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# Intranets

## Making One plus One equal One

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I expect most of you watched the wedding of the Vicar of Dibley over the Christmas holiday. As a church organist I've seen rather a lot of weddings, and of course been involved with some elements of the planning. This is where you can already see the problems of a future marriage becoming visible. I have recently been involved with sorting out the intranet environment for a large multinational that has been formed as the result of a merger (or acquisition – it depends which side you talk to!) and where the aim is now to merge the intranets of the two organisations quickly, so there is a consistent culture and effective access to information for employees of both the merged companies. If only it was that simple.

Looking at the two intranets, it quickly became obvious that there were more differences than there were similarities. Intranet A was only in English, and used a commercial content management system. Intranet B was in a number of languages and used Microsoft SharePoint Server 2003. Intranet A was organised along subsidiary/department lines, whereas Intranet B was organised by line of business. Intranet A had a decent search engine, and Intranet B used the search functionality (or what passes for it) of SharePoint Server. And so on.

### Content and culture

What is really fascinating is the differences that reflect the business cultures. Company A was US-owned and had a very laissez-faire approach to content, and to the way that staff post comments about opportunities and issues. The other company was European, with a concern over language issues, and a more stringent legislation on employee rights. For one, the main news item was the result of the softball match last night, and for the other, a note on the activity of a major competitor. Not for one moment am I saying that the approach of one is correct, just that every intranet is highly individual.

In addition, each intranet is designed in shorthand. Staff know all the relevant TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms) and the differences between Form E1 and Form E2. Although every intranet manager tries to ensure that new employees understand internal business procedures from information available on the intranet, life is just not like that. Then they wake up one morning and hear in the news that instead of five new employees arriving, a merger is announced that means they have three thousand, and the eyes of the shareholders in both companies are looking for the immediate benefits of synergy that were promised to gain their mutual acceptance of the deal.

A number of companies in the IT sector have put a significant investment into their intranets, and are now able to integrate acquired companies in the shortest possible time. Cisco was probably one of the best examples with an intranet application that was specifically designed to make employees of acquired companies become effective Cisco employees as quickly as possible. In the majority of companies this is, unfortunately, not the case. These are the companies that will almost certainly find that the lack of attention they have paid to their intranet means now that delivering on the promises they made to the shareholders, when asking for approval for an acquisition, suddenly becomes much more difficult.

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This is not just because of technical integration issues. An intranet is not only shaped by the business culture, but is also a visible focus of that culture. If the takeover is a contested acquisition, staff in the acquired company may well use their intranet in inappropriate ways. Discussion groups will flourish, key documents may go missing and expertise databases may be subject to post-hoc revision.

**Forewarned is forearmed**

Of course, before the merger, all sorts of due diligence would have been done by lawyers, accountants, HR specialists and just about every consultant you could think of, including IT consultants. But none of them will look at the intranet, an information and culture application that will be on the desktop of everyone in the merged organisation right at the start of the new business. No one will have looked at the issues around migrating content from one CMS to another (assuming that is the best way to go) or how search is going to be implemented, or how document security rules will be implemented.

Now not everyone that reads this column is going to be involved with a corporate merger, but even departmental integration at a lower level can give rise to similar problems. Even if it is only on one piece of A4 it might well be worth documenting the elements that will need to be considered in the case of a merger/acquisition. You may only get a few hours notice of the event!

But I'd also suggest that if you are an intranet manager and you work for a law firm, accounting practice or management consultancy, it might be worthwhile hunting down the head of M&A and suggesting that you might usefully be a member of the due diligence team. Intranets are now so large, complex and messy it could be that a merger that makes perfect sense commercially founders because developing a new corporate intranet that unifies information, knowledge and culture is just too difficult. There are some probably apocryphal stories about mergers in the financial sector that have been called off because integrating their back- and front-office applications would have been too costly and time-consuming. My guess is that the chances of this situation arising with intranets is much greater.

Does anyone have any war stories to relate?