Intranets

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Intranets and information management strategies

At the SharePoint seminar that UKeiG ran on 15 July, I asked for a show of hands about how many of the delegates had an intranet strategy. As usual, the answer was around 20% of delegates. With any intranet, and especially those that are being built around SharePoint, it is pointless hoping that everything is going to work out just fine if you have no strategy that states what "everything" is. The problem is much larger than the lack of an intranet strategy. There is also no information management strategy. If you want just one example of how important information is to a business, consider the recent case of the Bradford and Bingley Building Society. Over the steady state years the B&B were quite happy that it took seven weeks from the end of the month to produce the management accounts. Unfortunately for the B&B in the intervening period the credit crunch took a turn for the worse, but the B&B management were flying blind in information terms. They had to go into a damage limitation role that has seriously damaged their reputation.

Over the years the *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) and *Fortune* magazine have been essential reading for me. Both give me insights into the world of business that enable me to engage with senior executives and to understand the challenges they are facing. Over the last year or so there have been a number of surveys that have indicated how difficult it is to find information inside the average enterprise (see my column in the last issue of *Elucidate*) but on their own, they do not make a case for the value of information as an asset to the enterprise. In the June 2008 issue of *Harvard Business Review* (pp.61-70) there is a paper by Gary Neilson, Karla Martin and Elizabeth Powers (all at Booz and Co.) entitled "The Secrets to Successful Strategy Execution". The core message of the paper is that there are four fundamental building blocks to ensure effective strategy execution, and the most powerful of these is effective information management.

The authors list seventeen characteristics of organisational effectiveness, and out of the top ten of these, five are specifically about improving information flows, including ensuring that information flows across organisational boundaries (just the right message for intranet managers) and field- and line-managers have the information they need to understand the bottom-line impact of their day-to-day choices. The authors also point out that only three of the characteristics relate to structure, and none ranked higher than 13th, so all those clever re-organisation plans to ensure the organisation is fit for purpose are just window-dressing, and have no impact on the chances of achieving strategic goals.

There is a challenge here for intranet managers. Over the last two years it seems to me that increasingly the intranet is becoming the gateway to a significant proportion of the information assets of an organisation. This is especially the case if portal technology is being used as an application integration platform, but enterprise search is starting to do the same thing for more conventional CMS-based intranets. As a result, the borders between an intranet and other information platforms such as document management are becoming increasingly blurred. This process is going to be accelerated by SharePoint 2007, which offers the vision of being able to manage everything in one integrated platform.

The theory may be wonderful, and the technology powerful, but the organisation is rarely in a position to decide how and when to move towards a fully-integrated information environment. The main reason for this is a lack of an information management strategy. I remain alarmed at the lack of intranet strategies. If the organisation is not going to see the need for an intranet strategy then what hope is there for an information management strategy, especially when is no one senior executive willing to be the Information Champion.

In my view getting the best out of SharePoint is going to need some serious strategic consideration. I see many organisations justifying SharePoint on the basis that it is 'free' and that out of the box a fully-formed portal will emerge. Neither is the case, as the excellent CMS Watch report on SharePoint emphasises (http://www.cmswatch.com/SharePoint/Report/). One of the current business drivers for SharePoint is to be able to develop Intranet 2.0 applications as though there are no other options, which again is not the case. The barriers to the effective use of wikis, blogs, social bookmarking and everything else 2.0 is not a technical issue so much as one of organisational culture. At a recent Melcrum conference in London on Intranets 2.0, a speaker from TNT presented a fascinating account of how open and communicative the senior executives were, an approach which many in the audience felt would be impossible to emulate in their own organisation. This again is something that needs to be integrated within an information management strategy, and not seen as a neat piece of technology that will transform the way the organisation works. Someone who really understands the issues is New Zealand consultant Michael Sampson and he writes a very good blog on the subject of how to work with people you cannot be with (http://www.michaelsampson.net/).

There is no better time than now for intranet managers to step up a gear and take responsibility for shaping an overall information management strategy for their organisation, whether by stealth or frontal attack. The HBR article, and an associated website at http://www.simulator-orgeffectiveness.com/booz provide a critically important evidence base. In the current economic slow-down, effective decision making using the best available information is going to be at the heart of sustaining business performance. The evidence from the NetJMC Global Intranet Trends survey http://netjmc.com/survey/index.html is that increasingly the intranet is the way in which business is done. I dream that one day I will read a feature in *Fortune* in which a senior executive recognises the role that corporate intranet played in the success of the business, a role that is managed and resourced within a corporate information management strategy.