

Intranets

Martin White, Intranet Focus Ltd (martin.white@intranetfocus.com)

The life and challenging times of an intranet manager

Which organisations need an intranet manager? What training is available? What skills should an intranet manager have?

I've just completed the typescript of *The Intranet Management Handbook*, which will be published by Facet Publishing in December. The original title was to be *The Intranet Governance Handbook*, but that proved too limiting. At 66,000 words and 16 chapters it's my longest of the seven books I have written, and seems to have taken up all my spare hours for the last eight months. In the book is a section on the skills needed to be an intranet manager, and the problems that intranet managers face in being able to convince a new employer they really do know what they are talking about. This column is an edited version of the chapter, and I apologise in advance for some slightly choppy reading for you as a result of cutting the chapter down by half.

There is now good evidence from both the Global Intranet Trends Report and from the work of the Nielsen Norman Group that ideally there should be one full time intranet manager for every 3000 users of the intranet. Most organisations would see that as an unattainable and unrealistic target at a time when they are making efforts to reduce the number of employees in an attempt to reduce costs. However these organisations not only fail to recognise the role that the intranet manager plays in ensuring that the intranet is fit for purpose, but also fail to recognise that there is a distinct role of 'intranet manager'. Indeed in many organisations the 'intranet manager' may well have additional tasks and a job title that does not reflect the work that they do in managing the intranet. <http://netjmc.com/future-intranet/intranet-manager/does-your-job-title-reflect-the-strategy-and-vision-behind-your-role>

It does not help that there is no professional organisation that represents intranet managers, there is no structured training for intranet managers that would lead to some form of certification, and there is no obvious career path for an intranet manager. If the numbers of people with intranet management roles was small this might be an acceptable

situation, but the reality is different. CILIP has a membership of around 20,000. Based on information from the e-business survey of the Office for National Statistics in 2008 (the latest figures available) there were at least 50,000 intranets in the UK. It is therefore probable that there are more intranet managers (either full time or part time) than there are “information professionals”. There is probably a similar situation in many other countries. Even in the USA there is no association for intranet professionals.

Hopefully this situation will change. Certainly the advent of many informal groups of intranet managers is helping to establish good practice, and from the meetings intranet managers are able to gain ideas that they can incorporate in their own organisations. Examples include the UKeiG Intranet Forum and those of JBoye <http://www.jboye.com/communities-of-practice/groups/uk-intranet-group/> Attending these meetings it becomes clear that intranet managers tend to find themselves in their posts almost by accident. At the time that a vacancy occurred they happened to be in a position to take on the responsibility, and now enjoy the work that the position requires. However, many are now wondering how to develop their careers. Moving to another organisation is certainly possible, but the new employer has to take on trust their skills in intranet management, and is almost certainly not going to be able to look at the intranet of their current employer to judge for themselves in the way that web managers might be assessed.

The skills of an intranet manager

Even in situations where there the intranet manager is not able to devote all their time to the intranet there will still be an intranet team, because the support and skills of the IT team are a vital element of the service being provided to the organisation. A very good and concise list of the responsibilities of an intranet team has been developed by James Robertson (“What every intranet team should know” <http://www.steptwo.com.au>):

- Managing the intranet home page
- Structuring the top levels of the site
- Promoting the use of the intranet
- Determining the overall intranet strategy
- Establishing policies and governance
- Reviewing pages published by business areas
- Supporting intranet authors and publishers
- Liaising with intranet stakeholders

- Managing key technologies, such as the CMS and search engine
- Conducting intranet improvement projects

In my view, missing from this list are

- Maintaining an awareness of good intranet practice
- Assessing usability and accessibility
- Working with those responsible for related applications
- Ensuring the intranet meets internal and external compliance requirements

These responsibilities can be very time-consuming, particularly reviewing pages published by business areas and managing the search application. In the case of the former, the review process may highlight the need for content contributor training, and in the case of search engines the time required to undertake the analysis of search logs is always under-estimated.

Moreover, these tasks are ones that have to be undertaken on a regular basis. In addition there may well be a need to specify and select new CMS and search applications, or undertake a major redesign of the intranet. Given the scale and range of these tasks, the emerging standard of one manager for every 3000 users actually seems a very conservative requirement.

A very significant development in 2010 was the establishment by Mark Morell, the Intranet Manager at British Telecom, of a LinkedIn Group on Intranet Career Path Development. This arose out of a very insightful post that Mark published on his blog <http://markmorrell.wordpress.com/2010/06/03/whats-an-intranet-managers-career-path/>.

One of the initial areas of discussion was the top three skills that an intranet manager needed to have, with Mark Morell suggesting that these were:

- Strategic – to be able to develop a strategy that aligns with the organisation's and execute it

- Communications – to be able to build relationships with people across the organisation – stakeholders, IT partners, publishers and users. That needs a great ability to talk the right language with the right people and engage them to help you implement your plan.
- Project management – A plan is no good if it isn't managed properly, so you have the right priorities, focus and timescales, and ability to change if circumstances demand it.

Writing a job description for an intranet manager

Every organisation has its own format for setting out job descriptions. The example below is from a major multinational company seeking to recruit an experienced intranet manager.

Scope

The Intranet Manager is responsible to the Intranet Strategy Board for ensuring the company's intranet meets the requirements of users for trustworthy information to support the development of the business and also their own career development. This will require building close working relationships with a wide range of stakeholders throughout the company.

The Intranet Manager will chair the Intranet Operations Group and will have budget responsibility for all aspects of intranet operations, including content publishing, information architecture, service performance (in cooperation with the corporate IT department), training and support.

The Intranet Manager will liaise closely with managers of other business applications, such as corporate website, e-learning, social media and customer relationship management, to ensure that the intranet is positioned as a complementary application.

The company is going through a period of rapid business expansion and it is essential that the Global Intranet Manager not only ensures that the intranet meets current requirements but also works proactively to develop intranet content and applications to support emerging business requirements.

Key accountabilities

- Develop an annual operational plan for the development of the intranet that is in line with the strategic and operational requirements of the business
- Identify and report on appropriate KPIs that indicate the level to which employees trust and use the information on the intranet

- Develop and implement a governance policy for the intranet
- Develop good relationships with managers of other business applications that currently or potentially complement the intranet and from these identify and achieve integrated solutions that meet business requirements
- Develop and provide training courses, training material and help desk provision for both users and content contributors to the intranet
- Identify, evaluate, justify and integrate external web-based information resources into the intranet
- Maintain excellent relationships with internal and external providers of hardware, software and other services to ensure high availability of the intranet and effective operation
- Devise and conduct periodic usability surveys
- Monitor user satisfaction and report on actions being taken to meet emerging user requirements
- Monitor developments in intranet good practice and where appropriate introduce these into the intranet
- Work closely and cooperatively with staff around the world with responsibilities for intranet content publishing and local intranet support

Key competencies

- Experience managing an intranet
- Experience in using content management and search software applications for either intranet and/or websites
- Experience in conducting user requirements and usability reviews
- Experience in project management

Key traits

- Able to achieve a consensus of views and priorities of stakeholders
- Able to build excellent relationships with employees world-wide at all management levels
- Familiarity with the technology of content management and search applications
- Effective presentation and communication skills

Although all these requirements are very sound ones perhaps the most important is missing, and that is an understanding of how the business works, which can take a considerable amount of time to discover.

Is there a role for CILIP and UKeiG?

This column is written in a personal capacity, and not as Chairman of UKeiG. I do have some thoughts on the roles that CILIP and UKeiG might play in supporting the career development of intranet managers, and over the next few months I hope I will have been able to make some progress. In the meantime I would appreciate comments from you on this article and what, if anything, you feel could be done to enhance the career opportunities for intranet managers.