

Intranets

Just how networked are you?

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How to contact, and to stay in touch with, other members of your organisation

Helen Henderson is one of my best friends in the information business. We have known each other for around 30 years, but as Helen lives in the USA and I live in the UK we now meet all too infrequently. Helen and I have both developed our careers in the information industry but in very different ways, and the result of being avid networkers is that we have developed contact lists with very little overlap. We like to think that between us we know everyone in the information business, but the reality is that we don't. As we get older (and in my case greyer) we have great difficulty in tracking the new entrants to our profession and business, and by the same account, they would probably not be aware that we even exist and have networks that they could use.

This scenario is played out in every organisation. Senior managers have well-developed networks, and can't see the problems that newcomers to the organisation face when needing to know who knows what, rather than having to rely on a list of hits from an intranet search engine of dubious merit. The problems get worse when one of the senior managers leaves. Too much attention is focused on the loss of the knowledge they have, which in reality is probably not going to lead to the demise of the organisation. The more critical problem is that they may well have been the node linking two or more networks, and with the node gone these networks now operate only in isolation. Don Cohen and Larry Prusak's book *In Good Company* (Harvard Business School Press, 2001) is an excellent introduction to these issues, and for more about social networking Rob Cross and Andrew Parker are the authors of *The Hidden Power of Social Networks*, also from Harvard Business School Press.

Organisations now work virtually to such an extent that employees may work on projects and business processes with colleagues they are never going to meet. Few organisations appreciate the issues around using virtual meeting applications such as NetMeeting or WebEx. They are taught the mechanics of logging on, but not how to build trust and collaboration with others when you do not even know what they look like. These problems were brought into sharp relief by the launch decision for the Challenger Space Shuttle (Diane Vaughan's book, published by The University of Chicago Press in 1996 tells the story brilliantly).

Over the last few years, the growth in social networking applications, such as LinkedIn, has been colossal. As few months ago a search for a missing woman in the UK was supported by her friends who set up a social network hub to give people a chance to provide any information they had that might lead to her being found. Tragically she was found dead, but an important precedent has been created.

The need to have access to global expertise is now widely recognised by companies, and usually the most heavily used feature of an intranet is the staff directory. However the staff directory needs to go beyond address and telephone number information. James Robertson specializes in the development of staff directories, and has written a handbook on their development (<http://www.steptwo.com.au/products/staffdirectories/index.html>). In a global survey for the handbook carried out in 2004, 89% of respondents had a staff directory, and this number has almost certainly grown over the intervening period.

To be of benefit, a staff directory has to be

- Comprehensive across the entire organisation
- Maintained in a fully current condition for the end of the business week
- Compliant with data privacy legislation, where that is a legal requirement. (<http://www.intranetfocus.com/governance/legalissues.pdf>)

Too many organisations play lip-service to providing effective staff directories that go beyond name, telephone number and email address. People want to know about where other people are in the organisation, which projects they are working on, what expertise they have, who else might they know through professional affiliation, and a great deal more. In Europe there are some tricky data privacy issues, but these can, and should be, overcome rather than being used by HR departments as an excuse for inaction. Often the problem is that the information that is held in an HR portal cannot easily be exported to an intranet application, and even when export is possible, enabling staff to revise and enhance the information seems to be beyond the capabilities of the IT department.

The issue is often what information such a directory should contain. Here is a maturity model for a staff directory:

- Level 1 – Name, location, contact details, email address (hyperlinked if possible) and job title. A photograph can be added, though this always has to be optional
- Level 2 – Name and job title can be linked to an organisation chart so that direct reports can be identified, and more clarity gained on role and responsibility
- Level 3 – All staff names in the intranet are hyperlinked to the staff directory
- Level 4 – Staff who are not employees (contractors) are added
- Level 5 – Free text field in which the employee can add in their view of their expertise
- Level 6 – Expertise is managed by a set of controlled terms, so that expertise is comparable
- Level 7 – Search of the staff directory is integrated into the intranet and other enterprise search applications

Another excuse is that people do not like being phoned and being asked silly questions, and as a result hide their expertise. That is easily overcome. Several organisations I know have a policy that any 'first contact' has to be by email, and the email has to set out what the enquirer has already done to try to answer the question. This gives the expert a chance to assess a whole range of parameters about the enquirer, and to give a response that ranges from being very busy to call me now.

The cost to a business of not facilitating knowledge exchange is probably quite colossal. Not only does the new employee in particular not work effectively for months because they have difficulty in building a network, but they feel that the organisation is not taking them seriously and helping them build a career.

So what does your company do to facilitate knowledge sharing? Are there courses in how to manage virtual teams? How do you promote your expertise and your career in the organisation you work for? It's time to get a better balance between information and expertise.

Reference Management

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Still more new reference packages

This month's column has a range of new reference packages. If I am missing your favourite please do let me know.

InfoSelect

<http://www.miclog.com>

For keeping track of research notes and other kinds of information in either a structured or unstructured format you might like to try InfoSelect.

Backpack

<http://www.backpackit.com>

This is a useful package for keeping track of research notes. There is both a free version and a fully fledged package to boot. It has an advantage over other packages in that it is accessible from any Web browser in any location, eliminating the need to synchronise multiple computers on the go. It is very versatile and permits collaboration completely under the user's control, with shared pages and whiteboards

Bibblywiki

<http://www.giffmex.org/bibblywiki.html>

Bibbly wiki is an adaptation of Tiddly wiki software designed to create bibliographies, personal library inventories and notes on books.

BibMe

<http://www.bibme.org/>

This is a one-stop source allowing searching of references from a central repository and to then autofill the entry or you can manually put your own references in.

LiteRat

<http://www.literat.net/>

is a free German-language reference program especially suited to managing citations and their transfer to the word processor

Endnote version XI

<http://www.endnote.com/>

It's mid June, so there must be another version of Endnote being released! Version XI promises to be better than ever! There is now a feature that allows you to group references (taken from the reference manager grouping feature) allowing up to 50 custom groups. You can append up to 45 files of many types to each record using the new file

attachment feature. This expands the storage capabilities of the software. The software provides more support for Word 2007.

For many academic institutions the upgrade to Endnote XI is free – but nothing is ever free, is it? Documentation will now need to be updated, colleagues advised, Web pages updated, etc. To aid this process, there is an online tutorial on the website to talk you through the new features. It would be worth a look through. One particularly useful change for me has been the inclusion of reference type as a subject field for the subject bibliography. This aids researchers when submitting reading lists, so they can clarify what they are submitting to us.

Comparison of reference packages

www.wikipedia.org

Wikipedia has an article and several categories on reference software that compares the different packages in terms of operating systems, costs, options, etc. A useful starting point. Just type in reference management software and follow the links

Research into referencing

Issues concerning academic referencing are part and parcel of an Information Professional's life, and yet seems to pass a lot of others by. Therefore, any attempt to seriously consider which referencing styles exist, the history and origins of referencing, and when or when not to include a reference is to be welcomed. Colin Neville, from the School of Management at the University of Bradford, has been involved in researching issues concerning academic referencing as part of CETL Learn Higher project. As a result of his work, Colin has developed a section on the Learn Higher Reference website at www.learnhigher.ac.uk There is an accompanying book which, although aimed at students, would be of interest to anyone within the information profession who needs guidance. See his article in this issue of eLucidate.