

## **Intranet Strategies**

### **Introduction**

The role of Intranets in knowledge management cannot be underestimated. As with all tools described here, they need to be applied carefully and in response to clearly specified needs. In the development and humanitarian world, what is clearly evident is the highly disproportionate level of resources available to invest in such tools. But whether the organisation is a globe-spanning donor with its own dedicated satellite space, or a local NGO whose field staff have to use internet cafes to go online, there are some core principles and processes. And if these are followed, they substantially increase the likelihood of an effective, useful system.

To begin with, there need to be clear-cut reasons and a supporting strategy for an intranet deployed in an organisation. The all-too frequent 'me too!' approach has resulted in many so-called information graveyards which are seldom updated or accessed. At the other end of the spectrum, some intranets can be elevated to the position of a 'magic bullet' that will put paid to all possible organisational ailments. Both approaches are understandable, but flawed.

At the outset, it is worth establishing exactly how an intranet might benefit your organisation. Three of the most frequent applications (Lash, 2003) are:

- Information collection
- Collaboration and communication
- Task completion

While it is clear that no intranet will focus on only one of these applications, most successful intranets have a primary focus on one approach, with others playing a supporting role. This needs to be determined by the overall organisational strategy for knowledge and learning, and each has different resource implications, as we shall see later.

### **Detailed description of the process**

Information collection intranets are used to find and organise all of the information that resides within an organisation, essentially acting as a front-end to a large repository of knowledge. There could be document libraries, individuals' computer files, financial and statistical data, supplier information, databases, and other information that was previously only available to selected people or groups within an organisation. Access to this information reduces confusion and duplication, increases productivity, and improves decision making. In a system wholly geared towards information collection, individuals contribute and have access to a wealth of information, but do not use the system to interact with other contributors.

Collaboration and communication intranets enable organisational units and staff members to connect with others within the company, and to initiate or participate in essential information flows. In contrast with the information collection intranet, collaboration and

communication intranet promotes dialogue, debate, learning, and helps to facilitate face-to-face communications. Such an approach may be useful in decentralised organisations or groups, and when geographic locations can stand in the way of face-to-face communication. Typical features might include: discussion forums, internal bulletins, surveys, corporate calendars, team workspaces, and employee and project team pages.

Activity-based intranets facilitate the completion of tasks and actions. For example, the intranet may be used to reserve rooms, raise purchases, change human resources information, fill out and submit timesheets, purchase supplies, take online classes, and complete necessary forms. This kind of system reduces the time spent on often-repeated administrative tasks, and increases the time available to do core tasks. Drawing from White (2003), there are at least nine key activities which should be taken into account if an intranet is going to meet the organisational objectives:

- Develop a two to three-year intranet strategy, based on considerations of content and process requirements, technology and other resources, and governance mechanisms. This strategy should include a clear set of objectives for the intranet which are monitored, and regular reviews of the strategy.
- Obtain a sponsor. Ensure there is senior management sponsorship, and that the sponsor has budget control. Without senior sponsorship, the intranet will not be seen as an organisation-wide tool, and will not have sufficient resources allocated to it.
- Match information to business needs. The intranet needs to match existing and future organisational needs, and not just be a random collection of information. Establish the appropriate balance between information collection, collaboration and communication, and activity-based approaches.
- Recognise authorship. The roles, skills and responsibilities for contribution and maintenance should be included in job descriptions and reviews. Intranet contribution is not a hobby, but should be recognised and rewarded.
- Provide access to the external environment. The intranet should provide access to external information, such as donor and partner information, country-specific reports, funding information, research websites, databases, etc.
- Develop clear information 'architecture'. This should be as simple and easy to communicate as possible, and ideally should not replicate the existing organisational structure. A clear thematic and information type taxonomy should be applied.
- Undertake regular usability testing. There should be regular and systematic feedback loops from users to ensure the information and the system as a whole can meet changing user needs.
- Establish a marketing strategy. Promote the intranet through a strong brand identity and internal marketing plan, with a focus not just on the 'new information' but how the tool can be applied in day-to-day work.
- Assess the impact. The performance of the intranet needs to be measured against objectives, using surveys, success stories and failure stories.

### **Example: Christian Aid**

In 2000, Christian Aid approved a new four-year corporate plan, which included a commitment to changing and modernising its office systems and working practices. An audit of the charity's communication and collaboration practices showed that the organisation was very silo based. As the knowledge manager put it: 'It was becoming increasingly difficult

for staff to share information with each other or collaborate in teams using the legacy systems. By 2004, we estimated that the charity had more than one million documents on its network drives with many duplicated documents and redundant files. The problem was made worse by the fact that Christian Aid staff working away from the main office had no access to the wide area network (WAN) and were entirely reliant on email and their C drives.'

The initial reaction was to consider an intranet to address these issues, but it was agreed that an intranet solution without a fundamental change of culture towards document sharing and record management would fail to deliver the expected results. There followed a systematic change programme, based on separate software applications. Following a partial implementation, the strategy was revised to utilise a single intranet solution and therefore cut the costs of licensing, implementation, and integration.

### **Sources and further reading**

- Hovland, I. (2005) *Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations*, ODI Working Paper 227, London: ODI, especially for more information on the use of websites in communications strategies.