

Intranets

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I have two very good books to recommend to you and then some thoughts on the way in which news content is handled on intranets.

There cannot be many intranet managers who have not benefited from the wealth of insight and encouragement that James Robertson offers through the reports and papers published by his company, and through his Column Two blog. The volume of content that he and his colleagues have created is vast (over two hundred articles on the website alone) to the extent that intranets almost need a Step Two Librarian to manage it. Now James has written what will I am sure become a benchmark book on intranet management, entitled *What every intranet team should know*.

The book has seven chapters, which cover the six phases of intranet evolution, the four roles for an intranet, how to find out what staff need, how to design the intranet, how to deliver great content, the role of the intranet team and how to plan intranet improvements. In good content management practice, James has capitalised on previously published content but in doing so has condensed the material into 100 pages of a small-format book, with a strong sense of his own personality, and without sacrificing anything in the way of clarity of writing style.

Amazingly this is only the second book on intranet management written in this century. The other was *Why Intranets Fail* by Luke Tredinnick. Many of us have been trying to get James to write a book on intranets for some time, with the expectation that when he did, the book would be something rather special. It is. James writes in the introduction "As we have learned about intranets, we have seen a number of fundamental concepts and approaches emerge that can guide intranet teams to greater success. We have captured the most important of these ideas in this book, to act as a guide for intranet teams and the organisations they serve." It is this distillation of the good practice that makes this book so valuable. Every intranet manager (and a few consultants) will benefit from this book. It is an exceptional contribution to the development of excellent intranets, and an invaluable book to give to senior managers who still, amazingly, do not understand the benefits of investing in an intranet team.

James says that he still plans to write a more comprehensive book on intranets in due course. It will be well worth waiting for. More details at <http://www.steptwo.com.au>.

Card sorting is one of the core techniques for intranet IA development but is also one that can result in some very misleading outputs unless managed with care. I have been involved in many intranet redesign projects where I am told that "We did a card-sorting exercise" as a

way of justifying an information architecture from hell. I wonder what cards were being sorted. Donna Spencer, like James Robertson, is an Australian consultant, and has written extensively on card sorting techniques to shape information architectures.

This book is structured like a card sorting project, from organising the project, defining the need, choosing the method, choosing the content, choosing the people, making the cards, managing the sort, and then finally the analysis and reporting. The writing is clear and very stylish – it's a book you almost don't want to put down until you've got to the very end and discovered how little you really knew about the conduct of card-sorting exercises.

If that was not enough to recommend it, the way that the book has been published by Lou Rosenfeld is exemplary. The design of the book is so elegant and the layout so fit for purpose that the book is a delight to read. It is an exceptional example of how a publisher and an author can work together to produce a book that makes reading a pleasure and learning a delight. Card sorting is an essential tool for intranet and web managers, and hopefully this book will mark the beginning of the end of cognitively inept architectures. Buy both books today and you could transform your intranet tomorrow. Full details are at <http://www.rosenfeldmedia.com>.

Another way that you could transform your intranet is to consider whether the balance of news to navigation on the home page is appropriate. I am tired of seeing the information architecture of an intranet home page severely compromised by the need to have the entire centre section full of news, with each item in full and accompanied by a picture.

I am all for intranets being a communication application, but there are a number of issues that I would like to explore about the way in which news should be managed. Intranets are complex business applications, linking users to a wide range of content from the navigation on the home page. There may also be Quick Links sections, a "How Do I Do This?" section and many other ways of addressing immediate actions that staff need to take on a regular basis. A great deal of navigation then has to be presented in a screen area no more than a half-page scroll. That is a substantial challenge in any case, but when perhaps 60% of the screen is taken up with news stories, then the challenge is impossible.

This is not to say that news should not be on the home page at all, but there has to be a strategy for the content in terms of the impact it has on the employees and not on the annual bonus of the Internal Communications Manager. People do not read newspapers, they scan them, looking for titles that say "Stop and read me". The same is true for news stories on intranets. There is no room for clever titles, just a title rich in information, and perhaps a one-line synopsis. The user can then read down perhaps a dozen stories and click on one that might have implications for them. I use the word "implications" with care. News is of great interest when it impacts our careers. A story on a new office opening in Singapore might offer UK employees a chance to develop their careers in the office, and the news item might be

linked to a comment on the HR site about job opportunities. News that the new CEO has just been awarded Best CEO of 2009 is unlikely to get the same level of attention.

So Rule One is that news should never compromise a user-driven information architecture. Rule Two is that 'news' needs a strategy that results in users understanding why a news story appears on the site, even if it is not of immediate interest to them personally. Rule Three is that if the story is a good one, it needs space. In my opinion trying to squeeze news into 100 words never works. Stick to a couple of headlines, and then offer a hyperlink to a fully structured news story with relevant links. Rule Four is that only on very rare occasions do intranet news stories need a graphic, and certainly never a stock shot of Paris to illustrate a news story about market growth in France. Try an A/B test with taking the pictures off and seeing if there is a substantial decrease in traffic. There won't be. There may even be an increase.

Rule Five recognises that not everyone in the company (with the exception of the Internal Communications Manager?) is at their desk each day, and that they might welcome a way to track down news that they may have missed. One intranet I know has a drop down menu that a user can put in a start and end date (such as the dates of a holiday) and see the titles of all the news stories published in that time. Archive news can be just as important as current news. However Rule Six states that archived content may benefit from a different categorization, such as Major Success Stories, or linking a set of stories together to illustrate a theme such as employee engagement.

As everyone knows, rules are there to be broken, but do take the rose-tinted glasses off for one moment, look critically at the way news is managed on your intranet, and talk to users about whether there is a better way. In my experience there usually is.