

Planning an Intranet Strategy

An intranet by definition is a corporate communications and collaboration platform that connects all the employees of an organization into a networked system and enables quick access to information of processes, people and products of the enterprise. In a more practical sense, it means many things to many people. To some companies it is an important email communication system that lets the employees communicate with each other within an organization and share mails and documents.

To each of these forms of an Intranet, the world has attached different names - **Corporate Portal, Enterprise Information Portal, Knowledge Management**; however the essential goal or objective remains the same at the heart of any of these forms - to increase productivity and reduce costs!

Planning your Intranet - What are you looking for in an Intranet?

The scope of an Intranet for any organization should be based on the size of the enterprise (in terms of employees) and the intended objectives. The objectives or goals of an Intranet are derived by scrupulously observing the needs of the employees and carefully noting places of improvement in productivity by cutting down on unnecessary time and saving on costs. The objectives and goals so arrived are translated into the different applications that are built into the intranet - intranet email, document management systems etc.

However the scope has to be need-based to avoid spending valuable resources on applications that no one uses. Moreover like any critical business decision the need and scope of having an Intranet should be backed by a clear vision and foresight. This helps in building an Intranet that's not only useful but also scalable in a long run - it could be

supporting an increase in the number of employees working with the organization or a geographical shift/ expansion in operations of the company.

So for a small company having offices centrally located, the Intranet can comprise of document management systems that help employees to access documents created by others quickly without wasting time in their decision making and communication applications like chat modules that help them communicate not only internally but also externally with their customers/ partners. At the same time, for a big size company that's multi located, it may need to incorporate collaborative features in its Intranet where employees from different locations can work on a single document at the same time

Selling to the management

At these initial stages, a more uphill task of selling the Intranet concept to the management and various departments (for e.g. internal IS) takes up a lot of time. While a corporate website is almost always seen as a necessity and an asset as it is visible to the customers and the outside world, an Intranet that is essentially seen by employees often receives a cold shoulder or a step-motherly treatment. For this a proper business plan outlining the goals, investments and benefits in clear quantifiable terms is needed to convince everyone of the necessity of such an exercise. It is important that the Intranet is looked upon more as an investment in improving productivity and not merely an obligatory capital expense.

And this support and cooperation has to be sought throughout the duration of the Intranet development and not just while funding it. For the very same reason, it is always advisable to chalk out plans that shall be executed and deployed in a period of 3-4 months. This is because the people on the non technical and business side often get vary of waiting for the product to roll out resulting in lack of active support but cooperate better when the results start to show in a relatively lesser amount of time.

Defining Teams

Once the management approval is obtained the next important task is to form (small) teams define tasks for each team and team member. Here a typical hierarchy could be where there are 3 (small) teams who individually take up:

- ▲ Deciding and managing the top-level architecture

- ▲ Content development

- ▲ Design and development (web design as well as programming different modules)

A project manager who interacts and works closely with the respective heads of different teams monitors the overall Intranet activity and liaisons between the Intranet development group and the management. It is also the time to do a 'make or buy' decision for the different parts and modules of the Intranet. Usually an organization finds that its internal IS department is not equipped to handle certain activities (say database management programming for example) in which case the group may decide to go in for licensing third party systems to integrate in their Intranet. In fact organizations also outsource parts of their Intranet to different vendors and consolidate them in house (or even ask a vendor to do it). It is a matter of separate discussion whether or not to outsource to different vendors or maintain a single vendor to do all the modules, but it usually depends on the size and scope of these individual modules in the Intranet and the relevant experience of these different vendors in those fields.

Another important aspect that companies miss out occasionally is to hire professional content writers to compile pages of the Intranet. It's not enough to have technical strong Intranets and put up mere corporate policies and brochures that one finds in the company's reception desk. This information stored on the Intranet has to be used by employees to make day-to-day decisions so it has to be presented in a very apt fashion and written in a clear concise manner. And this is well done by professional content writers.

Cost estimation

Intranets should be looked upon as necessary investments and not an obligatory expense. This being so, it is highly important to measure the startup and ongoing costs that are incurred while development of an Intranet and for managing it. It is seen that after an Intranet is setup and running 80% of the budgeted costs annually go towards the maintenance of the Intranet than in building new features and facilities. While this remains more a concern of the Intranet development and maintenance group to manage the Intranet well and train the employees effectively, it should be noted that maintenance takes up as much as if not less costs as compared to its development.

Actual development

Depending on the 'make or buy' decision of an organization, the Intranet development group faces tasks from actual development to monitoring and coordinating with vendors. Whatever the tasks faced by the team there are a couple of principles that should not be ignored in the development of the Intranet.

Phase wise development

Generally if an Intranet system is planned to cover lot of areas and modules, it is advisable to perform phase wise development of the work. This makes sure that the teams get to work together on smaller tasks one by one than working on one huge project, complications are reduced to one particular module that is being developed, mistakes or errors faced initially are helpful in developing later modules and lastly because the organization gets to see something tangible in a shorter span of time, the motivation and encouragement levels increase boosting the Intranet development activity and giving it a unified welcome throughout the organization.

Pay attention to design & usability standards

While having a scalable and strong database design and good programming principles will help in quick retrieval of desired information over the Intranet, having a good thought-over design is of prime importance for the success of an Intranet. Employees should be able to find the relevant information quickly and properly. While normal usual design principles help in making a design look aesthetically pleasant, the design also should be created keeping in mind the usability factors. One of the easiest ways of finding

whether an Intranet is successful or not is by seeing how much time employees spend on it. However the time spent better not be only in unsuccessfully finding some piece of vital information or the popularity of the Intranet wont last for long.

Who's going to use it?

The design and programming should also consider the users of the system. For example Intranets that are run within a specific premises can afford to run heavy applications on their servers but these days Intranets are also increasingly used by the field staff using their mobile devices towards which such Intranets may not be 'compatible' -worse a badly designed Intranet would be very displeasingly used by the sales staff if they have to type away for eternity to get some product information or download a new price list.

Have Content development system at hand

Often it is useful to have a good content development system incorporated in the Intranet as it enables quickly adding information pages by people who are not well versed with technical aspects and lets them concentrate only on getting the message across and not worrying whether it will work on different browsers or things like that.

Deployment

You have done all the hard work! You set up different teams, you got approval from your bosses and approved the budget too. The development of the Intranet was completed and everything is now in place and the exercise finishes. Far from truth! The real test begins when the organization starts using the Intranet for its day-to-day activities. For the transition to go smooth, proper training has to be given throughout the company to different levels of users and their feedback had. As much as proper designing and programming is essential to get the Intranet running well, prompt support systems and communication mechanisms for users to communicate problems, errors is essential for it to survive.

Basically the 'marketing' of the Intranet in the organization starts well before its implementation and deployment. The different levels of users have different levels of involvement and interest that has to be kept alive with proper communication about the

Intranet and its features, benefits, requesting suggestions - and responding to them promptly. The Intranet is meant to grow as it is used by employees to share and create knowledge within themselves in the organization. For this they have to be a part of the deployment process more than anything else.

Epilogue

An intranet project never ends - it should never end as a matter of fact. An evolving and constantly growing Intranet signifies the addition in the knowledge base and value that its employees derive from the organization, from each other and which they pass on to customers, partners, and vendors.

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