



CrownPeak Technology

Intranet Best Practices | Business Whitepaper

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Debunking Intranet Myths

Today, a series of myths surround Intranets, myths that initially arose during the Internet boom days and have somehow survived. As a result, many Intranet projects—whether they are new Intranets or retreads of failed Intranets—are still overly complex and potentially fated to remain both costly and ineffectual.

The most popular myths go like this:

- ▶ Intranets need to be personalized for the individual user.
- ▶ Intranets are places to collaborate.
- ▶ Intranets can be successful without a simple way for non-technical staff to update and control content.
- ▶ An Intranet will manage itself if a Web content management system is installed.

Each of these misconceptions is a hangover from the Internet boom days, when phenomenal returns were promised from every project. Portals and their kin were the rage, and the marketing engines behind portal vendors drove much of the hype. (For purposes of this article, we're defining a "portal" as a personalized Web site, powered by a dynamic publishing system, tightly connected to back-office applications.)

On the other end of the spectrum is the straightforward Intranet, designed to be a vehicle for knowledge-sharing across an organization. Where a portal is customized for the individual user, a knowledge-sharing Intranet has controlled access (sometimes to different groups of users), but doesn't try to deliver "personalized" content to each individual. Instead, the main objective of a knowledge-sharing Intranet is to be the authoritative source for up-to-date content, available to everyone in the organization.

Don't misunderstand. A portal can be a tremendous asset for some organizations. Portals are the right choice, for example, for organizations with extensive back-office applications in need of a Web "front-end." Direct employee access to HR systems can be a tangible benefit and, potentially, a great cost-saver for large organizations. For most companies, however, the difficulty and expense of creating new content for specific types of users—let alone for individuals—combined with the difficulty and cost of implementing and managing portal software is almost never warranted. In and of itself, creating and managing highly segmented content is a multi-person job.

A recent Jupiter Research report entitled "Beyond the Personalization Myth" shows that personalized Web sites are, on average, four times more expensive to run than sites that are not personalized. Jupiter additionally notes that user experiences are not typically improved by personalization:

Given flexible, usable navigation and search, Web site visitors will be more satisfied with their experiences and will find fewer barriers to the profitable behavior sought by site operators. In fact, good navigation can replace personalization in most cases.

Collaborate How?

Another persistent myth holds that collaboration features—such as messaging, chat, bulletin boards, and "erooms"—are critical components of an Intranet. An eroom is a password protected

“mini-site,” where documents can be shared and commented upon, within a specific group. Erooms also often have their own calendars and task management systems.

Of all Intranet collaboration features, erooms can be the most useful, but can also be problematic since they “hide” content. Because erooms are meant for secure communication within a specific group of users, search across multiple erooms isn’t typically implemented. Documents, assets, comments, and other communications within an eroom can get lost. After a few years’ time, who can remember all of their erooms, projects and passwords—and which one might hold a certain version of an image, document, or other content fragment? It isn’t uncommon to hear about organizations with thousands of erooms built up over time, with no way to categorize, organize, or search through them.

Other methods of Intranet collaboration—such as chat rooms, task management systems, bulletin boards, and comment trails—create overlapping methods of communication and data storage. Because these applications don’t live on the desktop, they normally need to be checked periodically to be useful. In most cases, email and Microsoft Word’s tracking and redlining features are a better method for collaboration than an online system. Email is tracked, backed-up, and lives on the desktop for instant, continuous access. Word’s versioning and comparison features are industry standards, and work better than any online document collaboration system I’ve seen.

Useful Content or Useless Intranet

If an Intranet’s content isn’t accurate and useful, visitors won’t return. If the content isn’t easy to update, it won’t get updated, and the Intranet will fail over time. An easy-to-use method of updating site content is a requirement for a successful Intranet. An individual to “own” the Intranet is also a requirement.

A surprising number of Intranets have no method for content owners to update content directly. While it’s possible to count on technical professionals to maintain site content either by directly updating HTML files or via a system from the IT organization, doing so tends to be quite expensive. And that process is likely to break down at some point. If the process for updating content becomes difficult or sluggish over time, those responsible for site maintenance are likely to gradually begin shirking their duties. The Intranet’s value will erode over time, resulting in a slow march to failure. The correct time to put a content update process in place is months before the Intranet launches. And the right people to update and approve Intranet content are the content owners themselves.

An Intranet launch or re-launch can be highly useful. By enabling a Web content management (WCM) system well before launch, and then training the content owners on the system, including providing deadlines to get content live, organizations achieve two things. First, good content is part of the system at launch, so first-time visitors will recognize value and begin to make Intranet usage a new habit. Second, content contributors will have truly learned how to update the content (not just taken a training session). They have also had an opportunity to suggest improvements to the WCM system prior to the Intranet going live, so that necessary changes can be made.

Typical WCM systems use browser-based interfaces to let content contributors copy/paste, drag/drop, upload, preview, and approve content to go live. Some systems have added the ability to insert content directly from a Web page or via email. In Intranets with large numbers of content contributors, it may be easier to establish a few email addresses where content can be inserted into the WCM system. Likewise, links into the WCM system can be built directly into the Intranet pages, for quick and painless content additions or modifications by staff charged with

that task. Remember that a WCM system controls the Intranet's structure (and look-and-feel), thus ensuring that no one can break a well-designed navigation and layout scheme.

Significantly, a WCM system enables the Intranet manager to control the way content is updated, and to know what's going on. With a good WCM system, the Intranet manager can see reports on the oldest content and the least frequent users, can set the system to notify users via email when content needs to be updated, and so on.

The Intranet manager plays a critical role in an Intranet's success. He or she is responsible for prioritizing important content, managing site growth, and working with content owners to get content updated, owning the WCM system, and above all, acting as an advocate for the Intranet. As back-office applications come on line and can be integrated into the Intranet, the Intranet manager is responsible for making certain that happens in a usable way for the Intranet audience.

The New Conventional Wisdom

So much for myths debunked. Here are a few final thoughts on Intranet success that should become the new conventional wisdom:

- ▶ Concentrate on a simple, attractive interface and navigation system. (Think ahead: How will a given section work when you have 500+ documents?)
- ▶ Incorporate critical content into the Intranet, and make it available nowhere else (company directory, HR forms, company event calendar, brand asset directory, etc.).
- ▶ Add all of the content to the Intranet via the WCM interface and have the people who "own" that content area use the system to populate the content for the Intranet launch date.
- ▶ Appoint an Intranet business owner who monitors content and can contact content owners to make sure they are keeping everything up-to-date. Make sure he/she is focused on the site and the site's contents, not technology, but forms an excellent working relationship with IT.
- ▶ Don't even think about personalization, except when the Intranet is acting as a Web front-end to a back-office system, like PeopleSoft or SAP.
- ▶ Think hard about whether collaboration features are necessary or desired. Empty chat rooms are embarrassing, and email and Word versioning serve a similar collaborative purpose very well. Remember that computer applications almost never succeed in enforcing behaviors; they succeed only when they provide value.
- ▶ Make sure you have a suggestion box. And then, when the suggestions pour in, listen to your audience.

In the end, launching a simple Intranet with valuable content that is available nowhere else will result in a win. The more ambitious the plan becomes, the higher the likelihood the Intranet will be too complex, expensive, and difficult to maintain. Adding features and content over time, and publicizing those additions to the Intranet's audience may not result in an instant promotion, but it will result in a usable – and used – productivity tool for the organization.