

Archives in Two Languages

Researchers access the Co-operators Archives either as an English user or a French user, getting all the prompts and help messages in the language of their choice. The same descriptive record is presented in the appropriate language; not both.

Heather Ryckman, May 11, 2009 -- The Co-operators is a national, co-operatively-organized, provider of financial services with roots back to 1945. The Co-operators Archives was established in 1996 to acquire, document, preserve and make available the history of The Co-operators Group of companies. It primarily serves an internal clientele, with a collection documenting the actions, decisions, and history of each company within the group. While the majority of the companies conduct their business in English, the organization does have numerous French-speaking stakeholders and clients. One of the companies within the group, L'Union Canadienne compagnie d'assurances, is based in Quebec and conducts business solely in French.

One of the challenges I faced when deciding upon the design and functionality of our new database was how to incorporate bilingual record descriptions. The public search engine was to be made available to all staff so I had to find a way to provide the service in both English and French. Initially my plan was to customize field headings and instructions to appear first in English, with the French following (eg. Scope and content/Portée et contenu). The document would be quite long but it was the only way I could think of to ensure that all clients would have equal access to the descriptive information. The descriptions themselves would be unilingual, in the language which was predominant in the record group.

Upon suggesting to the staff at Eloquent that I needed to change all the field headings to include the French translations, they suggested I give their 'translation' module a try. It had an English and French public search face and would provide users accessing the database through our French intranet site with French search fields, help text, and descriptions while those entering through the English intranet page would see the English equivalents. This option is providing us with a more comprehensive and less cumbersome bilingual experience for our staff. The database is scheduled to be launched to staff in a couple of month, after the database is sufficiently populated, but I'm already excited by its possibilities.

Heather Ryckman
Archivist