The 10-Point Plan For A Successful Intranet

Expert knowledge means success

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Introduction

Today, the Internet gets most of the press, but the real computing revolution that's going on inside companies is the fast-growing use of Web technology to create enterprise-wide *Intranets*.

An Intranet is an in-house or a private corporate information network that allows access to people within an organisation enabling the capture and sharing of knowledge that's vital to success - that's why Intranets have been adopted by many of the world's leading companies.

Over the next few years, experts believe, Intranets will be enhanced with new services that will make them the key component of corporate networks.

The idea of building an internal information resource based on Internet technology is still in its infancy yet, despite its tender years, Intranets are really growing in popularity. There are mixed responses to the usefulness of these networks - some companies have fallen in love with them whilst others have allowed them to fall into disarray.

The most common problem appears to be a lack of planning - with companies setting up their Intranets without thinking why they need it - or what should be placed on it. As a result, many Intranets become a muddled casserole of irrelevant and confusing material. Most Intranet projects focus on construction and neglect maintenance. After you've made information available, the reliability, stability, user support, security and cost will require more attention.

Despite the widespread acceptance of Intranets as an efficient and cost-effective tool for internal communication, they may not directly improve customer relations or business performance. To take best advantage of an Intranet, an organisation must use it externally - for example, by allowing customers to interface with it.

What is an Intranet?

An intranet is a private space that gives employees in a company the ability to organise information, readily access that information, manage documents, share calendars and enable efficient collaboration, all in a familiar, browser-based environment. Because all your important business information resides in a central repository, it's available at any time, from anywhere in the world, using a simple web browser.

Authorised users outside your company such as your remote workers, suppliers, partners or clients can also use it to collaborate, communicate and share business critical information.

Many organisations discover other unique and creative uses for intranet technology to solve real business problems.

How can an Intranet help your business?

Intranets address the needs of everyone in your organisation. Some typical uses include:

- Sharing documents with anyone you authorise
- Scheduling meetings and sharing calendars with colleagues and remote workers
- Conducting discussions on everything from product ideas to employee suggestions
- Creating and sharing access to information databases, or even building your own database-driven applications
- Managing and delegating action items and project tasks
- Maintaining standard contact directories of all your employees, suppliers and customers
- Conducting opinion polls among your employees
- Posting announcements and sharing web links among all your colleagues.

Top ten items to post on your Intranet

1. Company Holiday Schedule
2. Company Forms
3. Links to Important Information
4. Employee Suggestion Box
5. Employee Directory
6. Company Benefits Information
7. Employee Bulletin Board
8. Company Meetings Calendar
9. Company Events Calendar
10. Training Documents

For further information on these items see our publication *IP734: Top 10 Items to Post on Your Intranet.*

Ten key points to follow before setting up an Intranet

Allow all your staff access

Basic Intranet technology is cheap and easy to set up. Restricting access means it can never be the primary means for communication in a company, and so will become neglected.

Don't ignore security

You don't need to show every piece of information to all Intranet users. Establish who can see what, so that you don't compromise security or confidentiality. An example: employees can only see their own personnel files.

Be tidy

The temptation is to put every written piece of work on the Intranet. This is not the best approach. You need to think about how much of the information you have is worth keeping up-to-date.

Put someone in charge

The content on your site has to be reliable and current. Someone has to be in charge of keeping it that way. If users don't trust the Intranet, they won't use it.

Keep your suppliers and customers on board

Building links to your Intranet means that suppliers can gather information cheaply and quickly or respond more quickly. Alternatively, you can use your Intranet to let your biggest customers see how much they are spending, and where, and change their pricing to save money.

Don't try to do everything at once

Start small, with a project that delivers a measurable result in six months. Only when this has been achieved should you attempt more ambitious projects such as building electronic commerce into your Intranet.

Don't ignore design

Information on a computer screen needs to be presented in a way that users can read, so just typing in company documents will not work. Use small amounts of text, with clear headings. If mobile users have palmtop computers, ensure they can read the pages too.

Don't miss out on the best of the World Wide Web

The Intranet can be used to funnel external information sources, like relevant web pages, news sources or technical support. Using an Intranet in this way can solve the problems of unrestricted Intranet access.

Expect changes in the way your company works…

Managers whose job was simply to channel information might become disenfranchised overnight. Be prepared to undergo some 'accidental' Business Process Re-engineering.

Remember your goal - Intranets are much more than an IT issue

The real goal of an Intranet is to bring about the organisational change required to share information. Technology is not the solution itself.

Build or Buy?

Does it make the best sense for a small to medium-sized business to build an Intranet from scratch or to buy a customisable pre-packaged solution?

Making the right decision at the initial stage can make the difference between a functional, cost-effective Intranet and a set of applications that cost too much and do too little. The important factors listed by Rick Faulk of Webexone in "Buy versus Build" include:

- Process and Functions
  - Who will develop a comprehensive vision of what the Intranet should do for the business?
  - What functions does the Intranet need to perform?
  - Who has the qualifications and time to design the Intranet?

- Flexibility and Risk
  - Can the Intranet evolve to meet the changing needs of the business?
  - If some initial applications already exist, can new Intranet applications be integrated easily?
  - Will the Intranet be compatible with changing technology (network structures, server/client operating systems)?
  - How will the Intranet work for all employees regardless of operating system?
- Deployment and Use
  - How will users get up and running on the Intranet?
  - What means of instruction or help will be offered to users?
  - How will the Intranet be maintained?
- Time and Cost
  - How long will it take to implement the Intranet?
  - What are the real cost differences between building an Intranet and buying a customisable, pre-packaged Intranet solution?

So, what's the best solution for a company? Is it to buy an existing solution or to build a new one from scratch? The decision is subjective, and the path to finding the best solution lies in the evaluation of the four decision factors identified above by Faulk — Process and Function, Flexibility and Risk, Deployment and Use, and Time and Cost. Determine the company's needs, weigh the importance of communication within and between departments, and then evaluate the strengths of both types of solutions.

Overall, for a small to medium-sized business, the case for buying verses building an Intranet seems to be compelling. A reliable, customisable "instant Intranet" offers a company a full-featured solution, with flexibility now and expandability later.

The ability to integrate the off-the-shelf solution with an existing Intranet means that development time is not wasted and custom applications can be created and deployed as needed. The ability to customise the "instant Intranet" ensures the solution's success in any vertical industry, while empowering a company with the immediate deployment of an Intranet solution. Customisable pre-packaged Intranets also offer ease of implementation and use and a price considerably below what it would cost to build the Intranet from scratch - both of which are very important to the small to medium-sized company.

Further Information

For practical ideas on building your corporate Intranet, including free Intranet graphics, software and tools, design templates and tips on how to build a low-cost small business Intranet, visit Intranet Publishing at:
www.intranetpublishing.com.