Intranets

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Opportunities in the Electronic Workplace

The current trend

As I speculated in passing in my column this time last year, the significant talk in knowledge management circles has been moving from the intranet towards the 'electronic workplace'. This electronic workplace is a place where distinctions between intranets, collaboration and communication applications and electronic ways of working become porous. I now wonder whether it will be long before the name "intranet" becomes more a part of transitional vocabulary, or a part of technical vocabulary rather than one much saluted by the non IT staff.

As evidence for this further speculation, I remember a large meeting six months ago in which employees from the same organisation disagreed with each other on whether they had an intranet. They did, and those who had said no had been using it, but had not been aware that behind the internal brand name was the reality of an intranet. In the same way, I have known an organisation become tied up in discussions about whether what they wanted was an intranet or a portal – a distinction which can be a useful one to make at a certain point in design, but not one that should be delaying the development of the pre-design needs analysis!

Intranets, clearly, are computer networks which use internet protocol technology within an organisation, and may consist solely of the organisation's internal website, though more often now they contain team websites and one or more portals giving access to the enterprise's electronic file system, etc. Equally clearly, the electronic workplace already exists: from the user's experience it consists of at least some of the following elements:

- Intranets – news, corporate information, news, internal directories
- Portals – links to business processes, HR systems, internal and external social networks, external databases
- Electronic workplace – all the above + emails, twitter feeds, instant message MS Office suite, mobile technologies, accounting systems, time logging systems…

Positioning the information professional

The consequences for readers of *eLucidate* need urgent attention.

No sacred cows

As ruthless attention to return on investment for every resource is applied in the public and the commercial domains, and in those many knowledge based workplaces in between, there are precious few sacred cows left. Processes that no longer answer the call for efficiency or competitive advantage are being removed with almost unprecedented haste. Knowledge Management functions are being dissolved or diluted across the workplace, and even those professionals who have operated effectively behind real or conceptual walls are finding their functions and value examined with a clarity that was perhaps missing in the 1990s and the first six years of the new century.

There are signs of future opportunities for those professionals prepared to move beyond their current job titles. Directorates in finance and human resources are faced with the costs of redundancies as posts "not needed on voyage" are offered up for longer-term savings. Many of them would rather move staff with specialist skills into functions where a modest return can be expected than to find this year's budgets depleted with expensive severance packages.

As we have observed in the Intranets Forum, and among participants in UKeiG's workshops, many intranet managers have other responsibilities in their over-crowded jobs. Up to now this has meant that intranet managing has been a Cinderella profession, and those internal communication experts with intranets on their portfolios have experienced the twin pressures of increased expectation and closer examination of relevance. But now it may be easier for those in the multi-focus jobs to move into the broader perspective of the electronic workplace.

Tactics

Opposition to this extended view of the working environment ought to be more welcomed than feared. The airing of polarised views is much less of a threat than the benevolent neglect that is more common in less anxious times.

But beware: indecision is among the keenest dangers to good governance in all organisations, and the lack of a clear view of the alternatives

- the fire-fighting and the piecemeal reaction to the opportunities of electronic development, versus
- the principled development of strategies in the context of the new realities of the marketplace.

and the visible proof that is likely to result in the deterioration of employee commitment and organisational performance.

In this environment, there is surely a strong role for intranet managers to play in leading the movement towards this more holistic view of the electronic environment.

Intranet news and notes

Three newsworthy items about intranets this time:

1. The UK did well again in the prestigious Step Two Designs' 2011 Intranets Innovation Awards, which were announced last October. The full list of awards winners is published at http://www.steptwo.com.au/iia.

In particular:

- The UK Parliament won a gold award 'for cleverly mobilising its intranet in a way perfectly suited to the working styles of the members of Parliament who are often on the go', and

- Arup won a gold award for its Amazing Race microsite on its intranet, which 'records the progress of teams in an internal charity and fitness event called the Amazing Race, which benefits the firm's chosen charity SportsAid'.

- Framestore won for a visual effects programme management tool.

2. Watch the UkeiG website for upcoming Intranets Forum meetings:

- At TUC's Congress House on 21 March
- At BDO's central London offices on 17 July

3. Prescient Digital Media organise some very good free webinars on intranets and social media subjects, usually on the first Wednesday or Thursday of each month. They last an hour, and start at 5pm UK time. More details to be found at http://www.prescientdigital.com/events.