

Managers Letter

Intranet Management and Applications

Part Two of a Two-Part Series

by *Joseph McKendrick*

The ease of Intranet deployment enables most departments to rapidly add content and applications to their company's Intranet. However, without a central point of management, chaos and misdirected communications may result.

Who should take charge? To date, information system departments have been taking the initiative in building Intranets. A recent study by *InfoWorld* Research Services found that, in four out of five cases, IS is responsible for organizations' Intranet infrastructure.

Deploying training programs over the intranet may be a more cost-effective alternative to localized computer-based training.

However, there also are roles for many departments. IS has the technological expertise to design and maintain the networks. Corporate Communications, Human Resources and Marketing can all contribute content. Additionally, Corporate Communications has the publishing and graphics know-how to craft an attractive and informative finished product. In essence, every department in an organization should have input into development and management of its Intranet.

In fact, the most successful Intranets have a high degree of involvement from users and top executives, according to Christie Comaford, Intranet development consultant and president of Planet U, based in San Francisco, CA. "However," she says, "it's important to let the Intranet grow from the grass roots up rather than by dictates from the top down." Overall vision and proper planning — the bedrock principles of management — don't apply to Intranet deployments, Comaford has found. Intranets will grow in the areas where they are most needed.



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As various departments build their own sections, companies run the risk of appearing to send mixed messages or even posting erroneous information — a potential pitfall. That's why a "content librarian" should be appointed or hired to watch over the material presented on the Intranet. In addition, Comaford says that desktop publishers — not IS personnel — make the best Intranet developers.

Human Resource departments are using Intranets to enable employees to communicate new policies and to view benefits information, which can be continuously updated. Online employee handbooks bring up-to-the-minute information to new and current employees. HR usually gets its feet wet first in its company's Intranet in order to "post vacancies and corporate information on a web server," says Al Doran, president of Phenix Management International (Richmond Hill, Ontario), a human resources management systems consulting firm. IS departments can offer applications for instantaneous use instead of going out and performing cumbersome upgrades to hundreds or thousands of desktop PCs.

Companies are employing a variety of practical and creative applications on their Intranets. Typical applications include the following:

- Employee phone and e-mail directories
- Company newsletters
- Policy and procedures manuals
- Product data and prices
- Telecommuting access
- Training
- Data entry
- Inventory searches
- Benefits searches and updates

A recent Olsten technology management survey found a range of creative Intranet applications at respondents' companies. The HR manager for an Indiana-based manufacturer says his company has successfully implemented an Intranet for "sharing information related to inventory, sales and receiving through accounting software." Another respondent, the IT director of a mid-Atlantic legal firm, says his firm is able to take advantage of "distribution of reports and office-specific messages of the day." The firm's newsletter is also posted on the web. Other Intranet

applications mentioned include online phone directories, executive information systems, product information, internal employee directories and even a "rumor and gossip" bulletin board.

Another new horizon for Intranets is computer-based training (CBT). Many companies say they are using the Internet itself as a training medium. In fact, web-based training is looking and acting more like CD-ROM CBT every day, according to Dr. William Gibbs, an authority on distance learning and CBT issues and an associate professor at Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL. "We're seeing that type of interactivity on the web, where the computer is asking questions, evaluating user responses and giving feedback," he says. Intranet-based training extends training to employees at any location, anywhere in the world. Companies no longer need to pay employee travel costs for training updates. In addition, changes or updates to programs need only be made once on a central server.

Some large companies have found Intranets to be a way to rapidly connect to far-flung employee groups and provide information.

Lockheed Martin's Intranet, for example, enables employees to access company policy and procedures and other company information, as well as send e-mail. The greatest annual savings, \$3.7 million, has been in productivity gains resulting from "employees saving time by not having to go out and find manuals," says Thomas J. Murray, product marketing manager for Lockheed Martin's Information Systems and Technologies division. On manufacturing shop floors, kiosks have been set up to allow employees to use the Intranet.

Intranets are being expanded into "extranets," or secure Internets for communities of trading partners.

BC Telecom, Canada's second-largest telecommunications company, replaced paper-based functions with online capabilities. Customer service representatives now have access to electronic product documents that are updated every night. In addition, all employees can access information on all of the company's HR programs, including health, safety, benefits and fitness programs and schedules, in a self-service-oriented HR environment.

Intranets are growing in sophistication at many companies, taking the place of client/server networks, where users' PCs were directly attached to a local or wide

area network with special front-end software. Major enterprise-scale applications are being developed to support Intranet-style networks, accessible through browsers. "The first thing people did with the Intranet was to put up policy manuals and post press releases," says Andrew Mahon, senior manager of strategic marketing for Lotus Development Corp. "It was only a matter of time before the opportunities with the technology became more evident and people started to build real applications," he says. Some of these include transaction-based systems, database access tools, project management and collaborative workflow. Most major enterprise application providers, including SAP,* PeopleSoft* and Oracle,* are incorporating web access into their systems to accommodate Intranet architectures.

Taking the Intranet concept a step further, the Internet and world wide web also serve as a channel for enabling business-to-business electronic commerce. Intranets are being expanded into "extranets," or secure Internets for communities of trading partners. As with Intranets, participating companies only need an Internet connection and standard browser to link trading partners. Extranets also can extend access to telecommuters, customers, sales representatives and branch offices.

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