

Evolution of the “Red Book” – From (paper) rags to riches

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ABSTRACT

Each summer, Academic and Research Computing (ARC) produces a guide for Mobile Computing Program participants describing the specifics of the selected laptop computer and providing a general introduction to computing at Rensselaer. The guide has evolved over the last few years from a red loose-leaf binder of printed pages (hence the name, “Red Book”) to an on-line series of web pages.

This year, we made the decision to use the Luwak technology, presented and well received at last year’s conference [2], to create the guide making it an easy-to-use tool for the students in addition to facilitating staff editing and updating.

The Luwak technology is currently used by ARC for the Help Desk web site (j2ee.rpi.edu/helpdesk) where the student consultants can add their hints and tips quickly and easily. This was explained in a paper I presented at last year’s conference [1].

This paper will discuss how the new format will create an improved “Computing at Rensselaer/Red Book” guide and, in a more general way, how the Luwak technology is changing ARC documentation.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.m [Computing Milieux] Miscellaneous

General Terms

Documentation

Keywords

documentation, web, training, laptops

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SIGUCCS’03, September 21–24, 2003, San Antonio, Texas, USA.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y. is a private institution with more than 7,000 students and 450 faculty members. Students come from 50 states and 81 countries around the globe.

The Division of the Chief Information Officer (DotCIO) is made up of seven branches. My duties place me in Academic and Research Computing (ARC), the group that provides computing services and assistance for faculty, students, and staff in support of Rensselaer’s educational and research mission.

2. THE MOBILE COMPUTING PROGRAM

The Mobile Computing Program at Rensselaer began in Fall 1999 with each member of the freshmen class required to have a laptop computer. Four years later, the Program encompasses all undergraduates. Most students purchase or lease our Mobile Computing package which includes the laptop and an extensive selection of software.

The implementation of the Mobile Computing Program is provided by the Mobile Computing Team, made up primarily of ARC staff. The Team is responsible for many aspects of the program, from selecting the laptop model, to ordering, distribution, and academic support.

Each year, we place all the software and other Rensselaer modifications into an “image,” which IBM loads on to the laptops prior to delivery. So, when a student opens the laptop for the first time, except for tweaking a few networking settings, it is ready to go.

3. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE RED BOOK

To help students become familiar with their laptop and other computing-related topics, ARC produces a handbook for Mobile Computing Program participants. Its purpose is two-fold: to explain the specifics of their laptop computer and the pre-installed software and also provide a general introduction to computing at Rensselaer.

The handbook was very well received. Parents loved it, assured that their son/daughter was given help using their laptop. This was most important several years ago when using a laptop was a relatively new procedure. As for the students themselves, although the handbook had a lot of information in it (which we want them to read), it was not convenient to use as they carried their laptop all around campus, nor was some of the information timely as the months passed. Until this year, the information each year’s handbook contained stood alone and remained the same

throughout the year. Also, each student was given only the one handbook at the time they picked up their laptop.

4. “MEMORY AS A MAP”

The first year of its existence (1999), the handbook came in the form of a red loose-leaf binder of over 100 printed pages with red dividers between the sections! The “Red Book” was christened.

I heard a commentary by Katie Davis on “All Things Considered” (NPR radio) [3] where she discussed “memory as a map.” She was referring to the way we sometimes refer to places by how we remember them as they once were and not how they are today. We might say “the Smith’s house,” for example, even if the Smiths haven’t lived there in years. Our continued use of the name “Red Book” is exactly what Ms. Davis was talking about.

Even though the way it is presented each year has changed to the current web-only format, staff members still refer to the guide as the “Red Book.”

5. RED BOOK: FALL 1999

The Fall 1999 “Red Book” consisted of two areas of information: specifics about the laptop, and basic computing information at Rensselaer. It had a great deal of information in it, but I doubt that students carried it around with them, so the information was not at hand when they needed it.

The computing information was basically duplicated from web pages already created on the ARC site. Since the guide was never updated once it was distributed, after a period of time, the student would no longer be looking at current information.

In addition to the printed pages, we also created one huge HTML file on the web. If a student is still referring to this file, they would find that it takes forever to load and is unwieldy to use.

Each year, the information in this edition has become more and more out-of-date. Many students have upgraded the operating system and/or several of the software packages. The computing information is definitely obsolete.

A “Red Book” icon (red on the screen, black & white seen below) on the desktop image of the laptop labeled “Rensselaer Laptop Information” directed our students to it. It was also mentioned on the Configuration Checklist which they had to complete when they were setting up their laptop.



Figure 1: Red Book Icon

6. RED BOOK: FALL 2000 and 2001

For Fall 2000 and 2001, the basics of the guide stayed the same. Of course, the contents was updated with specifics about the new laptop and the computing information reflected the current situation.

Paper copies in red binders were still handed out at laptop distribution time in Fall 2000. And again, we put it on the web in the form of one huge HTML file and mentioned it on the Configuration Checklist.

In Fall 2001, we left printed pages behind and went entirely to an on-line document which we made available in both .html and .pdf format -- still rather unwieldy to use.

7. RED BOOK: FALL 2002

In 2002, the handbook continued to be only available on-line. However, we divided the information into many individual (small) files for ease of accessibility and use. The opening file was the table of contents (see Figure 2) with links to the information. Each of the informational files had prominent links to the previous file and the next file at the beginning and end, so it could be read like a book. There was also a link back to the table of contents.

This was an improvement, but we wanted to do even better.

8. AS TIME GOES BY

The Mobile Computing Program has now been in place for four full years and every undergraduate is required to have a laptop. With the option of acquiring a new laptop each year (with many students upgrading after two years), each student can now have one (or more) of four different laptop models and support must cover all of them. We distributed laptops with Windows 98 (1999-2001) or Windows XP (2002-2003) as the operating system. We’ve added software packages and updated others. For example, each year, the version of Maple, a symbolic algebra program, has been upgraded. We have a Microsoft License Agreement that allows all students participating in the Program to install any Microsoft OS they choose (some have chosen to install Windows 2000) and also to upgrade the other Microsoft products on the laptop, for example, Office. We would like each student to be able to learn about the specifics of their unique laptop (model, OS, software) in the first section of the handbook.

The second section of the guide, basic computing information at Rensselaer, contains details that change each year. But as opposed to laptop information, we want all students to access the same information. For example, students should find the most recent instructions on printing and printers, not what they were several years ago. This type of information is continually updated on our web site, but was not updated in previous editions of the “Red Book.”

If a student only referred to the “Red Book” they were given with their laptop, they would indeed find information about the laptop as it was distributed. However, if they had changed the operating system, the guide would not contain information about it. But, even more important, the general computing information would most likely be out-of-date.

Is this a documentation nightmare? It sure is. But along came the Luwak technology to the rescue.

9. LUWAK TECHNOLOGY

The Luwak technology is based on Java and runs in J2EE (for those who are interested in the technology itself, you can read about it in a paper that was presented and well received at last year’s conference [2]). (Remember the coffee beans?)

(continued)

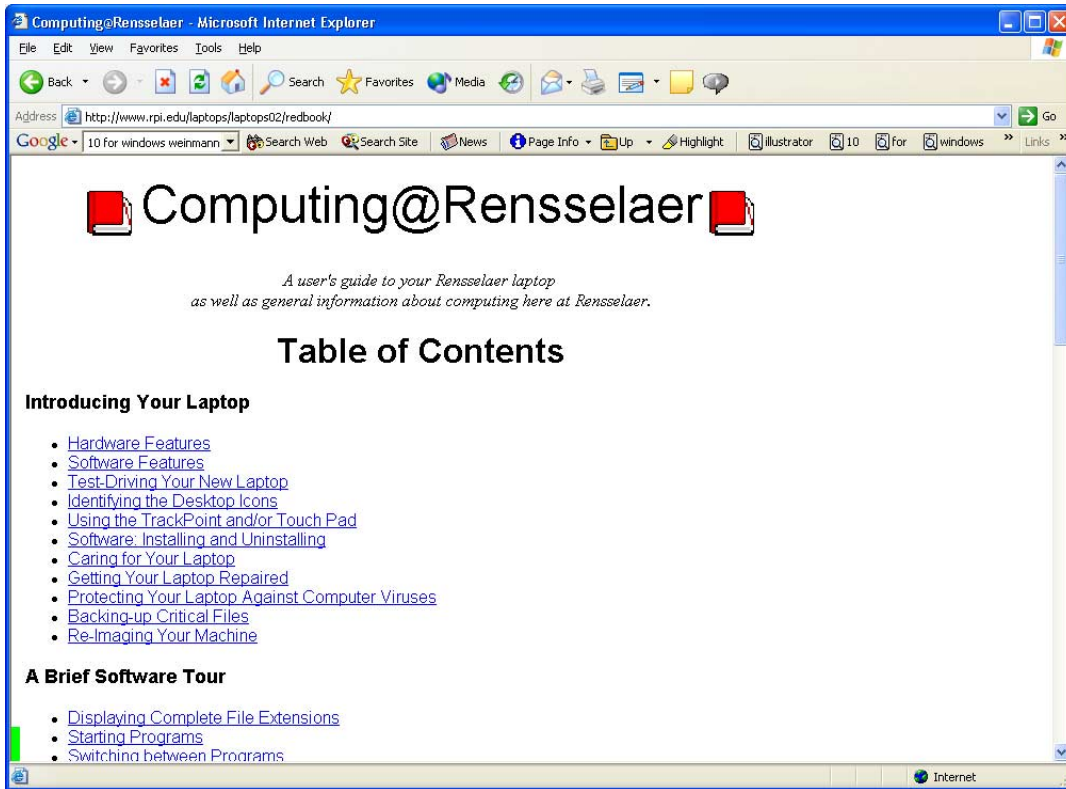


Figure 2: Red Book 2002 table of contents

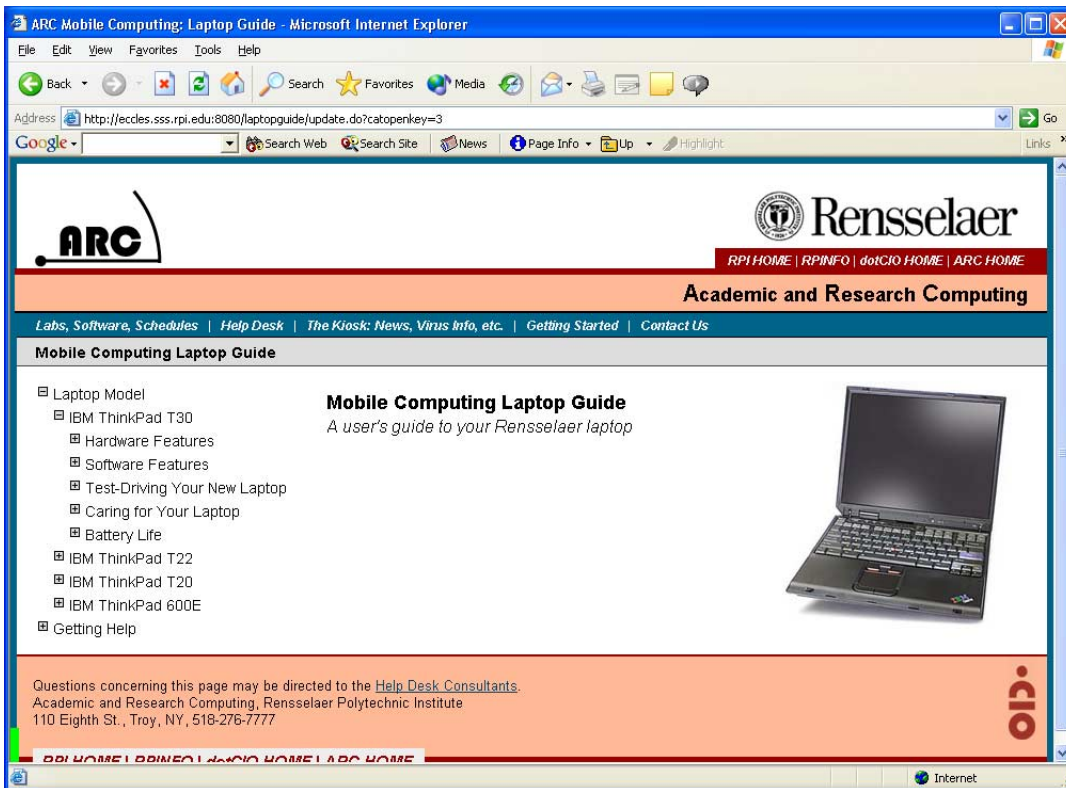


Figure 3: Red Book 2003 home page

Once the look of the pages is established, updating the content is both easy and fast because the content is separate from the design. The Luwak technology also gives us the ability to have different people responsible for specific parts and assign permissions as appropriate. This makes it possible to share the work load among the staff, enabling those with the most knowledge about a topic the capability of working with those details. An editor would still have final control over what was actually “published.”

There is also a link at the top of each page to produce a printer-friendly version, so that a paper copy option will remain available to users.

You can see the Luwak technology in action on the Help Desk web site (jee.rpi.edu/helpdesk) [1].

10. COMPUTING AT RENSSELAER: FALL 2003

There are so many more exciting possibilities open to us than we had with the paper versions of the “Red Book,” renamed “Computing at Rensselaer.” The Luwak technology allows us a great deal of flexibility in how information can be presented to the user. We can have sections specifically created for the guide, or point to information that already exists.

The guide for Fall 2003 is divided into two major parts, **Laptop Model** and **Getting Help**, as you can see in Figure 3. But now, the Laptop Model section will contain laptop-specific information for all laptops, not just one. Users select their model laptop from an expandable list. For each model, they will be able to find such details as diagrams explaining all the keys and ports.

The second section, “Getting Help,” is made up of information on computing applicable to all students. This will no longer be static, as we can point directly to the information that is continually maintained on the ARC site, for example, the instructions for changing your password. This eliminates duplication and will make it easier for us to ensure that each student always sees current, accurate information.

11. THE FUTURE

We have now implemented the Luwak technology in two major areas of our documentation and are still exploring other areas in which it can be used. We are planning to employ it in the production of our Memos, which are documents that are longer than our one-page Quick Studies. Newly-revised memos will be written this way.

One of the ideas that is not yet implemented in the Luwak model is the automatic generation of PDF files. This would enable students to print a copy of the documentation as a big book...in other words, going full circle...but in this case, the book would always be fully up to date at the time they printed it.

As for the “Computing at Rensselaer” handbook created using the Luwak model, we now know that a student will be directed to the most recent computing information. The handbook will be an easy-to-use tool for the students. Instead of being a “static” document, we will be able to edit and update it throughout the year.

Most important, we will be able to point everyone to one place for laptop information, leaving the annual “Red Book” behind, except in our memory.

12. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Pat Valiquette, Sharon Roy, Arlen Johnson, and Theresa Mahoney who not only discussed the ideas presented in the paper with me but also reviewed it. Thanks also to all those who worked on the various “Red Books” over the last four years.

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