

Meeting Reports

The BT intranet story

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On a blustery afternoon at the end of September, I and a colleague attended an intranet forum, held at Imperial College, organised by the UKeiG. For those who haven't been to one of these events, I'd urge you to go, particularly if intranets form a large part of your day job (as is the case for us). They are a great place to meet other like-minded individuals who have some relationship to intranets, either as a designer, user, organiser, project manager or some other role. The healthy mix of attendees also helps to ensure the Q&A sessions cover a wide range of perspectives.

The purpose of this session was to take a whistlestop tour through BT's intranet, a tour ably led by BT's intranet manager, Mark Morrell (you can access his blog at <http://www.markmorrell.wordpress.com>). During the introduction, we learnt that the BT intranet:

- Began life in 1994, in response to 'information overload'.
- Is a single entity that can be accessed by the entire firm from the engineer in his van through to the management team.
- In the first year alone, produced benefits amounting to £305m.
- According to the Intranet Benchmarking Forum (think large corporate members with big budgets), the intranet is top amongst its peers in the areas of:
 - strategy and governance; communications and culture;
 - performance and metrics; and
 - design and usability.
- Is led by the needs of the business (and owned by the communications team) rather than the IT department.

After the introduction, it was onto the live site, the first glimpse of which was the personalised area. From here staff could access areas of the site that were relevant to them, such as key documents, team-sites and subscribed RSS feeds. While not visually stunning, it still provided a quick way of helping people quickly get to the stuff they used most often.

Next stop was the homepage. Having attended a fair few events recently that spouted the virtues of Web 2.0, I was keen to see how this could be applied in practice. On the BT site, the Web 2.0 items (blogs, wikis and podcasts) were all evident, but in a pleasantly understated way. It was interesting to see that the theme of keeping it functional seemed to permeate through the homepage with lots of useful links as opposed to filling up the page with corporate images and video clips, (which, although nice to look at, hardly help people get their job done quicker).

Much to my surprise, one of the most interesting aspects of the presentation was site governance, particularly in light of the fact they had a number of collaborative tools and an army of devolved site owners. Some of the insights included:

- Incorporating mandatory review dates for all content and a 'review it or lose it' approach to managing old content.
- Using the page templates to govern a lot of the site standards.
- Adopting differing levels of control for the 'formal' intranet pages and 'team sites'.
- External advertising (potentially a contentious issue in any organisation) was present but solely available on the online staff news pages.
- 'self-moderating' blogs and wikis – the often anticipated barrage of irrelevant and defamatory postings never materialising. Mark explained the company's pragmatic logic of 'if you can't trust your staff to be professional at work, why are you employing them in the first place?'

Having been to quite a few presentations, the 'live' tour was a nice break from the traditional pattern of several slides and a few screenshots. It was also an indication of BT site's technical capabilities that it could be accessed remotely. Mark revealed that he spent the majority of time now working from home having been freed from the constraints of the daily commute to London (there were some wistful sighs from the seasoned commuters at this point).

When quizzed on the challenges ahead, Mark mentioned that the search needed to be improved, particularly in respect of the metadata that people used. Some, but not all were diligent about adding terms. 'Folksonomies' (think user-generated taxonomy) were currently being considered. The search did however, have the advantage of interrogating the various data depositories (formal website, blogs, wikis) which produced a pretty comprehensive set of results.

Perhaps my favourite aspect of the BT intranet was the staff directory. The design was fairly uncluttered, but again, was big on functionality. As well as standard contact details, it also gave you the names of their line managers (useful for all those 'praise' emails!), names of subordinates and availability (i.e. shared calendars). Mark mentioned that in the first year of

operation they estimated the intranet had saved the company £88m. Having worked in places which didn't have this sort of directory in place, I could well believe it.

Overall, this was a very worthwhile afternoon, which did a great job of showcasing both the challenges and achievements of BT's intranet. The informal nature of the presentation ensured plenty of engagement with the attendees, who came armed with plenty of questions! A big thanks to Mark for taking the time to show us around. I certainly learnt a lot and came away with plenty of ideas for improving our own intranet.

Chris Mullan

I am currently working as the Intranet Content Co-ordinator for accountancy firm Baker Tilly. I'm also into my second year of a part-time Masters in Information Science at City University. My professional interests include maximising the usefulness of search logs for intranet content management and innovation without a budget.