Intranets

Dion Lindsay (dion@dionlindsayconsulting.com)

Remote access to intranets; social media on the intranet

Over the long summer break two issues have kept raising their heads about intranets, above the ever present concern about how to keep developing your intranet while resources are short and strategic priorities may be elsewhere. These two big issues have been accessing intranets away from the office and using social media on work intranets

Access away from the office

The growing importance of mobile technology generally is hardly in doubt: but here are some measures, extracted from Mashable.com's summary in March 2011 http://mashable.com/2011/03/23/mobile-by-the-numbers-infogrpahic/ :

- Of the four billion mobile phones worldwide, 1.08 billion are smart phones

- By 2014, access to the Internet through mobile devices will overtake access from the desktop

- 50% of all searches are performed on mobile devices.

So in that context, both the anticipation by employees that they can use the work intranet from a mobile phone, and the demand from managers that the intranet be made available on mobile devices will be growing quickly.

How much will this affect intranet managers, and to what extent is it "just" a technology problem? Well, there seem to be three main options for delivering intranet on mobile phones, and all three will involve cooperation between technical managers, content managers and contributors:

- Simplifying the layout of the existing intranet to make it easier to display on a mobile connection

- Designing a separate mobile site, or

- Creating mobile applications to deliver aspects of your intranet to your mobile employees.

Writing for the Web is recognised as a different skill to writing for print publication. And designing text for access on smart phones will have separate challenges in terms of selection of topics (the more you make available, the harder it will be for users to find, and the more impatient they will become), brevity (what are the absolutely must-have facts and data), and projected use ("ok – we have the data, what can I do with it from my mobile?").

Plenty there for the diversity of intranet managers to be involved in, and to lead on. Given how decentralised the management and maintenance of intranets tend to be, it will be interesting to see how effectively those involved can rise to the challenge!

Social media and the intranet

It would not be true to say that the internal use of social media has been holding the coat tails of their external communication functions – wikis for example have had an effective role in organisations for a long time.

Nevertheless, the current lively interest in social media allied to intranets and collaborative tools has been informed by the experience corporations have had with Twitter and Face-book, and as SharePoint 2007 and SP2010 arrived with promises of social media and collaborative tools, internal communications managers have paid serious attention to social media in the workplace. And the natural rallying point for such tools and applications has been the home page of the intranet.

I have spent the summer attending and running courses on social and collaborative intranets, and the most remarkable example I've come across of intranet home page as access point to social media is that of the Open University. Three column layouts are considered by some to be a little inflexible for modern content requirements, but within such a layout the Open University manages to include all the following while retaining, in my opinion, one of the clearest and most useful home pages in the business:

- Blogs and wikis
- Yellow pages
- Meeting organiser
- Survey
- Noticeboard
- RSS feeds
- Community of interest

I have no link to the OU intranet site nor permission to publish screenshots of it, but I will try to get someone to present its intranet to an Autumn meeting of our Intranets Forum!

Intranet news and notes

In recognition that managing intranets is as much about practice as it is about theory, I start this new sub-section with a couple of items which I've come across recently, and though they are too small to write up as articles, they are best not missed out. In the same spirit, I hope readers will send me some contributions for future issues – pithy and relevant to whatever is tweaking the minds, pens and tongues of intranet managers! Contributions to dion@dionlindsayconsulting.com.

Swings and roundabouts on employee engagement

From Civil Service Statistics 31 March 2010. (Office for National Statistics Statistical Bulletin, 19 November 2010 http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/search/index.html?new query=intranet (italics are mine):

> The main reason for under-coverage and non-response is that it can take time for HR systems to "catch-up" when a new employee joins their department. *Departments are also moving to self-service systems which require individuals to maintain their personal information via an intranet service.* While it is the responsibility of departments to review the quality of information and encourage regular updates, an element of non-response is expected.

Watch out for the 2011 Intranet Innovation Awards

In October or November this year I expect the announcement of the winners of Step Two Designs' awards for individual intranet improvements. I'll tweet as soon as I get wind of a date for the announcement. For a sense of the kinds of things to expect, or to consider entering for the 2012 awards, see http://www.steptwo.com.au/products/iia2010. Two things to notice along the way: these prestigious awards are for examples of innovation *in* intranets – you don't need to have designed a whole new intranet to enter! And the list of supporters cited at http://www.steptwo.com.au/columntwo/2011-intranet-innovation-awards-are-now-open-for-entries/ is a very good starter list if you want to follow intranet blogs: it includes Intranet Focus, J Boye and Prescient Digital Media.