if required (repeal or correct the published news, edit the pictures etc.).

Topics

Both official and unofficial events are published on the news portal. There are fresh pieces of news published on a daily basis about presentations, public life and scientific activities, meetings, protocol events and audit reports.

The aim of the news about audits is to show the objectives and scope of audits, the main findings and recommendations, then to give information about efficiency. Formerly SAO communicated only the approved and published audit reports. Now on the news portal we present the scope and the objectives, the extension and the methodology of the commenced audit. We provide information about the current phases of the audit process from the beginning to the end, even after it, because ideally the reports live on and the recommendations are implemented. We publish news when the National Assembly discusses the audit reports, when there is an enactment based on the reports, or when the report effected a new regulation. Moreover, we inform the public when we have a conference presentation

about audit experience and the results of the reports or when we publish a professional article. The topics of the international news pieces are mainly related to our participation in numerous international events, conferences, co-operation with a number of foreign audit institutions, creation of standards and implementation of international practices. Nevertheless, there is a wide range of topics: there are important pieces of news about the human resource management, reports about the new trainee program and the trainings, articles about information technology novelties, fresh information about our anticorruption project, the best practices seminar, methodology results, risk management analyses, strategy and planning.

While creating the news portal we had to focus on the 21st century technologies. In our speeded up world, the level of people's stimulus-threshold is really high (Németh, 2006), so we had to create a surface, which grabs internet users' attention, and keeps the readers on the website. We gave great importance to the design of the visual appearance, that is the reason why there is a large, continuously changing picture, which immediately catches the readers' attention. Videos are also very important elements, because they permit users to get a real impression about an event or a presentation. If we only illustrate news with a single picture, it cannot motivate users to spend longer time on our site. It is also an important element that the presidential welcome speech is not traditional. He addresses the enquirers in a video message, in which he tells why he decided to create a dynamic news portal.

In the new strategy of SAO one of the targets is to have strong internal and external communication, so the leaders give television and radio interviews, take part in studio discussions, and even write articles. Interviews with the leaders are available in the commendatory section.

Book descriptions recommend books for professionals or for people interested in finances and audit. Since we have this feature, the number of visitors of the Professional Library of SAO has increased.

The scientific life database includes presentations, scientific communications, professional papers and articles of SAO leaders and employees.

There are three banners on the right side of the portal to make recently published reports, best practices seminars and organizational events easily available.

Internal communication

The State Audit Office of Hungary is a nationwide organization with some regional offices. Using the news portal employees can follow the organizational life and events. They can even be informed about novelties which were not available before, because the departments did not share their own news. Through this news portal our 600 employees can get information, so it is a very successful internal communication tool as well.

Results

Hereinafter we show some data from February until 14 May, and from May to 14 August.

During the first three months pilot period SAO's departments could apply to get the access to the uploading system. We gave 10% of our employees administrative rights: it means that nowadays from 600 employees more than 60 can upload news and pictures.

Since the beginning we follow the number of visitors and news uploads. In the first three months (pilot period) 148 pieces of news were published, in the next quarter 170. It means that every day we published 2-3 pieces of news. To point out the difference, one year earlier in the same period, from middle of May to middle of August only 8 pieces of news were published on the official website of the SAO.

From the 170 pieces of news approximately 70 were about the audits, more than 50 about events connected to the SAO, more than 30 about scientific life and conferences. In the last half year the number of visitors, the time that they spent on our website, the number of the checked subpages and the number of visitors from foreign countries continuously increased. In the first quarter we had 10.203 visitors, in the second quarter this number increased to 12.801. Based on the statistics one visitor spent more than 3 minutes on our website, they checked 3-4 subpages (mainly they read news and book descriptions furthermore they had a look on the picture gallery).

Looking at the number of visits there is a periodicity, from Monday to Thursday it is growing, there is backslide at the weekends (Figure 5). This tendency did not change in the last half year. There is an interesting fact: we had visitors from 39 countries, after Hungary the news portal was most often visited by people from Italy, Romania and Belgium.

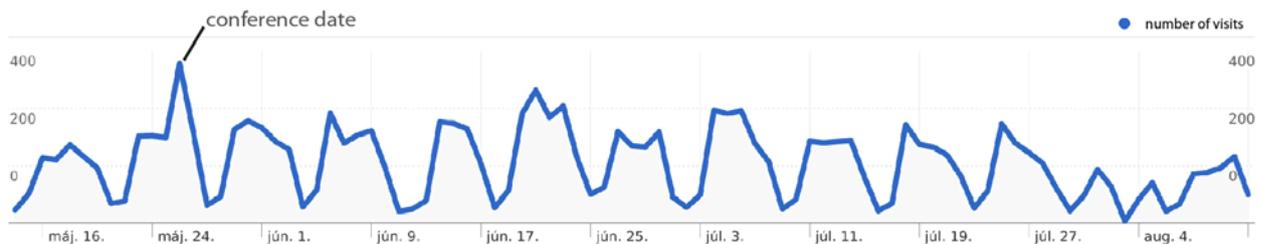


Figure 5. The periodicity of the number of visits

How to lead media to use the news portal: a case study

One of the main goals of SAO's strategy is to be the primary source of its own news. The news portal is a very good tool for that, but we have to use it cleverly to make the media use it (even on a daily basis) as a source of information. For this purpose the State Audit Office of Hungary created a communication plan connected to a momentous professional conference. The speciality of the exclusive conference was that all three members of the Fiscal Council participated in the event, held presentations, so there was a very high level of media interest. Using our technical facilities and human resources we could report about the presentations as soon as they had finished, our articles were also illustrated with photos. Later on we uploaded videos as well. Journalists were not allowed to attend the event, so they had to use our news portal to get information (the above diagram shows well the exceeded visitor number on the day of the conference). The Hungarian News Agency published our news without any changes (they did not even correct the typing errors), as well as the whole Hungarian media. So tangibly we could reach the strategic goal to be presented in the media without distortions. Because of the special needs of radio and television channels we held a very successful press conference after the professional event, too. After the event we tested one piece of news which was published on the news portal about the presentation of the head of Fiscal Council: in three hours our news was published on approximately 70 other websites as well.

Conclusions

The State Audit Office of Hungary increasingly acknowledges the importance of communication. The efforts to learn news writing and editing play an important role in it. We believe that giving more information about our professional activities and actions is a vital element of our successful functioning.

The news portal provides information in a vivid way, and many events are only reported here, not elsewhere. The news is detailed and frequently updated, the elements are dynamic and continuously changing. The topics are varied: the articles are not only about official events or conferences but also about the important stages of the audits and the positive changes and results of the audit reports. Illustrating the news with photos and videos not only authenticates them but also helps to provide user-friendly information in an eye-catching way.

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