Intranets

Martin White, Intranet Focus Ltd (martin.white@intranetfocus.com)

What constitutes a mature intranet: should it be based on external sites, or should it be based on the organisation's internal needs?

From here to maturity

As an intranet consultant you certainly get to see the world, even if it means travelling from London to Sydney for just four days at a time of severe security restrictions at Heathrow. (The money was good!) The only major problem occurred at 25,000 ft and 100 miles out from Sydney, when it became clear that virtually no one on the 747 had a pen to complete the landing card! While in Sydney I had the chance to talk intranets with James Robertson, MD of Step Two Designs, and by around the third latte, we got around to intranet maturity. This was prompted, from my perspective, from having recently read a report from the Enterprise Solutions group at Avenue A | Razorfish entitled "Corporate Intranet Best Practices". At the heart of this report is a six-stage maturity model that starts with Communication and Information Sharing, and then moves to Self-Service and then Collaboration. Stage Four is Enterprise Information Portals, then Digital Dashboards and finally a Consolidated Workplace Interface. You can read more about the model at http://intranetmaturity.com/

The model that Avenue A | Razorfish have developed is based on work with large corporate intranets they have carried out for their clients. There is much of interest in the report, but I'm not at all sure I can live with a maturity model that is based around technology. (Having said that, one of my clients read the report and had a real Eureka! moment, so perhaps I'm a minority of one.) Nevertheless I am sure that the report will be heavily downloaded by intranet managers trying to prove a point with their sponsoring manager. For all the millions of intranets there must now be in the world, it is surprising how little statistical information is known about them. Back in 2001 Melcrum Publishing, a UK consultancy (www.melcrum.com) released the results of a survey that they had sponsored into some of the quantitative metrics of intranets, such as the size of the budget and the number of people on the intranet team. James reminded me that he had carried out a similar survey about a year ago, details of which can be found in a summary of the results at http://www.steptwo.com.au/papers/kmc_intranetteams/index.html.

Flying back from Sydney gives lots of time for thought (especially when upgraded to Business – thanks BA!) and I started to ponder over what I'll call White's Intranet Paradox. The paradox can be stated thus – the more you manage to find out about how intranets are being used in other organisations, the greater the chance that your own intranet will fail to meet the requirements of your organisation. There has certainly been a lot of interest in benchmarking intranets over the last year or so ("Just how good is your intranet" at EContent March 2006), and I'm not changing my mind about the utility of benchmarking. But I have recently come across organisations that are now driving their intranet on the basis of what other organisations are doing, which is close to insanity.

When we speak about maturity, we do so with some norm in our mind. We see our children maturing, using what we would consider as adulthood as the norm. My concern with benchmarking and quantitative research into intranets is that the focus is looking outwards, and it should be looking inwards. Intranet maturity should be a function of how well the intranet supports the provision of information within the organisation, taking into account business objectives and user requirements. I might even go as far as to say that a fully mature intranet is invisible. It has become so much a part of the way that the organisation goes about its business, that no one even thinks to mention that such and such a piece of information is on the intranet. That to me is maturity.

Certainly lessons can be learned from case studies about other intranets, and indeed from benchmarking, but in the end an intranet has to be probably the most user-centric application in the organisation. This is because just about everyone in the organisation uses it almost everyday for just about anything. The only application that will be more frequently used in an organisation is the email system, and just possibly Microsoft Word (or equivalent).

It would be really good if we could find some organisation to designate 2007 as The Year of the Intranet User, but I'm afraid that it will just have to be me! All too often I find intranet managers who have never run surveys of their users, never set up some discussion groups to get some face-to-face response and make the assumption that now there is a CMS that enables each employee to contribute content then the content by definition must be useful. As James Robertson puts it "A key principle for intranet teams is: you can't usefully deliver information to users that you haven't personally met." Make 2007 the year you meet your users.