Intranets

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Intranet Review Toolkit

In my last column I commented on the issue of intranet benchmarking, and I make no apology for returning to the subject this month. Some of the most useful information on intranet development and management comes from the pen (desk-top?) of James Robertson, the founder and Managing Director of Step Two Designs (http://www.steptwo.com.au), based in Australia. Now James has come up with an Intranet Review Toolkit which enables intranet managers to benchmark their intranet against current best practice. The Toolkit was sponsored in part by the Information Architecture Institute (http://iainstitute.org/news/000457.php).
The Toolkit covers the intranet home page, site structure and navigation, search, page layout and visual design, intranet content, news, staff directory and intranet strategy and management. There are nearly 70 evaluation criteria (or heuristics), each of which has a rationale for why it is important, and then two statements that set out the upper and lower bounds of good practice. Each criterion can then be given a rating between zero and five, and the spreadsheet automatically calculates the score. Summing scores by section and overall provides a quantification of intranet performance. Space is provided for comments against each of the heuristics.

The approach is best illustrated with an example:
Criteria 2.2. The labels used in the navigation are clear, consistent and useful
Labels used in the navigation are a key factor that enables staff to locate information on the intranet. The labels need to provide a clear indication of the content available within each section of the intranet.
Labels should be:
• Understandable by staff
• Consistent within the site
• Descriptive of where the user is going next
The broader principle is that the labels should provide a strong 'information scent', thereby providing staff with many clues about which navigation item to select when seeking a particular piece of information.
0: Navigation labels are ambiguous, use organisational jargon, are used inconsistently, or do not provide a clear indication of the content that is being linked to.
5: Navigation labels clearly differentiate each area of the site and are understandable by all staff.

I am sure that there will be many different views of how valuable this criterion is, and whether the notes supporting the scoring are 'correct'. Benchmarking always has quite a high degree of subjectivity. Overall this is a very commendable first version, and in principle works very well indeed.

If I have a concern it is that I'm not sure that the section on news is all that valuable. Indeed there is even an option to score this as zero if the intranet is not used for news dissemination. I would have preferred to see sections that looked at how access to corporate documents was accommodated, or more expansion of the staff directory into expertise identification.

However these are personal points, and I am certain that this Toolkit will develop rapidly as it starts to be used, and from use will come requirements for enhancements and additions. The Toolkit is available under a Creative Commons licence, allowing it to be freely downloaded and used, as long as certain conditions are met. Congratulations are due to the vision of the IAI in underwriting some of the costs of the Toolkit, and to James Robertson for the immense amount of experience and dedication that went in to developing the Toolkit.

Social software and collaboration

One of the most popular sessions at the Online Information Conference in 2005 was that on social software, headed up by Jimmy Wales (the inventor of Wikipedia) as the keynote speaker. The use of blogs and wikis to support collaborative working is becoming increasingly popular, as is the use of corporate blogs as a way of building closer relationships between an organization and its customers and stakeholders. For expert advice on corporate blogs do have a look at the blog written by Adriana Cronin-Lukas, the founder of The Big Blog Company (http://bigblogcompany.net/)

Easy-to-use blog software has been around for some time, but wiki software is less easy to find and install. When I was in Paris recently running a workshop with Jane McConnell (http://www.netjmc.com/) I met up with Luis Arias, one of the principals of XWiki.com (http://www.xwiki.com). XWiki will either provide a hosted solution or install their software on your intranet server. I've not tried the software myself yet, but it seems to have been well thought-out.

On the subject of collaboration, there is a very good article on the subject in the July/August 2005 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, pp.96-104. Well worth showing to any senior manager who thinks that collaboration is just another business fad. A copy of the article, by Philip Evans and Bob Wolf, can be downloaded from http://www.hbr.com.