

Intranets

Who manages the Intranet?

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A common question when setting up an intranet – in which department should the intranet be based?

I have lost count of how many times I have been asked where an intranet should 'report to' in an organisation, usually by a manager who wants to get rid of what they see as a problem child that is fast becoming a challenging teenager! There is no easy answer (if you are looking for one then move on to another section of eLucidate) because it depends on a number of different factors in combination,

A look at my website will show that these are the three elements that I see as forming the platform for any intranet strategy. Just to be perverse, let me take them in reverse order. An ownership decision based on organisational structure tends to want to take the 'tidy' route to management. Everything else in the organisation reports into one department, so what not the intranet? There is a logic behind that, but a false logic. The fundamental problem with an intranet is that it is on every desk in the organisation. With the exception of MS Office/Outlook, it is probably the only application that is on every desk top and so the normal rules of divide, conquer and take the plaudits do not apply. Of all the departments in an organisation, IT, HR and Internal Communications are probably the only ones that touch every employee at every level. However, only large organisations have an Internal Communications department; so the choice usually comes down to HR and IT.

From a technology perspective, an intranet is boring. It's nothing more than a heterogeneous mess of HTML, MS Office and pdf files loosely assembled onto a Web server. Even the excitement of installing a CMS is soon tempered by the realisation that it is nothing more than a database application. Portals are different! I have yet to find a portal application masquerading as an intranet that was not driven by an IT department with an interest in using SharePoint or BEA AquaLogic and needing an application to make the business case for the license costs. (If any of you have the evidence to contradict this statement my e-mail address is on this page.)

There is another aspect of technology though, and that is the CMS implementation that I have referred to above. The case is often made that, since the same CMS is being used for the website (which probably got it first) and for the intranet then it should be Marketing Communications that take responsibility for the intranet. The case is made on the basis of sharing expertise and of reducing support and training costs. There are some fallacies here that need to be addressed. If there is a major training requirement and a substantial need for ongoing support for an intranet CMS application, then you have bought the wrong CMS for intranet use, no matter how good it is for the website. An intranet CMS has to support ad hoc use by people who are not being rewarded for intranet content addition, and who see the need to work through a 500-page user manual as the final frontier. Moreover, Marketing Communications is all about communicating with the external world, and employees have very different information and knowledge needs.

So what about either Internal Communications or HR? To a significant extent (humour me here!) Internal Communications is about the bulk transfer of information to employees

and HR is about some very specific information to individual employees. Neither really get involved with understanding how better business decisions can be made with effective access to internal and external information.

The reality is that the solution to the problem is a strategic issue and not an operational one. One of the reasons that departments are sometimes very keen not to take ownership of the intranet is that there is no top-level sponsorship of the intranet, and so budgets and lines of authority stop with the departmental manager – and that can be uncomfortable. If the objectives for the intranet are clearly articulated, and the resources required are quantified and made available, then any specific department can see that it is the guardian of the intranet, not the owner of it. An intranet absolutely has to have a steering group with representation from all stakeholders, which reports into one (or more) executive-level sponsors. Budget is made available at a corporate level and allocated to a department for line management purposes. A good intranet improves business decisions, reduces business risk, supports business growth, enhances career development and makes working for the organisation a pleasure. Are you telling me that you do not want to be the manager who takes the credit for all this?