

Intranets

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Any time, anywhere

Once upon a time, when the pilot shut down the engines of the aircraft, there was a short period of calm as passengers readied themselves for the torment of the baggage carousel. Now the silence is broken by the noise of mobile phones being switched on and the beeps of messages arriving. We live in a world where being away from email and text messages for even an hour means that we are concerned that decisions have been made without our invaluable input.

Over the last couple of years the mobile handset has changed beyond all recognition. The Apple iPhone and the Google Android are changing the mobile paradigm from messaging to information and application access. However possibly the most important recent development has had much less visibility and that is the purchase of Palm by Hewlett Packard (HP). HP are not interested in Palm hardware but in the WebOS operating system and a raft of 1500 patents on mobile information access that Palm have not had the resources to develop any further.

Going back to aircraft for a moment, one of the long-term outcomes of the recent air traffic disruption in Europe from the Icelandic volcano was that staff at all levels found themselves working from hotel rooms and airports, often without a laptop, as they were supposed to be on holiday. Their smartphone could act as an effective email access device, but most were marooned from their corporate intranet. So just tracking down staff telephone numbers on the corporate directory became a nightmare.

Without any doubt the mobile handset business, driven by consumer demand, is going to be a transforming influence not only on intranets but on Web sites as well. A good indication of the rate of development of mobile accessed applications is an article in the May 2010 edition of *Chemistry World*¹ in which Antony Williams, the inventor of the chemical structure database

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<http://www.rsc.org/chemistryworld/Issues/2010/May/MobileChemistryChemistryHandsFace.asp>

ChemSpider, looks at just a few of the applications which have been developed for practising chemists in industry, universities and schools.

In short, if you do not have a mobile access strategy for your intranet, then you only have a few months left to come up with one, or condemn your colleagues to being at a major competitive disadvantage. The usual response to my enquiry about why a client does not have effective mobile access to the corporate intranet is that security is an issue. When security is getting in the way of access to business-critical information then it's time to fire and hire in the IT security department. The second most common response is that providing access to all the intranet is just too much of a content-management challenge.

I would be the first to suggest that it is not necessary to provide access to all intranet content, but to focus on delivering content that is of particular value to staff who are rewarded for being out of the building and then penalised by not having access to the intranet. Indeed a good way to start is to add a new persona to your collection that summarises the key requirements of mobile staff. This is not just a senior executive issue, but ripples all the way down to young graduates to whom the mobile handset is the way they live and wish to work.

One technology issue that does need careful consideration is mobile search, though GPS information can be used very effectively to limit search queries and results to those relevant to the precise location of the user. Rarely will a project manager in Germany be interested in projects being carried out in Brunei. One of the neatest solutions I have come across to date is Isys Anywhere from Isys-Search (www.isys-search.com) but expect other search vendors to come up with similar products by the end of this year. If they do not then you may wish to consider whether you have the right search vendor.

Recent reports from Accenture, Morgan Stanley, Deloitte and the Nielsen Norman Group all point in the same direction, and the supporting evidence will be around you every time you fly, travel on Eurostar, or have a drink in a hotel bar. There is little point in investing in putting content into an intranet that at any particular moment in time perhaps 20% of your colleagues will not have access to as they are away from their desks. Don't think for one minute that people who need access will have a secure lap-top. Apple, Google and HP are betting that they will not. Are you going to bet against them?