BUSINESS MANAGEMENT MASTER CLASS SERIES

Intranet Web Development Master Class

Long before the Internet came to fruition organisations developed electronic methods of communicating internally such as bulletin boards, eMail lists and hypertext pages. These internal services are commonly referred to as Intranet technologies. Developing an Intranet site can turbo charge internal broadcast communications or can sometimes leech time away from core business activities.

The Intranet Strategy

Before you start developing your Intranet it is sensible to develop a formal strategy to ensure that common sense prevails. In particular you should consider what the benefits of the site are to the business? What will the site allow your business to do better? Do the ways that you communicate right now work for the business? If they do work why does the business need an Intranet? Is the Intranet being developed for the business or for the CV's of your staff?

If you choose to proceed who will develop and maintain the site? If you opt for an internal virtual development team with members from every department do they really have the time, capability and desire? If you go for a dedicated central team or outsourced team can you really justify the expenditure? Remember, one way or another your proposed Intranet will cost you time and money. If you can't see a tangible return on investment don't do it or don't do it yet.

Also, one often overlooked fact about Intranet sites is the small matter of communicating change. Let's say you update your expenses policy on your Intranet – if that's all you do the policy will not be followed. You also need to consider how you push the fact that something has changed to those that need to know. It is unreasonable to expect your staff to trawl through the site looking for updates that may or may not affect them. You could send out eMails, send memos, put a news item on the site's homepage, mention the change at team meetings, tell managers to tell their staff, put up posters, provide a 'tell me when this page changes' function on every page, send out news letters… In other words you still need to do many of the things that you used to do in terms of internal communication.

The Tools

If you decide to go ahead there are a few technical issues to consider. If you're a techno phobic that leaves technical considerations to others – think again. You're about to spend money which means that you need to know what it is going to be spent on and what you will or will not get for your investment.

Very small sites can be implemented using WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) tools such as Microsoft FrontPage. The advantages of WYSIWYG include being able to develop sites with little or no understanding of the technical infrastructure behind the scenes. If you can use MS Word you can use FrontPage. However, that advantage becomes a disadvantage if you try to use FrontPage to implement an Internet site. Very, very few commercial Internet sites are developed using FrontPage and there are a lot of very good reasons for this.

FrontPage is particularly effective when it comes to generating simple static html pages for simple information delivery. A static page does not change much and will generally not include user interaction. Most of the indexed content on the Internet is made up of static pages – essentially blocks of text with images. More advanced FrontPage sites can include some dynamic content such as automated navigational borders, themes, headers and site maps. To make use of these features your web server needs to be specially setup to run FrontPage sites (FrontPage extensions need to be installed) and you need a measure of luck – if (when) that hidden (highly complex) technical infrastructure becomes corrupted you may need to rebuild the site more or less from scratch.

The disadvantage of static content is that it often needs to be manually updated on a frequent basis. A typical example would be a manually updated organisation chart. The content of the chart updates on a regular basis, but the priority that an HR dept assigns to the task is going to be lower than the business critical tasks associated with their other HR duties. As a consequence the chart is likely to be a static picture of how things used to be rather than how they are now.

At the other end of the spectrum you may wish to implement a highly dynamic site using ASP or similar. ASP stands for Active Server Page which essentially means that the web page that a user sees is generated programmatically by the web server, often by pulling together information from a series of databases. ASP sites require ASP web servers and a substantial level of technical know-how. This includes a detailed understanding of html – the language behind most web pages.

Possibly the greatest advantage of ASP etc sites it that the skills learned when developing your Intranet are *probably* the same skills needed when developing an Internet site. There is however no guarantee of this. It is possible for example to use ASP for your Intranet and simple HTML for your Internet site. This could be because your Internet site is hosted on a server that does not sufficiently support dynamic services such as ASP.

Most Intranet sites lie somewhere between the two extremes. Generally they are static sites with a number of interactive elements. The skills are Internet ready, the web server requirements are minimal and such sites can be implemented very, very rapidly without needed too much technical expertise.

Intranet development can be fun for those involved but from a management perspective care should be taken to ensure that there is minimal impact on core business activities. For this reason you should monitor usage over time and keep an eye on the amount of time being spent on maintaining the site. They are particularly useful as a medium to communicate procedures and to provide access to process automation utilities / applications. If care is taken to adopt a sensible strategy Intranet sites can supercharge internal communications and streamline business operations.

Audience: Non-technical business managers – all sectors
Length: 1000+ words
Basis: All right restricted. Free of charge if the details below (inclusive of URL) are published essentially as is. Otherwise £100 GBP.

Neuro Innovation Consulting is a business consultancy with experience covering database management, database marketing, CRM, eMail marketing, database quality management, systems development, e-Commerce, web development, change management and business process design.

http://www.neuroinnovations.com