

Goree Institute Internship 2008: Reflections and Analysis

Zachary Koch

When Dr. O'Bannon first asked me to write a proposal of what services I could provide for the Goree Institute while I was there, he made sure to note of the importance of avoiding the "I'm a westerner so I know best" attitude. After a long history of colonialism, the goal was to avoid establishing myself as some sort of authority that was going to come in and "fix" the problems of the Goree Institute, much in the same way that Europe came in and "fixed" the "backward" Africans during the 19th and 20th centuries. With this in mind, I wrote an initial employment proposal, outlining both the services I could offer and a timeline for turning those proposed services into tangible, presentable products. By the end of the summer, however, none of the services had been implemented. I had not designed a web site, implemented a content management system, or even added any functionality to the old site. Every expectation we entered into the summer with was not met. As such, there is a tendency to, when reflecting on these expectations, ask the question, "Why did the internship fail?" This question, however, is misleading in that it assumes there is a universal acceptance of the failure of the internship on the side of both parties. Thus, the question to ask is not, "Why did this trip fail?" rather, it is "Why weren't our expectations met?" In attempting to answer this question, one can not only pinpoint where improvements could have been made on the side of the Goree Institute, but how we perhaps committed the same mistake we hoped to avoid from the very beginning.

Overview

Preparations for the summer and the work I was to do began almost immediately after I was awarded the internship around the middle of May. Since things were happening very last minute, there was a need to quickly be able to define how exactly I was going to be able to contribute to the Goree Institute during my 10-week tenure. After meetings with both Dr. O'Bannon and Kyle Danforth, Senior Assistant Director of CIEE, I drafted an employment proposal for the purpose of "selling" myself to the Institute and outlining where I thought I could contribute the most.¹ Dr. O'Bannon and I decided that my most valuable contribution would be in the form of an updated web site and content management system (CMS).² This decision was also supported by Nicolette Du Plessis, a Goree Institute employee who facilitated contact between DePauw University and the Goree Institute. It is important to note, however, that "updating the web site" was meant to be a fairly general idea, the specifics of which would be facilitated by the Institute once I had officially arrived.

¹ The proposal is attached to the end of this document.

² A CMS is a web site tool that allows individuals to add content to a web site without any technical knowledge. One of the things the Institute was struggling with was getting consistent, updated content onto the site.

The first meeting with the members of the Goree Institute took place three days after Dr. O'Bannon and I arrived in Senegal. Each person present had already read the Proposed Work statement and had come with ideas for the web site.³ It was during this meeting, however, that we learned that the Goree Institute had already contracted a web design company, eVolution, to update their web site.⁴ While this certainly changed the plans which had been established prior to departure, by the end of the meeting it was decided that I would still implement a CMS once the web design company finished the web site. I was to also perform a "users needs assessment," which included interviewing each person at the meeting independently to determine what they wanted from the web site. The goal as to pinpoint some other services that I could provide since I would no longer be doing the redesign. About two days later I received from Aboul Salam, the Office Administrator and person facilitating the redesign, the Statement of Work from eVolution from which I learned two important points. 1. The contract had been signed in October of 2007, about eight months prior to my arrival on Goree. 2. eVolution was going to be installing a service called Joomla!, another CMS. The significance of the latter point was that suddenly what I was going to be doing during my internship became very hazy. In response to this I sat down with Nicolette and Dr. O'Bannon to discuss the best way to move forward. Under Nicolette's advisement, it was decided that I would continue my user needs assessment as planned and reevaluate my position after I had a better understanding of the direction the Institute wanted to move in.

Within a week-and-a-half I had interviewed each person at the meeting independently and summarized my findings in a report which I distributed to the members of the Institute.⁵ I decided, based upon what the leadership team was looking for, along with my particular abilities and time frame, to implement the following web functionality while I was working at the Institute: An Intranet⁶, online event registration for Teral⁷, an online contact form, and a way to link the other Goree Institute sites into a portal. Apart from the Intranet software, each one of these features were essentially "add-on" functionality to the web site, i.e. they required the web site being redesigned by eVolution to be finished before I could install them onto the site. I was told by Abdou Salam that eVolution was going to have the web site completed by the end of June, at which point I could begin implementing said add-on functionality.

It was about the time that the finished web site was supposed to be delivered that eVolution sent a JPEG mockup of a proposed site for review by the leadership team at

³ The people present were: DouDou Dia, the Managing Director; Waly Ndiaye, Director of Programs; Abdou Salam Wane, Office Administrator; Nicolette Du Plessis, Director of Imagine Africa Program as well as my mentor on the island; Brett O'Bannon; and myself.

⁴ www.evolution.sn

⁵ A copy of this report can be found at the end of this report. It is entitled, "Goree Institute Intern Progress Report"

⁶ An "internal Internet" that allows staff members to share files, notes, and other information easily and online.

⁷ Teral is the revenue-generating portion of in the institute that focuses on conference and seminar hosting. The hope was to be able to allow people to register for Teral services online, instead of the current system of phone and fax.

the Institute. While it seemed very odd that after eight months we were just seeing a mockup for the first time, I was assured by Abdou Salam that eVolution had finished putting all the content onto the site and this was the final phase of development.⁸ As such, I reviewed and commented on the proposed site and sent my comments back to Abdou Salam to forward on to the web design company. I was operating under the assumption that Doudou Dia, the Managing Director of the Goree Institute, was sending his comments to Abdou Salam as well. This iterative process continued until eVolution, Abdou Salam, and myself felt like it was ready to move to the next stage of actually developing the JPEG mockup into a web site.

For approximately two weeks I did not hear back from eVolution, so I spent much of my time developing what I could of the add-on functionality. When I finally received an email from eVolution informing me the design was online, I was once again asked for comments. This was the same day I learned that at the end of the week both Abdou Salam and Doudou would be going on vacation for the next 30 days. I was left with little direction when Abdou Salam and Doudou left and gradually took on the role as key contact between the Goree Institute and eVolution. I continued to facilitate the design process alone, working directly with eVolution.

About four weeks before I was set to depart, Doudou returned to the office for a meeting and stopped by my desk to inquire on how the web site was coming along. After mentioning that it was largely out of my hands, I showed him what was then the current state of development. After examining it for a few seconds Doudou replied, "I'm not feeling it." He followed that up with, "Can you just design us a new one?" This was startling for two reasons. 1. Because the design that he "wasn't feeling" had been sent to him a number of times via email and this was the first time his dislike was being mentioned. 2. I had been there for six weeks, doing largely nothing but waiting and providing the occasional commentary. It was with only four weeks remaining in my internship that he asked for me to take on the project that had been proposed at our initial meeting. I had to explain to Doudou that four weeks was simply not enough time to completely design and implement a multi-language site, not to mention that eVolution felt they were nearing completion and would be expecting their final payment. Doudou then requested that I send him an email with my thoughts on eVolution's current design. He mentioned that, provided I was willing, the Goree Institute would pay for my work back at home. I agreed to send him my comments and did so later that afternoon. After Doudou did not respond to my initial email, I sent a follow-up email soliciting advice for how to best move forward with eVolution. I never heard back from Doudou, nor did I see him before I departed on the 20th of August.

For the remaining three weeks, I worked with both Dr. O'Bannon and Dr. Dave Berque, DePauw Computer Science Professor, about the best way to fix the situation. Dr. Berque proposed picking a few elements of the redesign and working to improve them to show to Doudou. The hope was that by changing subtle elements on the web site, changes that were feasible in the given timeframe, the redesign could be tailored more to Doudou's liking. Unfortunately, since Doudou never returned, I was unable to present my proposed changes. After it became clear that Doudou would not return from vacation

⁸ A JPEG mockup is just an image of the proposed design of the web site using a graphic design program. It is not in any way a functioning site.

before I left Senegal, I decided, along with Dr. O'Bannon and Dr. Berque, that my most valuable contribution would be to continue to facilitate the design process and make it "as good as possible" before I left. I viewed this as the best way to contribute to the web site and the Goree Institute in light of everything that had happened. I continue to work with the Goree Insitute to hopefully get the final site online.

Analysis

Pinpointing exactly why so few of the initial expectations were met and so little work was actually accomplished is a complicated task, given the complex nature of the way the different cultures of the United States and Senegal view work, the idea of productivity, importance of deadlines, hierarchy, etc. Thus, it is difficult to analyze or be critical of a system without sounding as though "our way is right and their way is wrong and that is why the project failed." Having said this, however, examination of cultural differences, particularly in a work environment, is crucial for any kind of effective analysis, as it clearly played a substantial role in my experience with the Goree Institute.

Nanka nanka moy jap golo chi nyae is a popular Wolof phrase that perhaps best provides a key foundation to understanding one of the cultural barriers faced when trying to get work done. Translated as "Slowly slowly you catch the monkey in the bush," the phrase is used to emphasize the importance of moving slowly throughout both life and work. Rushing to get something done is a Western view of work according the Senegalese. This phrase goes hand in hand with another common phrase, though this time in Arabic: *Inshallah*, meaning, "God willing." Things are done slowly, without rush, only when God has willed them to be done. Taking this a step further, it was explained to me that to move quickly and to push for things to get done quicker is an unwillingness to allow God to control the events of your life, something that was to be avoided at all costs.

This concept was evident in life both inside and outside of the Institute. Perhaps the best example of this was the Goree Institute's site redesign process through the Senegalese-based company, eVolution. As mentioned, the original contract was signed in October of 2007 and had still not been completed by the time I arrived in early June 2008. As noted in the overview above, eVolution did not provide a JPEG mockup until two weeks after I had arrived and had still not finished the site by the time I had returned to the United States. For the sake of comparison, within the United States, one could estimate the entire process of a web site redesign for a site such as the Goree Institute at anywhere from two to four months.⁹ My purpose with this is not to highlight the difference between the web development process in the United States versus that of Senegal; rather, it is to show that there is a very different understanding and, ultimately, acceptance, of the idea that things just take longer. My continual attempts to get either Doudou or Abdoul Salam to put pressure on the web design company, eVolution, to speed up the process was always met with shrug off statements or flat out resistance.

In light of this then, it has to be accepted that part of the reason for the lack of finished product was inherently cultural. The expectations with which we entered into the

⁹ By "entire process" I am referring to everything from initial mock ups and revisions to web site deployment and user testing.

project were, arguably, very American. In my original proposal of work, which was submitted to the Institute before my arrival, I laid out a very concrete timetable for accomplishing tasks, operating under the assumption that there were similar cultural understandings of work, timeframes, and deadlines. Thus, part of the blame for why our expectations were not met was that our goals for the project were not pragmatic given the inherent cultural differences.

Stemming from this as well was the way the way the project was approached from the very beginning. Since this was both the first year of the grant as well as being organized last minute, the details of what exactly I would be doing were ambiguous at best. It was decided that much of my role at the Institute would be established once I had arrived and had the chance to actually sit down and meet with the staff. While this was inevitable given the time frame with which we were working, we failed to take into account the cultural norms that would be at play once I had arrived. With only 10-weeks in-country, two of which were spent establishing what exactly my work was going to be, combined with the cultural issue manifested in the idea of *nanka nanka moy jap golo chi nyae*, it seems pertinent to ask the question of how reasonable were our expectations to begin with? How much work was really possible given everything weighing against us? Provided that our initial plans for work had come through, i.e. designing a new web site and implementing a CMS, would our results have been any different? Both Doudou and Abdou Salam would have been gone on vacation and the design and approval process might have experienced the same delays as eVolution did. Thus, again, there seems to be the issue of pragmatism when weighing the cultural norms against us as well as the barriers of trying to coordinate a project last minute, particularly one overseas.

Neither of these two points do, however, address the issue of the Goree Institute itself and its role in the internship process. There is little room to doubt that the Institute could have done more to create a more meaningful and productive internship experience, both in terms of what I would have been able to take back experience wise, but also what they could have gotten out of having a completely and independently funded employee with experience in web development and design. It seems unreasonable to assume that this missed opportunity was for lack of want. Evidenced in both my conversations with Doudou and his desires for a more purposeful web site and the fact that the Institute had already invested over \$2,000 (2,850,000 CFA) for the development of a new web site, it seems clear that the Institute did value and had need for what we proposed at the beginning. Instead, there are other factors that hindered a mutually beneficial partnership.

The first is the general organization structure of the Goree Institute as a whole. There is very little communication between the different departments, with each different department of the Institute, despite that they are in the same building, working independently of each other. For example, even though Abdou Salam was the one facilitating the web site and was the liaison between the Institute and eVolution, he never knew of Doudou's dislike of the design. Thus, while Doudou was talking about canceling the contract with eVolution, Abdou Salam was working to finalize that same contract. This general disconnect is commonplace throughout the Institute. Other employees, outside of the Institute's leadership, were not even aware that a new web site was being developed. This problem is magnified, particularly during the summer, by vacation

schedules during the month of August as well as a number of employees with other commitments outside of the Institute.

The issue with Abdoul Salam, however, brings up a second point: that of the ability level of employees and whether or not they are capable of doing the job. While there are certainly cultural issues at play in terms of moving slower, that certainly does not equate to not getting anything done, which was the case with the web site for the first eight months. Oftentimes at the Institute a fine line is drawn between “moving slower” and not really moving at all. In a dinner conversation with Breyten Breytenbach, the executive director of the Institute, he mentioned that within the last 10 years, Abdou Salam had yet to really finish any project and actually carried somewhat of a reputation for his inability to finish tasks. When asked why, then, Abdou Salam was still at the Goree Institute within such a key position as Office Administrator, the response centered around two points: strict labor laws that made lay offs and firings difficult and, perhaps more importantly, most people just liked Abdou Salam as a person. Despite that the Goree Institute is a business, there was an unwillingness to separate personal feelings of an individual with their worth as an employee who is able to get the job done. Worth noting as well, however, is that Abdou Salam works directly under the oversight of Doudou. If Abdou Salam is failing to get things done, such as the web site, it is the role of the managing director to step up and ensure that it gets taken care of. The inability to get a completed web site is a reflection upon Doudou’s management style as well as Abdou Salam’s work style. Furthermore, when Doudou did decide to finally get involved with the web site, he did so completely apart from Abdou Salam, thus furthering the communication disconnect.

These points are not meant to be an exhaustive explanation of the Goree Institute and the issues I encountered while there; rather, they are to serve the purpose of shedding some light into some organization problems that perhaps hindered the facilitation of the internship. It is also important to note, however, that this was also the first internship of its kind for the Institute. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that they simply did not know how to effectively utilize me, due to the fact that they had never had such a resource available. Regardless, however, there clearly exist problems at the Institute, but the challenge is separating what is inherently cultural, and in the case of firings, legal, from what is simply bad managerial or organization practices. The Goree Institute, for better or worse, is a Senegalese organization, carrying with that all of the cultural norms and expectations that come with being a Senegalese organization.

Conclusion

When looking back on my experience in Senegal working with the Goree Institute, it is easy to label it as a failure. There was no finished web site, no content management implementation, and no back-end coding. Essentially, not a single one of our goals for the project were met by the end of the summer. But to label it as a failure is to continue to make the same mistake that was made going into the project at the beginning of the summer: looking through a strictly American lens. Because our expectations were not met, because we did not get the return we were looking for when the trip was proposed, there is a tendency to universally claim that the internship failed to contribute something meaningful. Furthermore, the notion of failure tends to reflect

more poorly on the Goree Institute than it does on DePauw, and this reflection is heightened in light of my final point of analysis regarding the Goree Institute and its organizational and leadership structure. Yet it seems likely that our own mismanaged expectations from the beginning laid the foundation for inevitable disappointment at the end. The Goree Institute's organizational and leadership structure came to light most explicitly because we demanded from them guidance, a set of expectations, and most importantly, the task of filling in the holes of an internship and experience that we had yet to truly define ourselves. Thus, while there is certainly room for criticism of the Goree Institute in how they could have done more to facilitate a successful internship, it is impossible to remove ourselves from the equation of unmet expectations. For the program to be successful in the future, then, requires that we at DePauw shift back some of that burden of responsibility back onto ourselves. Realistic expectations must be developed from the beginning as well as clear-cut ideas, defined in conjunction with the Goree Institute before departure, as to how a particular student can contribute and take away something meaningful. Potentially, then, will come the ability to ask pertinent questions about what was taken away from the experience instead of simply "why weren't our expectations met?" Ultimately, my experience in Senegal was completely unforgettable and has shaped me in more ways than I ever would have thought possible at the beginning. I think it would be both a shame and a fallacy, particularly in light of what we could have done better, to not try to attempt this internship one more time and give another student the ability to have that same incredible experience.