

Intranets are increasingly being owned and managed by communications teams or business areas. In general, this is a positive shift, leading to greater alignment with staff and organisational priorities.

However, the move away from IT ownership, can leave intranet teams with a significant knowledge and skills gap relating to technology. In this technology-dominated world, is this viable or sustainable? Can intranet teams do without technical knowledge?

### **Intranets as a technology platform**

There has always been a technology component to the delivery and management of intranets. When intranets were just a publishing platform for content and news, modern web content management systems (CMS) thankfully took away much of the technical complexity, replacing it with simple point-and-click interfaces.

Many technical aspects remained, however, often relating to integration with other business systems. Notable examples include HR self-service, the staff directory, online forms, and business process integration.

With changes in the broader web landscape, expectations of intranets are growing rapidly. No longer just publishing tools, modern intranets are expected to support collaboration and social tools. There is also a desire to deliver simple, streamlined tasks online, hiding behind-the-scenes complexities.

These greater capabilities all require technology involvement. Even when capabilities are mostly deployed 'out-of-the-box', work needs to be done to seamlessly integrate features together to create a coherent intranet.

In many cases, non-trivial development work is required to develop desired functionality, often far in excess of the original purchase cost of base products or platforms.

This presents a challenging dichotomy: even as intranets are focusing more on business and staff needs, they are becoming more complex from a technical perspective.

Increasingly, this means great intranets are the product of a clear business vision and superb technical execution.

### **The need for technology savvy**

Where does this leave intranet teams? As discussed in the earlier article *Roles needed in an intranet team*, there are many areas of knowledge that need to be covered. How much technical expertise is required in successful intranet teams?

First off, intranet teams cannot afford to be technology *ignorant*. All teams should have at least a reasonable awareness of the technical platforms underpinning the intranet, and the technical aspects of making improvements.

But neither do intranet teams need to be technology *geeks*. Technology is only one aspect of running intranets, and team members don't need to be professional developers or IT architects.

What's needed is technology *savvy*, perhaps best defined as "the ability to have meaningful discussions with IT, and to make informed technology-related decisions".

This middle ground involves having a working familiarity with relevant technology platforms, and a sense of what's involved in doing further IT work. This enables intranet teams to be effective drivers for delivering a great site.

### **Gaining technical knowledge**

There are many ways of steadily building technology savvy over time, including:

- Reading blogs and websites that cover general technology trends from a business perspective.
- Gaining hands-on training with key tools, to an administrator (not developer) level.
- Attending conferences and events that explore intranet and technology topics.
- Tracking what other organisations have done from a technical perspective.
- Building a productive relationship with IT, to allow constructive two-way dialogue and knowledge sharing.
- Hiring team members with a greater level of technical knowledge or comfort.
- Sticking at it! Not being afraid to ask questions, or to keep asking for more information until things make sense.

Intranet professionals often ask questions of their peers in the hope that the experience of others can provide a starting point for planning and inspiration.

### Common questions

For those new to intranets there is certainly immediate value in exploring the most valuable core intranet tools such as great people directories, easy to find support services like HR, and a search function that returns useful results. However, answers to other common questions can be more challenging to implement.

Many of the common questions encountered include:

- What is the best governance model?
- Who should own the intranet?
- How much will an intranet cost?
- What is the best technology to use?
- Which technology tools should we deploy?

These are all valid and important questions to ask and by all means draw on the experience of those who have walked the walk before. However expecting to transplant other solutions and answers directly into your own organisation can be problematic.

### Unique solutions

Intranets are an integral part of the organisation's culture and will heavily reflect systems and practices already in place. Without giving these aspects due consideration, imported solutions can flounder. Factors that will influence the appropriateness of imported solutions include:

- maturity level of your existing intranet
- degree to which silos prevent cross organisation information sharing
- resources and capabilities available to you
- readiness of other business areas to support your vision
- appetite in the organisation for change

Regardless of where you want to get to with your intranet, you must start from where you are now and what is immediately possible.

For example, an organisation that has a well-established authoring community might have:

- a decentralised model where the intranet team facilitates publishing, rather than directly delivering content
- a community where new authors can connect and obtain support
- practices which deliver material that is easy to consume online
- standard publishing processes

These elements all support more advanced improvements. For organisations without these types of frameworks in place, ideas imported from other intranets can struggle to progress.

### Leveraging the work of others

When taking advantage of the work that others have done, keep the following perspectives in mind to help make the most use of the available information:

- Ensure you have the right lens through which to view the solution.

The uniqueness of your organisation's business will mean some adjustment of the solutions is necessary, so evaluate any solutions through the lens of 'how will this add value to the business'.

- Ask how and why, rather than what.

Understanding the context of how the solution evolved will provide valuable insight into how it might be adopted locally. The process of developing and deploying the solution is also as valuable as the functionality it delivers.

- Use external solutions to support, not replace internal research.

Start by understanding your organisations before seeking answers elsewhere. This might be in the form of extensive research or informal consultation, since the best intranet solution is often one that everyone agrees on.

Leverage the work of others, but ensure you are leading *your* intranet into the future, not simply following the work of others.

Designing website is easy. Want to see what the leading companies are doing with their sites? Open them up in your browser. Want to know current best practices? Browse a selection of sites, and look for patterns.

In comparison, designing intranets is much harder. By definition they are hidden inside organisations, and teams struggle to find good examples.

This makes it much harder to learn from the experiences of others, and to cherry-pick elements from a range of other sites.

One of the key objectives of many teams is therefore to see other intranet screenshots. While hard, it is not impossible.

Broadly speaking, there are three main ways of getting access to intranet screenshots: from published reports, by connecting up with other teams, and by attending events.

### Published resources

There are two major published resources that are invaluable for intranet teams, and both are end products of annual intranet competitions.

Intranet Innovation Awards  
[www.steptwo.com.au/ia](http://www.steptwo.com.au/ia)

These annual awards uncover and share the leading edge of intranets, focusing on specific intranet improvements that add value to the business. The annual report contains hundreds of screenshots from leading intranets.

Intranet Design Annuals  
[www.nngroup.com/reports/intranet/design/](http://www.nngroup.com/reports/intranet/design/)

Another annual intranet competition, judging the standard of intranets as a whole. Running for many years, the annual report is substantial, containing many screenshots from a wide range of organisations.

### Intranet communities

Organisations are often nervous about sharing their screenshots in a public forum, either concerned about releasing confidential information, or uncertain about the standard of their site compared to others.

This makes the role of intranet communities doubly important. Bringing together practitioners in a more private setting, members are much more likely to share screenshots and other information.

In addition to informal groups, both in the real-world and online, there are a number of professional communities around the globe. With greater resources at their disposal, they are likely to offer a member library of screenshots as one of their benefits.

Current communities include:

- Intranet Leadership Forum (Australia)  
[www.steptwo.com.au/ilf](http://www.steptwo.com.au/ilf)
- Intranet Benchmarking Forum (Europe and North America) [www.ibforum.com](http://www.ibforum.com)
- IntraTeam (Scandinavia) [www.intrateam.dk](http://www.intrateam.dk)
- J Boye (Europe and North America)  
[www.jboye.com](http://www.jboye.com)

### Conferences and events

There are a growing number of intranet-focused conferences around the world, and these provide a unique opportunity to see what other teams are doing, and to forge longer-term connections.

A handful of events now bring together over 500 practitioners into a single location, while many gather 50-150 together in the one room.

These events are too numerous to list here, and intranet and project teams are encouraged to seek out conferences and workshops in their local areas.

Pay particular attention to who is running the event, and the standard of speakers. Events that are well-connected with the wider intranet community typically have a higher standard of information (including great screenshots).

### Other sources

There are a range of other sources of screenshots. Look for blogs that share intranet examples, as well as presentations on Slideshare, and elsewhere. Above all, build strong informal relationships with other teams, and get them to share what they've done!

In the old days, corporate news and information was communicated on paper, either as internal newsletters or a company newspaper. Created weekly, monthly or quarterly, these paper communications were delivered to staff desks or pigeonholes.

In the modern era, communication is electronic, except perhaps for field or shop-floor staff. Newsletters have been converted into PDFs, and are emailed out or posted to the intranet.

But is this really a great advance? Or has a 20th century practice been replicated in the 21st century without any real change?

### Limits of paper

Electronic newsletters can take many forms, from plain text in an all-staff email to simple PDF updates or beautifully formatted documents.

Regardless of the format or method of delivery, electronic newsletters suffer from a number of significant issues:

- Updates are only sent out on a regular schedule (every Friday, first Monday of the month, etc), even though changes happen more frequently.
- Depending on the format, it can take significant time (and money) to construct each newsletter.
- It can often be hard to find good content to put into newsletters, with 'filler content' making up the difference.
- Communication is inherently one-way, with no mechanism for staff to comment or participate.
- Newsletters often contain key information among social updates and less important news. This can be very hard to find at a later date (eg 'it's in Frontline Update #34').
- Delivering updates by newsletters devalues the intranet, and potentially competes with it, particularly when newsletters are delivered via email.
- It is hard to target newsletter content to the needs of specific audiences without proliferating multiple newsletters, each delivered separately.

### News instead of newsletters

There is a simple answer: use the news box on the intranet homepage instead. Almost all intranets provide the straightforward ability to create and publish news items, which are then seen throughout the organisation.

Replacing newsletters with news provides many benefits:

- Each news item contains a single topic, making easier for staff to assess what to read, and to find it again later.
- A rich mix of news, updates and social activities can be published on the intranet, with staff picking the items that interest them.
- News items can be published as needed, without having to wait for a scheduled newsletter.
- Publishing is much quicker and cheaper.
- Staff can comment on news items.
- More advanced intranets allow news to be targeted or tailored for key audience groups, ensuring that relevance is maintained, even as the volume of news grows.
- Intranet news can be delivered directly to mobile devices.
- Putting key news on the intranet enhances the value of the intranet, thereby making it a more powerful communications channel.
- 'Noise' and 'internal spam' is reduced, by providing a single comms channel.
- Email notification can still be used as a 'push channel', linking back to the intranet rather than containing the actual content.

### A cultural change

In this day and age, there is no reason to maintain practices developed 50 years ago, with newer technologies (such as the intranet) offering much better solutions.

This is, however, a cultural change for staff and comms teams alike. A good communications strategy will also be needed to ensure that messages reach all staff, including those not regularly in front of a PC.