Intranets

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

Reviews of new intranet publications

Martin White reports on the latest thinking on intranets from around the world, including reviews of a conference in Washington, some publications, and a new shared-content intranet website

Global Intranet Trends Report 2011

 http://www.global-intranet-trends.com

In the same way that we cannot remember how we coped without a mobile phone and Internet access, it is difficult to remember how we judged intranet development progress before Jane McConnell launched the Global Intranet Trends Report, in 2006. Intranet managers and consultants alike listened to presentations at conferences about what were then regarded as exceptional intranets, and then extrapolated the comments made to the nth degree to justify investment or a consulting contract. Just as year-on-year, intranets are becoming more mature, so this report has grown in credibility and value.

This year the number of respondents reached 440, almost double the previous year. The easy route to publishing the responses would be to keep to the same tables every year and just update them. The value of this report is that it reflects the insights of a highly experienced and analytic intranet consultant. The result is that, although many of the core tables remain the same, the survey questions probe new and important issues each year, especially in the areas of social media and governance.

There have been two major changes to the report this year. First, it sets out very clearly what intranet leaders are accomplishing, defined in terms of impact on the organisation. Some of the characteristics of these leaders are that decision making for the intranet is clearly defined; the intranet, collaboration spaces and social tools are more integrated; senior management has made the intranet part of the objectives of the management team and social media is deployed more widely internally. Second, there is an option to purchase the report together with a 60-90 minute personal briefing from Jane for £940 plus VAT. That has to be the intranet bargain of the decade. This package repositions the report as a business-critical

briefing for senior management which also provides valuable information for corporate intranet managers. Each year the quality of the presentation of the report and the clarity of the writing continue to improve, essential if you are going to ensure that a copy of the report appears on the desktops of several senior managers helpfully annotated with an evaluation of how close (or how far away) the organisation's intranet is from leadership position.

I don't want to create the impression that this report is only for large global organisations. Intranet managers in smaller organisations, often working on the intranet part-time, will find much to encourage and inspire them in this report. As the StepTwo Intranet Innovation Awards http://www.steptwo.com.au/products/iia2010 illustrate, intranet excellence is about vision, user-focus and execution, and not necessarily about technology and the number of pages on the site.

I honestly don't think it is possible to write a 2011/2012 intranet strategy without using this report as a baseline. Of course there will be a requirement to undertake user research, but even then this report will help you decide where this research needs to be carried out. If your organisation feels unable to invest £470 in the report (the base price) then by definition the organisation fails to see the value of the intranet, and also fails to regard information as a corporate asset.

KMWorld 2010

Washington DC 15-18 November 2010

After a number of years in the San Francisco area, the KMWorld conference moved to Washington DC this year, and doubled the attendance over 2009. As well as KMWorld there were parallel Enterprise Search Summit, SharePoint Symposium and Taxonomy Bootcamp events. Since KMWorld had three tracks of its own, the first challenge was to work out where you wanted to be, knowing that almost certainly you wanted to be in three other places at the same time. Presentations on intranets were sprinkled on to all four events. There was a buzz about the event that has been lacking in San Jose over the last few years, and the exhibition area was quite full. The Renaissance Hotel, on 9th St, Washington DC, was a disaster as regards wifi access, whether it be in the guest rooms or in the conference area. If you are planning to stay there take semaphore flags!

Fortunately the quality of the papers made up for the terrible wifi. The opening keynote was Thomas Stewart, who ran over time, spoke through his hands, and had possibly the most boring set of slides I have ever seen. Since he is the Chief Marketing and Knowledge Officer of Booz & Company I expected more. The opening of his presentation was passable, but then it degenerated into something quite unintelligible. On the second day Peter Morville talked about search patterns (http://searchpatterns.org/) and even though I've heard him speak on

this subject twice before I was still fascinated by his analysis. He was followed by Major Sanchez from the US Air force who gave one of the best papers on KM I have heard for a long time. The lack of a hairdryer cost the US Air force $1.2B. (http://bit.ly/hql1G1) The keynote on the final day was David Snowden http://www.cognitive-edge.com/blogs/dave/ who continues to entertain and educate in equal proportion. Unfortunately he too ran over time and his presentation, which contained some really interesting material, had to be rushed at the end.

(Listen to it at http://www.cognitive-edge.com/presentationdetails.php?presentationid=72. You'll enjoy it!)

Many individual papers were quite superb, and a few were a disaster. One speaker talked about mobile access to information for 40 minutes with no reference to the location-specific benefits of the technology. There were some good intranet papers because the StepTwo Designs Intranet Innovation Awards were presented by James Robertson, with some minimal help from myself. The Enterprise Search track suffered from too many vendor presentations, a result of the fact that they all wanted to be sponsors and so had a speaking slot. Some of the best papers were in the SharePoint Symposium, and I learned much, as well as being reassured that my views on SharePoint were in line with the consensus.

There was quite a bit of twittering on #kmw10 if you want to have a look. Overall, it was an excellent conference, and I made many new friends. I ran workshops on search benchmarking and on user requirements for intranets, and as always, I seem to learn more from these workshops than I give. The conference will be in Washington DC next year, though at a different and as yet undisclosed hotel. Well worth adding it to your diary and budget, even if you are based outside the USA.

Designing Intranets

www.steptwo.com.au

Anyone who has met James Robertson will have been struck by his passion for user-centric design. This passion comes across very clearly in his latest book on intranet design. website designers have no idea how fortunate they are. They have millions of websites to comb through looking for neat design tricks, and in general websites have a focus that is just not possible or appropriate for even a small enterprise intranet. However, intranet managers have no excuse for not meeting the requirements of their users because, in theory, they could talk to every single one of them. This is clearly not practical, and the core of this book is about the use of low-cost and very practical approaches to defining user requirements, and translating these into highly usable intranet designs.

The author starts out by identifying the value of good intranet design, and comments on eight common intranet design mistakes. Then the importance of understanding user requirements and the creation of an intranet brand are highlighted, followed by the chapters that describe a range of techniques, such as the Microsoft Product Reaction cards, card sorting, tree testing and usability testing, that require the involvement of only a small number of participants and can generate excellent intranet designs in a relatively short period of time. Over 30 pages are devoted to the design of the home page. The book concludes with advice on how to launch a new design, and how to design intranet applications.

The A5-sized book is just 230 pages long, but every word is chosen with care. The production values of the book are very high indeed, which makes it such a pleasure to read and then use, with a number of case studies to illustrate the benefits of a structured approach to intranet design. James has been running workshops on intranet design for many years, and throughout the book the wisdom gained through not only teaching but listening to the problems faced by intranet managers comes shining through.

I cannot recommend this book too highly, and it should be bought by every intranet manager. Even if you are not currently contemplating a re-design I suspect you probably will after reading the book. It costs $60 plus post and packing.

Intranet Lounge

http://intranetlounge.com

The number of blogs and tweets on intranet topics has grown substantially over the last few years. James Robertson performed a valuable service for the intranet community in monitoring a wide range of blogs and integrating the best of the contributions into his own blog. Recently he decided that he could not cope with the avalanche of new postings, but now Bas Zurburg has stepped in to the breach with Intranet Lounge - an integration service with a difference. It relies on members (membership is free) to submit links to content, and members can then rate the items for value. The site is divided into four categories: management, social and E2.0, Content and Technology. Atom and RSS feeds can be set up. Some of the content is being posted by Zurburg or an associate.

Zurburg has been working in the IT business since 1991, and in Web development since 2004. This background in Web development shows in the elegance of the site, in which the display of each content item could hardly be improved. At the right hand site of each item is a thumbnail of the Web page itself, which is a very elegant way of providing a hyperlink click-through. However I am less enthusiastic about the way in which the subject tags are presented in the right-hand navigation. The subject tags are light grey on a black background,

turning to a dark red on mouse-over. This is a long way from the WAI guidelines, and comes across as a triumph of design over usability.

Already the range of content is very wide indeed, given that the site was only launched in June 2010. At present it looks as though around one hundred items have been added in the last month, but I am certain that this will increase steadily as the value of this innovative approach to content integration becomes more widely known. Zurburg deserves a round of applause from the global intranet community for the work he has put in to this highly innovative site.