The Solicitors Online Blog

Musings from an online lawyer

PHP – a journey into the unknown

WRITTEN ON OCTOBER 22, 2010 BY TESSA SHEPPERSON IN WHAT I AM DOING NOW   0 COMMENTS - LEAVE A COMMENT!

Php for lawyers?

Today and yesterday I did something which few solicitors of my generation have done, or will ever do.

I attended a computer training course on php (for beginners, naturally).

"What on earth" I hear you ask "is php?"

What is php?

Php which originally stood for Personal Home Page, when it was developed in 1994 by a Danish/Greenlandic programmer called Rasmus Lerdorf , is now short for **PHP: Hypertext Preprocessor**. And therefore has the dubious honour of being an acronym where the acronym itself is part of its own definition.

Its main home on the internet is php.net where it is defined as

> *a widely-used general-purpose scripting language that is especially suited for Web development and can be embedded into HTML.*

Wikipedia has longer definition:

> *PHP: Hypertext Preprocessor is a widely used, general-purpose scripting language that was originally designed for web development to produce dynamic web pages. For this purpose, PHP code is embedded into the HTML source document and interpreted by a web server with a PHP processor module, which generates the web page document. As a general-purpose programming language, PHP code is processed by an interpreter application in command-line mode performing desired operating system operations and producing program output on its standard output channel. It may also function as a graphical application.*

So now you know.

Basically it can be used to make websites 'dynamic'. So, for example, if you click a link on a page and the content of the page changes as a result, that will often be because of the php code working away in the background, and then sending the right html code to your computer browser to make the page change its appearance.

It is also the code used in most open source software, to pull different bits together from a database (where they are all stored separately in lots of different tables), to produce a

page.

For example [WordPress,](#) perhaps the most popular blog software around (its used for this blog for example), is built using php, also [Drupal](#) which is the software being used for my new Landlord Law web-site (still unfinished at the time of writing). Others include [Moodle,](#) [Joomla](#) and [Media Wiki](#) (the software used to drive [Wikipedia](#)).

The course experience

Attending a computer programming course was an interesting experience.

The other two students were of course men (apparently a lady at a computer training course is a rarity), and were considerably better at programming than me. But then they had both done a lot of programming previously, whereas I have not.

We had all brought our laptops along, and the course started off by having php installed on them. We then started learning what php can do, copying the code and seeing it work, and doing increasingly difficult exercises. These involved working out the code to make something specific happen.

It was interesting to see the difference between myself and my co-students. For most of the time, I found it virtually impossible to work the code out (as in, write it from scratch based on what I had been told). If I copied it very slowly however, I could dimly understand what it was doing and why. Which for me, I considered a result.

However on the morning of the second day, I had a flash of brilliance. We were doing some code which changed one set of words to another. As it was about words and not numbers, I found I could both follow what it was about, and adapt / develop a bit of code to make it work. Yippee!

However our next exercise was about making some sort of numerical calculator, and I was lost. My eyes glazed over and I could feel all intelligence drain from me.

I can do logical things with words (which is why I am a good lawyer) but not with numbers. Or not without a lot more difficulty. Which is different, as our teacher Michael Gruenberger said, from most of the people on his courses, who are generally better at the number stuff. Including the others on my course who were noticeably slower with the word exercise, but much better at everything else.

So what did I think of it?

The php course was a really good thing to do. I now have a much better grasp of what is possible, and what sort of things php will do. So the next thing is to get some books (already on order from Amazon) and work through them carefully (when I get the time).

This, I know, will help me get ideas for new ways of delivery of legal services online (for [landlords and tenants](#)). And it is just possible that some of them (the easy ones) I may even be able to develop myself! Watch this space …

In case you were wondering, the course was run by [Cambridge IT Courses](#) who provide computer training courses in Norwich, East Anglia and the Midlands.
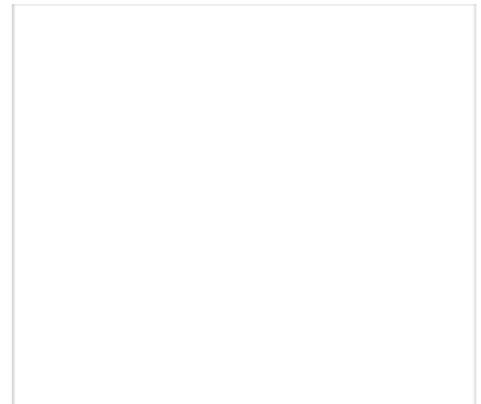
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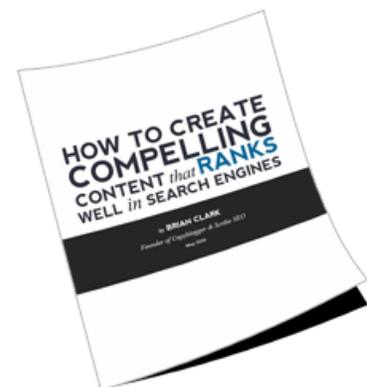- [Social Media – Whats the point? (Part 3)](#)
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