

Intranets

Sharing Intranet knowledge

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It's taken a very long time, but at last people are beginning to share their experiences of intranet management. The Intranet Benchmarking Forum continues to expand, and is about to start up in Asia-Pacific (<http://www.ibforum.com/>). I announced an Intranet Masterclass with James Robertson in London on 7 March on the UKeiG mailing list, and sold all 25 places within a couple of weeks, with one delegate coming from Russia. At I write this I am looking forward to the first meeting of the UKeiG Intranets Forum on 5 February, and Janet Corcoran, the new Forum coordinator, tells me that there will be around 30 delegates.

I've been invited to speak at the IntraTeam Intranet Conference, which will be taking place in Copenhagen on 5-6 March 2008. The theme of the conference is Creating Value with an Intranet. Kurt Kragh Sorensen and his team have assembled an impressive roster of speakers, including James Robertson (StepTwo Designs, Australia), Jane McConnell (NetStrategyJMC, France) and Kara Pernice (Nielsen Norman Group, USA) as keynote speakers. In addition there will be case study presentations. I have worked with all three of these industry experts, and it will be a pleasure to be sharing the platform with them at this event.

It always interests me just how much expertise there is in Denmark on intranet management, and that a small country can support two major conferences (the other being JBoye08) on intranet/enterprise content management. Although there are intranet events in the UK, they tend to be run by professional event companies who just try (often unsuccessfully) to assemble a collection of case studies with no overall theme or focus.

With this level of intranet interest over Christmas I started to read with great anticipation a new book entitled *Intranets for Infopros*. This is edited by Mary Lee Kennedy and Jane Dysart and is published by Information Today (<http://books.infotoday.com/books/IntranetsForInfoPros.shtml>). This is only the second

book this century to be written on the subject of intranets (the other coming from Luke Treddinick and published by Chandos), and for that alone the editors should be congratulated. The book is a set of eleven chapters from eleven authors, though Mary Jane Kennedy is the lead author of four. The target market is clearly information professionals (please not InfoPros!) who have, or want to take on, a role in intranet management. As so often with multi-author works, trying to get some degree of consistency between authors is very difficult. Some of the chapters are excellent, such as Avi Rappoport on search and Eric Hards on designing to meet the needs of end users. Others (but not all!) have something of interest.

The basic problem with the book is that all too few of the authors have actually worked on intranets, and so the alignment of the content of the book to life in the real world is somewhat tenuous. There is virtually a total lack of case studies of organisations. The opinions of the authors are useful and sometimes challenging, but in the end the whole is not even the sum of the parts. If it set out to be a handbook for information professionals that is not the way it turned out, but as a collection of essays on intranet-related topics the book has value, despite a poor index and inadequate copy editing. I can't work out where this book went off course, as both Mary Lee and Jane Dysart are experts in intranet management, but overall I was quite disappointed.

I commented in my last column on the excellent surveys that have now been released by Jane McConnell of NetStrategyJMC (<http://netjmc.com/survey/index.html>) On a smaller scale, the intranet CMS vendor Sorce has just released a survey of around 100 UK intranets (<http://www.sorce.biz/>). Sorce is an interesting company as it specialises in intranets, and the site offers a number of good briefing papers on intranet topics. One of the topics covered in the survey is the speed at which intranets are being deployed, with typical implementation times of around three months. My personal record is five days, but that was in Kuwait and I'd rather not repeat that experience!

Over the last few months I've been working on a number of projects where the existing CMS for an intranet is now causing a lot of frustration in terms of ease of use. In all cases the CMS was installed in 2002/2003 and is now coming to the end of its sensible life. To be sure the CMS vendor is still supporting it, but over the last couple of years in particular product features have been added on without the chance to re-think the underlying CMS architecture. In all cases, the current intranet team are keen to move on but are terrified about how long it will take them to learn the new system. They have been used to two-day training courses just for content authors. The good news is that what I might call 'current generation' CMS products work in terms of 1-2 hours for basic author training, with very good in-context online help.

One of the familiar problems with intranets is that authors do the two-day in-depth training, and then don't use the system for a couple of months. The result is that they have forgotten what to do. Two lessons. If users are not going to use the CMS on a regular basis then why are they being trained? The idea that everyone in an organisation should be an intranet publisher is dead. It is not supportable. The second lesson is that not everyone wants the same level of training. A simple rich-text editor, or editing the web page itself, may be all that is needed, and this should certainly be able to be taught in an hour or so.

Finally I must draw your attention to two recent publications from the Nielsen Norman Group (<http://www.nngroup.com/>). First up there is the 2008 Intranet Design Annual (price \$198). This report reviews the designs and usability of ten intranets that were chosen from a much larger number of nominated designs. One of the winners this year is British Airways. The second publication runs to ten volumes, and provides detailed usability tests of 27 intranets. The ten reports cover:

- Understanding and Studying Users (Test Data, User Behavior, and Methodology), Address, Access, Homepage, Personalization, and Promotion
- Forms, Procedures, and Policies
- Communications (Including News and Newsletters)
- Corporate Information, Teams, Departments, and People
- Searching the Intranet and the Employee Directory
- Navigation, Layout, and Text
- Content Management and International Intranets
- Managing the Intranet and Teams
- Killer Apps (features that drive people to the intranet)

Each report costs \$158, or you can get the set for \$898. The depth of research and analysis in these reports is outstanding. My only gripe is the use of "Killer Apps" for the title of the final volume – just as bad as "Intranets for InfoPros". If you have an intranet of any reasonable size, then I would recommend buying the set. Bias note – I do present at Nielsen Norman Group events, which is why I was in Las Vegas instead of Olympia at Online Information conference time in December. Give me Olympia any time!