



Cobweb is proud to be celebrating the 20th anniversary of the launch of COBRA (Complete Business Reference Adviser). We have been supplying COBRA to the UK business support community since 1997, when COBRA was first made available in NatWest's network of branches.

When the concept for COBRA was conceived back in the mid-90s the internet was still very much in its infancy. Our researchers sourced the market and legal information required to produce COBRA from premium resources – mainly available in business reference libraries – or through telephone and desk-based research. We were also heavily reliant on our team's knowledge and experience of business and the local and national support available around the UK.

In 1997, COBRA was launched as a premium, subscription-only resource, providing high-quality information for business support practitioners and advisers.

By the early 2000s, there had been an explosion in the amount of free-to-view business information and other content that was being published via the internet – much of which was published by the Government or on emerging websites such as Wikipedia. As a result, we were advised by many of our peers that providing access to premium information would no longer be a viable business model, when so much information was freely available online.

Nevertheless, this did not deflect us from our strategy to supply high-quality business information at a premium via subscription. Our CEO, Colin Weatherspoon, and Managing Director, Marianne Whitfield, completed a management buy-out of Cobweb in 2002 and set about expanding the breadth of content on COBRA.

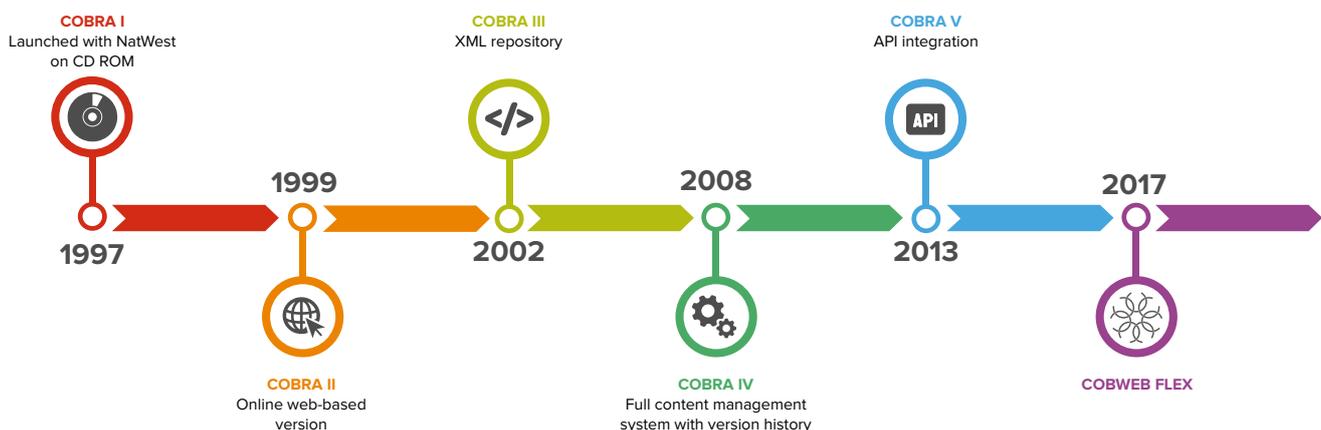
As a result, and despite the continuing glut of free information available via the internet, our customer base continued to grow year-on-year with increasing numbers of business support practitioners recognising the value of the well-researched, validated, practical information that was exclusively available on COBRA.

While our customer base has grown healthily over the last 20 years, so has the range and nature of the content in COBRA. Back in 1997, there were around 200 Business Opportunity Profile (BOP) titles which focussed on the market opportunity of each business idea. In 2017, we cover close to 600 business ideas. What sets the BOPs apart today is the regulatory detail and focus on the practicalities, risks and challenges – as well as the opportunities – in each trade and sector.

Cobweb has always had its own in-house development team who have engineered various content management and publishing platforms to support the delivery of COBRA's content.

Cobweb has also developed a number of innovative information services in partnership with a range of corporate and public sector clients over the past 20 years, including NatWest RBS, Lloyds Banking Group, BT, LexisNexis, Escher Group, the FSB, the Welsh Government and, most recently, North Tyneside Council.

With ongoing advances in technology, a rapidly changing business support environment and the looming challenge of Brexit, the evolution of COBRA over the next 20 years should be just as innovative and rewarding.



A partnership that's spanned two decades

Cobweb's information services, including the Business Opportunity Profiles (BOPs) and Business Information Factsheets (BIFs), were first developed back in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Around 1995, we entered into discussion with NatWest about developing an exclusive, CD-ROM-based tool for their business managers to use with clients. "NatWest played a pivotal role in how COBRA would look and the content it would provide," explains Marianne Whitfield, Managing Director at Cobweb.

"Our partnership with NatWest was a great opportunity. Their backing helped us to develop COBRA into an excellent resource that would be used by a leading high-street bank, and that we could promote to the wider business support community."

For NatWest, the chance to have exclusive access to the extensive and up-to-date business information on COBRA was an exciting prospect.

As Rachel Burnell, former Assistant Marketing Manager in the Small Business Services department at NatWest recalls, "At the time, there were around 1,200 Business Managers at NatWest. They would support our existing business banking customers, as well as any new start ups or prospective clients".

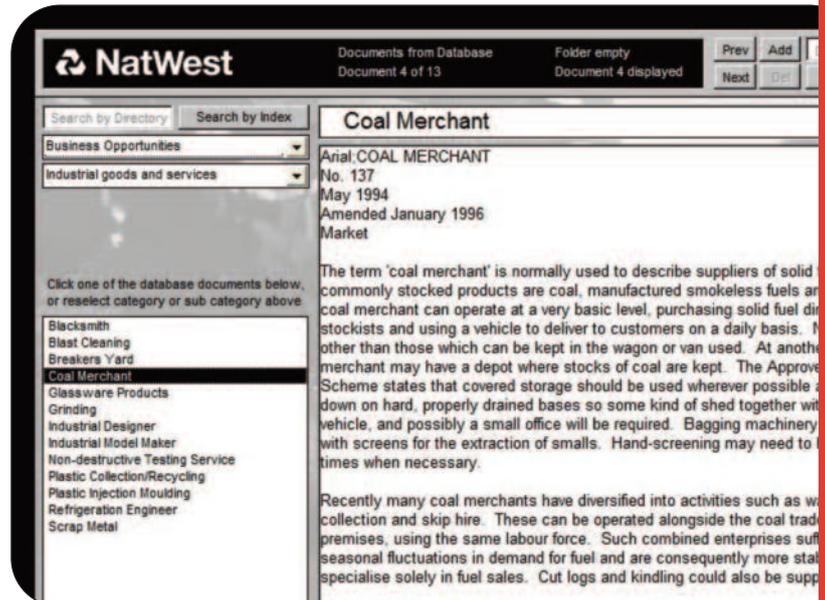
"I was responsible for getting COBRA up and running in the bank. We were really excited about it. COBRA gave us access to hundreds of business factsheets and start-up guides at our fingertips. It was tremendous," adds Rachel. "We were also the only bank with access to COBRA so it was a real advantage over our competitors."

The opportunity to work with Cobweb to shape COBRA's content and interface was another big selling point for NatWest. "It was great. We could feed back any tweaks that were needed, or any comments from the Business Managers who would actually be using COBRA with clients on a day-to-day basis," explains Rachel.

"The initial feedback was very positive. The Business Managers really welcomed being able to have access to up-to-date information they could use with their clients, whether it was an established firm or a new start up. It was particularly useful if a Business Manager was unfamiliar with the business type or sector."

"I also think it was the first time that such information was available in the bank electronically via CD-ROM, rather than just paper-based," adds Rachel. "We knew early on that COBRA had the potential to become an indispensable resource."

For Cobweb, the development of COBRA was the first of many projects with NatWest, and the relationship continues to this day.



“Cobweb is a trusted and valued partner of NatWest and Royal Banks of Scotland and we're looking forward to the new tools they're developing

COBRA is still the 'go to' tool for NatWest's Business Relationship Managers and Business Growth Enablers.

Harinder Kunor, NatWest Business Growth Enabler from the Black Country, tends to use COBRA mainly for her networking events.

Harinder says, "If I know the type of businesses that have booked in to an event I go to COBRA to build up my knowledge of their industry and then share that new knowledge with my audience. When it comes to our customers, they're impressed with the insight and understanding we have of their particular industry."

"The best way to share the knowledge is to review the factsheets with customers on my iPad but I also print off a few extra copies that I can then give away or e-mail across so they can go back to the information later."

According to Lisa Rix, NatWest's Head of Partnerships and Propositions, "Cobweb is a trusted and valued partner of NatWest and Royal Bank of Scotland and we're looking forward to the new tools they're developing to help us serve our customers with even better insight."

"I'm delighted that we are still collaborating with NatWest 20 years later," says Marianne. "We are working together on a number of exciting and innovative projects, whether it's designing apps or developing new ways to use the content on COBRA. It's fantastic and I'm excited to see how this partnership continues to evolve."

20 years at the front line of business support

Since opening its doors in 1994, the North East Business and Innovation Centre (NEBIC) in Sunderland has been providing business support, training and workspace to start ups and established firms across the north east of England.

“We were established with the demise of the shipbuilding and coal mining industries to build an enterprise culture and provide intensive hands-on business support,” explains Shirley Hermiston, Business Support Manager at the NEBIC. “We are also a registered enterprise agency which enables the provision of independent and impartial advice.”

To help them with their work, the NEBIC team has been using COBRA for almost 20 years, making them one of Cobweb’s longest-standing customers. “The team needs up-to-date information on all the different sectors and types of business, which is why COBRA is so important.”



“*What I have seen in the 20 years of using COBRA, is how much more information is on there now*”

The breadth of information on COBRA is why it continues to be so well-used by the NEBIC team. “What I have seen in the 20 years of using COBRA, is how much more information is on there now. It’s probably quadrupled.”

“For every business idea there’s at least 20 pages of full information about training, qualifications, legal requirements, market trends and so on. It’s why we use COBRA pretty much daily,” says Shirley.

Through the delivery of a comprehensive and impartial business support service, Shirley believes the NEBIC generates real benefits for the local economy. “We have a reputation for sound advice. A lot of our clients who want to start up a business are recommended by others, which is really good.”

“Without COBRA we would have to do all that research about the different sectors and business ideas ourselves,” says Shirley. “Having access to COBRA allows me and the rest of the team to focus on what we do best, which is working with our clients to help them start, run and grow a business.”

Supporting the next generation of start ups

The Mitchell Library in Glasgow is one of Europe’s largest public libraries and is the central hub of a city-wide information service. It provides a range of premium online business resources and a team of specialist staff to help firms access support and expertise.

“At the library we have a business department and focus on new start ups and small to medium-sized enterprises. Our job is to provide comprehensive and up-to-date information that can help people to start and grow a business,” says Rosemary O’Hare, Principal Librarian at Glasgow Libraries.

“We always refer people to COBRA because they get such useful information from it. You can just enter a keyword and you’ll always get something back,” adds Rosemary. We’ve had COBRA for around 20 years now, mainly because it is a good entry point to get people started with their research.”



“*It is definitely a resource that we want to renew and keep every year*”

COBRA is also being used as a resource to support the library’s new employability project. “We have been awarded funding from the Scottish Library and Information Council to work with young people to improve their employability.

“A member of staff is going to be working with local schools to promote our resources with a view to self-employment and entrepreneurship. In particular, we will be helping young people to consider employment or starting their own business in the creative industries,” explains Rosemary.

“COBRA is going to be a key resource for the project. It’s a great introduction to researching an idea and the issues that impact the creative sector, such as intellectual property and copyright.”

Rosemary also believes COBRA, with its clear and easy-to-use interface, is ideal for working with clients of all age groups and abilities. “It has a nice, clear design and because it is broken up into sections and by idea, it is very easy to navigate,” adds Rosemary. “The library staff and users find COBRA to be really approachable and so rich in information. It is definitely a resource that we want to renew and keep every year.”

What our clients say about COBRA

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So much is covered in COBRA, and it provides a lot of the ‘fundamental information’ clients need. It really allows us to enrich the support we give people. COBRA is essential for the self-employment support we provide. In this field, we certainly couldn’t operate without it.

Right Management Career Consultants

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It is not difficult to see why many of our students regard COBRA as an invaluable and convenient source of business information in helping them, from researching their ideas to completing their financial projections.

Barnsley College

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If there are any business libraries out there that haven’t got COBRA, I would strongly recommend getting it. I’d put it up there as one of the number one things to have as a business library.

BusinessLine, Wrexham

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The team at Cobweb update the content on the London Growth Hub every day so users always have access to the most up-to-date list of events and support available in the capital. The team’s knowledge of the business support landscape also means that the information is relevant to our audience.

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