

The Social Intranet: Where Work Gets Done

Introduction

Like the ugly duckling of fairy tale fame, once-awkward corporate intranets are now the most beautiful app on the server farm. Social intranets are the workspace in which knowledge workers live – a portal to the tools, content, and applications needed to perform their daily responsibilities. Once huge document graveyards for static corporate content, traditional intranets have been transformed using Web 2.0 social technologies into collaboration platforms that foster innovation and empower workers to extract, create, share, publish, and update information in real-time.

The new intranets empower users while reducing IT costs. Technical staff can focus on integrating, customizing, and extending the intranet, rather than on managing its static content. Emerging Web 2.0 standards and open architectures let IT quickly integrate valuable systems of record (CRM, ERP, DMS) with secure, easy-to-use social applications that mirror the web experience employees enjoy in their personal lives. As the preferred communication channel in users' daily workflows, social intranets are the central nervous system.

From Static to Social: The Evolution of the Corporate Intranet

The concept of an intranet and its role in the organization has changed substantially as the Internet has evolved. The earliest intranets were merely static data archives of employee-centric information, such as personnel directories. Today, social intranets are the primary interface corporate knowledge workers use in their daily activities.

The role of IT in building and supporting the corporate intranet has also evolved. Initially, intranets were just pages on the corporate website accessible to anyone clicking a hidden link. Security was non-existent, and the content was static, just standard corporate messaging. Over time, the volume of information posted on the intranet grew, and the responsibility to publish and update that information became a ball-and-chain to fast-paced IT departments. Today, social intranets allow IT to manage a stable application, while users themselves create, publish, and update content.

Gen 1 – Static and Lonely

First generation intranets essentially centralized the administration and dissemination of corporate information. There were measurable benefits; however, building and maintaining the website could be expensive. Most of the first intranets were handmade. Employees provided content, and IT staff hardcoded HTML pages. Its ongoing support was an unwanted distraction for IT departments already trying to do more with less. Updates were infrequent and content became stale and outdated quickly. As a consequence, employees soon lost confidence in its use.

Gen 2 – Self-Service Intranets

In the late 1990s, Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software providers re-invented the intranet when they added web-based employee self-service HR applications to their solution suites. Users flocked to the sites to manage their benefits, insurance, tax reporting, and more. Other self-service applications followed, and organizations achieved significant ROI as Help Desk call volumes plummeted.

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Others saw the opportunity to offload user support to the intranet and uploaded file cabinets of information. Users were told to help themselves to every policy, procedure, org chart, marketing collateral, or other document that ever existed. The intranet became an “information repository” that required even more IT resources to manage, with the same static content that people didn’t trust.

While people were better able to find documents through new search functionality and web-based document management solutions, documents were not better able to “find people.” Collaboration was forced, and limited to invitees. There was no reason to talk to co-workers, so people quit talking. And soon, no one even knew who to talk to.

Gen 3 – People Find a Way

Then, people spoke. First by email and chat rooms, and then Web 2.0 was born. Social technologies transformed how we communicate by changing what we can communicate and when. Web 2.0 technologies took advantage of mobile technology that let us communicate from anywhere. Users got it, and the popularity of social networking sites exploded – even in the workplace.

Innovative companies didn’t crack down on employee access to Facebook and other sites, despite privacy and security issues, because they wanted their people to talk. Instead, they recognized the value social networking could bring to the company and adapted it, with the proper security, for their own use. The result is the third generation intranet – a social intranet.

The New Social Intranet

Web 2.0 builds online communities around common interests, and the workplace was quickly recognized as an obvious opportunity to leverage its benefits. Early attempts to socialize the office did attract users, who did socialize, but not so much about company issues. Merely adding Facebook-like functionality across the enterprise didn’t magically make the company more innovative.

To enable innovation and add measureable value to the organization, the social intranet has to focus its community on business issues. The social intranet must be part of people’s daily work flow and connect them to the relevant colleagues, information, and systems of record that drive the business. By initiating business conversations, social intranets enable innovation.

To focus users on business issues, Socialtext and other third gen intranet solution providers add a “social layer” to the enterprise – a stable communications platform connecting all enterprise data with functionality that enables the stakeholder community to easily find, retrieve, create, publish, collaborate, revise, and manage business information in real time, from any browser-enabled device. This social intranet is the gateway through which all stakeholders access company content, services, applications, and tools. It is the medium through which information is shared between people in the form of microblogging, social networking profiles, wikis, spreadsheets, blogs, and other formats.

A critical factor in the success of a social intranet – user adoption – can be encouraged by integrating the social intranet into crucial business activities, bringing them into the flow of work. Integrating with existing systems and applications that employees rely on to execute key business processes provides even deeper conversations and adoption. For example, the Sales team can integrate a CRM system, such as Salesforce.com, to update opportunities and share revenue forecasts with senior executives and implementation managers. Marketing staff might extract and share the upcoming trade show schedule from that CRM application, or it could integrate a customer survey tool. And more.

Organizations use social intranets to enable dispersed teams to work closely. User profiles make finding an expert within the community fast and easy. New ideas benefit from the community’s collective wisdom – and its scrutiny. Onboarding happens faster and is more effective as the community assists and nurtures new employees. Senior executives can broadcast matters of importance instantly and have constant visibility into the organization’s productivity and morale. Institution knowledge need not be lost when a long-time employee retires. Because users are already familiar with social networks in their personal lives, little training is required, adoption rates are high, and workers are quickly productive.

Social software enables dynamic information exchanges. Users can seek discussion by floating ideas, including data surfaced from enterprise applications, into the activity stream. Or, they enable conversations by informing others of events or activity via automated activity streams, group communication channels, and subscribed notification mechanisms. Teams stay synchronized so sales presentations are effective, marketing is on point, customer responses are timely, and services are delivered as expected. The intranet becomes the go-to place for getting work done.

Most importantly, people talk again, and they talk openly. Social intranets improve bi-directional information flows by overcoming communication barriers – such as a lost email address – and by opening access to information silos and business applications. By talking openly, those silos are eliminated. When the entire community talks openly, critical issues and innovative ideas rise to the surface.

How to Build the Modern Intranet: Start with the Social Layer

Obviously, many of the benefits promised by social intranets are not new. Companies have provided web-based collaboration and document management solutions for years. Today, many of those vendors have attempted to integrate social functionality into their products; however, a true social intranet is not document-centric, and it extends beyond collaboration.

Organizations looking to gain the benefits of a modern intranet should first implement the infrastructure and functionality to attract and build a community – the architecture and tools that comprise the “social layer.” Why? Because the value proposition of social intranets is meaningless without participation by the stakeholder community. As the community grows larger, the company’s return on investment multiplies. Lackluster user adoption rates are commonly cited as the primary cause of failed social intranet projects. To reap the potential benefits of a social intranet, keep the members’ user experience in mind as you take the following steps.

Choose a Platform

It would be hard to justify building a social intranet from scratch. There are a number of reliable social intranet platforms on the market that offer a wide range of features and functionality, including software-as-a-service (SaaS) solutions that require minimal capital investment. By exercising reasonable due diligence, an organization will recognize the value of a social platform versus the costs to cobble together disparate social applications.

In fact, most organizations can cost justify a social intranet platform from the first month – since it enables community members to create, publish, and update content. IT no longer incurs those support costs. To reduce risks, a company can initially subscribe to a SaaS intranet solution, and then migrate to an in-house implementation as membership and usage grows. A robust social intranet can be implemented in just a few days. Socialtext and other vendors offer both hosted and on-premise solutions so that transition can be seamless.

In general, potential solutions/vendors should be compared in three areas:

Security

The alternatives are clear: depending on the organization’s operational and security requirements, it can choose to host the social intranet behind its firewall, license the software for hosting at a data center of its choice, or subscribe to a SaaS solution that is hosted and secured by the vendor. The applications should support current security best practices either way. From the members’ perspective, wherever the intranet is hosted, it should be accessible at all times, from any browser-based device, including mobile.

Functionality

The best intranet solutions offer a number of familiar web tools with which users create and share information. The company should understand whether users will want to use microblogging, wikis, blogs, or other data formats, and then select a solution that provides the required capabilities. Preview the solution to assess whether users will have a unified, consistent design and interaction experience. The user interface should enable stakeholders to easily join the community, contribute to groups and discussions, and create and share content.

Enterprise Integration

A critical differentiator between intranet solutions is the level of support provided for integration with enterprise applications. For organizations that have available in-house resources, an open API into the social software may be sufficient. Other customers will require more assistance; for example, Socialtext provides pre-built connectors for popular enterprise applications, including Salesforce and Sharepoint, through which stakeholders can extract critical information, events, and processes that had previously been accessible only to users of those applications. Determine from which applications users will want to pull data, and then ensure the intranet solution selected provides the support your IT staff requires.

Adoption is Critical

More than anything else, the value proposition of social intranets requires people. Companies should execute multiple strategies for attracting and engaging users. Ideally, the intranet will exist in and contribute to the employee's daily work flow. When launching the social intranet, consider how and why a user would use the site.

Make It Easy – sure, users are familiar with social software functionality, but how could you be inadvertently making it hard for users to adopt the intranet?

- Lack of executive support ...if senior management doesn't care, no one will
- Announce as a temporary or pilot program and no one will waste the time
- Separate logins are a needless irritation that drives users away

Make it the Place Where Works Get Done – the intranet should serve as the primary gateway into enterprise applications and content, including:

- Standard intranet-based data (personnel directories, HR forms, etc.)
- Integrated enterprise search
- ERP, CRM, DMS et al

Lead the Way – use aggressive marketing to build excitement for the intranet launch and then demonstrate to users how it can add value:

- Invite users to create a member profile
- Post corporate wikis, executive blogs, and microblogs
- Invite comments and feedback from the community

Momentum and activity will build, and content and collaboration will deepen, as members become familiar with the website and with each other.

Add Information Sources

People are starting to talk, microblogs messages are posting, and wikis are growing, across department boundaries and around the company. Now, increase the value of the social intranet by integrating critical information sources, including strategic enterprise applications. Key business metrics and processes can be extracted from business applications – automatically or by users – and injected into the social intranet to inspire or support discussion, collaboration, and actions that drive your business.

Every leading social software solution supports application integration at the API level. While web standards have emerged for sharing enterprise data with social networks, including Twitter Annotations, Google OpenSocial, and REST APIs, organizations should choose a solution that supports more than one standard to provide future flexibility.

A few intranet solutions include out-of-box integration with popular CRM, ERP, and document management solutions that deliver unquestioned value for users of those applications. On the other hand, user communities surrounding open source intranet solutions have also been quick to develop new APIs.

Note that some intranet vendors have chosen to co-exist and enhance third-party document management and collaboration solutions, while others have incorporated features from those applications in their software. If an organization is satisfied with its current document management and collaboration solutions, a “bolt-on” social solution that supports integration with all other applications could be the most cost effective and functional solution.

Conclusion

Initially no more than a virtual bulletin board on which HR and Legal post corporate announcements, social intranets have evolved into the employees’ go-to place for getting work done. Social intranets connect people to the colleagues, systems, and information needed to perform their jobs and serve customers more efficiently. Social intranets enable innovation as the community bring more ideas to the table faster, identify and elevate the best ideas sooner, and reveal bad ideas in time.

Social intranet solution providers offer corporate clients a wide selection of features, hosting options, integration tools, and pricing plans. Companies should carefully consider current and future needs when evaluating intranet platforms for functionality and enterprise integration requirements. When implementing a social intranet, user adoption is critical to attaining predicted ROI so companies should plan to attract and engage users across the enterprise. Invite everyone, show them how easy and useful the intranet can be, and then wait for innovation to emerge.



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