



An i5 Group Guide.

Building your organisation's intranet



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Introduction

Intranets were big business back in the mid-90s, this new buzzword had the corporate world rushing to realise the alluring productivity benefits that bringing the power of the internet within the organisation offered. But the heady promises seemed to tempt decision makers into ignoring sound project management and good common sense.

In most instances, the situation spiralled out of control and, instead of adding to the bottom line, early intranets became company 'white elephants' — absorbing large amounts of money and effort and delivering next to nothing in return. The reasons were many and the response from senior executives was swift, budgets were slashed and many of the systems shelved.

But now, with cost-reduction and efficiency gains top of many firm's agendas, intranets are back in fashion; their massive cost-saving and improved productivity paybacks appealing to the new economy's lean and frugal organisations.

Although driven by economic imperatives, the rebirth of the intranet is proving a catalyst for more than just productivity gains. Access to information across the organisation is becoming increasingly critical and many firms are discovering that real competitive advantage lies in being able to rapidly disperse it to staff.

And yet, the first question that should always be asked remains the same: why? Just because the technology is available and the hype is being reinforced with substantial successes, does your business really need it? Is your current corporate culture even suited to an intranet? Will the savings and benefits justify the development and maintenance costs? Will the enforced changes in practices and policies be worth it in the long run?

This paper is designed to help you start answering these questions using our Diaspora™ Model. The model is based upon an examination of the reasons why many intranets fail and extracts best practice guidelines from these lessons. Common business benefits offered by an intranet are discussed as an aide to establishing your goals, and the applications required to deliver such benefits are detailed.



1. Planning your intranet

There are two main ingredients in the recipe for a successful intranet: people and information. And it is with these in mind that your planning should start.

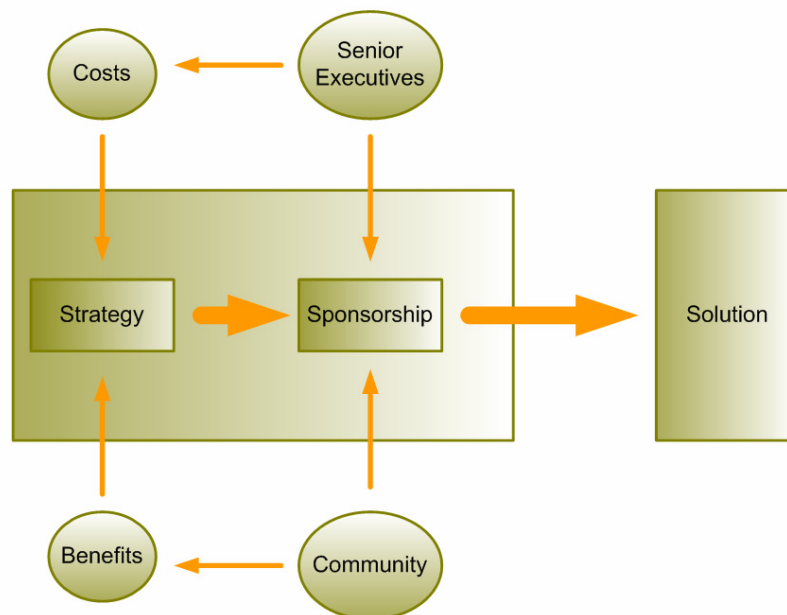
You need to see your organisation as a community of people, each with their own strengths and limitations, needs and dispositions. And you must allow this understanding to suffuse the entire process from preparation to implementation.

The second ingredient, information, is what your organisation thrives on and your intranet is its delivery system. Your overall goal should be to make said information available as quickly and appropriately as possible. One aspect of a successful intranet should be that your colleagues won't have to wait for answers anymore.

It is also important to remember that successful intranets grow and evolve, and that yours is likely to have a larger effect on your organisation than currently anticipated and require significant infrastructural and training investment as well.

The dynamic process illustrated by our Diaspora™ Model (shown below) is borne of our experience and is divided into three major steps: strategy; sponsorship, and solution. Each of these stages informs the next, and is in turn fed by the satellite factors illustrated.

Overleaf we begin the process of creating a strategy suitable for your organisation. Designed to help you answer the 'why?' question, we evaluate the main benefits an intranet can bring to an organisation.



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Fig. 1 ~ i5 Diaspora™ Model



2. Strategy

The strategy or goals you set for your intranet will not only guide its implementation and keep your efforts correctly focussed, but enable you to measure its success as well. Although you should constantly re-evaluate and adjust them to your changing conditions, it is vital you start the process by making them the heart of your initial strategy.

As illustrated in our Diaspora™ Model, your strategy will be informed by two factors: the benefits your organisation requires and the costs you are likely to incur. Basing your strategy upon these two corresponding factors enables you to ensure that realistic goals & expectations are set right from the start and will help ensure your project is a success.

2.1. Benefits

Intranets offer many tangible business benefits and the first step in creating your strategy is to establish which ones are appropriate for your organisation. Based on our experience, the suggestions below are amongst the more common.

2.1.1. Document Library

Providing a central, indexed repository of all relevant documents can speed up common administrative tasks and save a company huge amounts of time. It can also reduce the expense of printing documentation since staff members can consult annual reports, review benefits handbooks, locate an expense report form, and review company vacation policies quickly and autonomously online. Multimedia content, such as video and audio, can also be distributed via the intranet because of the high speeds (100Mbps) and negligible costs involved in Local Area Network (LAN) transmission. Of course, it is important to ensure any library is always available and that it can be easily searched by staff members.

2.1.2. Communication Channel

As well as having an online repository of static company documents, your organisation can start to benefit from publishing more dynamic information on the intranet. The medium can offer a significantly cheaper and much faster dissemination alternative to existing channels, such as paper newsletters and printed company-wide memoranda.

2.1.3. Collaborative Workspace

Not only encouraging better information sharing across your organisation, an intranet that allows colleagues to collaborate on developments can improve both productivity, shortening product time to market for example, and innovation — through cross-departmental or regional relationships and teamwork.

2.1.4. Employee Self-Service

Building on the document library foundation, the goal here is to reduce costs and avoid the demands made upon administrative and support personnel across the board. Your colleagues are able to keep their own personnel records (contact details etc) up-to-date (where authorised) and administer the majority of their Human Resource (HR) requests personally. Common tasks, such as filing expense and leave forms or scheduling a conference room, are automated and autonomous.



2.2. Costs

With regards expenditure, it is important to note that a modest and methodically planned intranet need not cost you that much. One of an intranet's real advantages is that, based predominantly on common internet data transfer protocols and technologies, it is an easy system to incorporate into your organisation and the technology driving your system may cost little more than R 45, 000 (depending on your current infrastructure and requirements).

Where your real costs will lie is in the initial planning process and in managing the change in culture and business processes that invariably follows implementation.

And this is why intranets are actually extremely tricky systems to implement because, while the technology that drives them is usually straight forward, they are often a combination of some of the most difficult organisational challenges around.

Not only do they usually require a change in the organisation's culture as it migrates 'online', the standardising of procedure and processes is often necessitated, along with a bridging of the existing 'islands of information' within the firm.

It is also important to recognise that this scale of organisational transformation will impose major changes on your colleagues and overcoming their natural resistance represents the real challenge behind implementing an intranet.

3. Sponsorship

As Shel Holtz amusingly observed, most organisations approach their intranets with a startlingly similar attitude to the 'Field of Dreams' epigram — 'if you build it, they will come'. For some strange reason believing that just because they have created an intranet, staff will use it. Sadly, this belief is always proven mistaken and is the main reason why so many systems lie dormant and unloved in corporate closets everywhere.

Once you have created an appropriate strategy, it is imperative you obtain sponsorship or 'buy-in' from within your organisation. And, as illustrated in our Diaspora™ Model, this needs to come from the Senior Executives at the top as well as the Community of staff in general.

3.1. Senior Executives

Senior Executives need to champion your efforts as part of overcoming the natural resistance you will encounter, as well as agreeing on budgets, and so need to really comprehend the value your intranet will bring to the organisation. You need to help them understand how your efforts will help them sleep better at night.

Inadequate executive support can be of particular significance in larger deployments when efforts and budgets need to be co-ordinated across departmental and regional boundaries (managing the inter-departmental teams required in such circumstances is discussed in further detail below).

And yet, having said the above, it is equally important to be wary of Senior Executives or stakeholders attempting to try and hijack the intranet's development and design. Preventing this is not an easy task, but stick to the point that an intranet has to be about accommodating the maximum number of people if it is to succeed.



3.2. Community

It might seem obvious, but community endorsement is the single most important ingredient in your recipe for success. During planning, spend most of your time focussing on and consulting with your target audience. We would recommend sub-dividing your community where logical (this is commonly done along existing organisational lines, for example, sales, management, administration etc) and creating typical 'personas' for each group.

Your persona can be either a fictitious representative of the group, or an actual colleague. Examine the tasks they are likely to perform on the intranet and critically compare these to their current processes. Is there an improvement? Can it be quantified? Would they make better business decisions using the intranet?

Remember to also note each user group's limitations (the things they will naturally struggle to do) and build in appropriate compensations. For example, it might be logical to insist that every Sectional Head be responsible for publishing their section's latest news — to improve inter-departmental communication — but impractical if such colleagues are not natural writers. In such an instance, perhaps assigning a junior member of the marketing department to each Sectional Head would be more appropriate.

This exercise should not only help you decide whether an intranet will actual improve productivity, but having identified where efficiency gains might be made within the organisation, also what shape the system should take. In other words, what features to deliver to which groups of users when.

And whatever scale of implementation you are involved in, always keep in mind what Lisa Sulgit once said, "your colleagues just want to get the stuff they need".

4. Solution

Once you have created an appropriate strategy and obtained the necessary sponsorship from all the stakeholders within your organisation, you will have already gone a long way towards ensuring the success of your intranet. The next step is to convert those two ingredients into a working, meaningful solution.

This initially involves making sure good, consistent project management practices are in place and the creation of a suitable development team. The larger the implementation, the more people will need to be in your team, but our experience suggests that it is always a good idea to try and keep it as small as possible.

Creating and leading an inter-departmental and discipline team can be an challenging task and making sure the people involved, from information architects and visual designers to site administrators and interface developers, all work together can take some doing.

There are many different schools of thought on how best to manage such a broad collaborative effort, but here are four tips from our collective experience:

- Define clear roles and responsibilities early on;
- Align milestones and deliverables – forcing collaboration from the start;
- Encourage members to share knowledge and 'educate' each other;
- Foster good communication – insist on daily team meetings where possible.



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We would also recommend that you take the proverbial bull 'by the horns' and try and deliver a real, meaningful application first. It is often tempting to deliver something quick and easy and score an initial 'success', but these features are often those of less value to the community and can harm people's first impressions of the system, weakening enthusiasm towards the system.

So go for the 'killer application' identified during your planning phase no matter how much more expensive, complex and time-consuming it will be. Your intranet will only be a success if people use it, and people will only use it if it actually makes something easier for them.

Always remember that your intranet will only be a success if it is relevant and actually solves problems. These both sound obvious, but unless your Users are involved right from the start and you remember that whatever you do must matter to them and improve their working day it is unlikely that your system will be adopted.

And so make sure you have allocated enough resources for both launching the service (advertising its existence and 'selling' its advantages) to your colleagues and training them on how to use it. Since your intranet is all about participation and exchange it can only be a success if everyone feels they own it and this message must be clearly and continuously communicated.

5. Typical Applications

Sales

- Information Catalogues
- Product Information & Product Support
- Databases
- Sales Support Centres

HR/Employee Self-Service

- Training and Registration
- Employee and Group Information
- Official Travel Guide & Travel Plans
- Employee InfoBases
- Employee Property Management
- Policies and Procedures
- Performance Tracking
- Jobs
- Benefits
- Literature Ordering
- Stock Quote

Managerial

- Project Information
- Competitive Analysis
- Strategies
- Financial-Management Query
- Manufacturing Information

Administrative

- Phone Directory
- Conference Room Reservations
- Directions
- Maps

Communication/Media

- Newswire Clippings
- Corporate Newsletters
- Libraries (Document, Magazine, Websites etc)
- Knowledge Preservation
- Subscription Services
- Historical Information
- Conferencing
- Indexing Engines

Miscellaneous

- Surveillance
- Access to Data Warehouse
- Software Libraries
- Technology Centres
- Application Front-end
- Whiteboard