

Bring your intranet into the 21st century

Social media can make an outdated intranet easier to use—and make your employees more productive in the process

by Shel Holtz, ABC, IABC Fellow

Intranets are in dire shape. Built with tremendous enthusiasm and launched with great fanfare, the enterprise versions of the Internet contained within the boundaries of the organization have been languishing. Early intranets looked for all the world like the World Wide Web. Today, they still look like the World Wide Web—circa 1998.

While the Web itself has undergone unprecedented and dramatic change, intranets have stagnated from inattention and lack of funding. Sure, company resources are committed to maintaining the servers and adding content. A staggering number of companies abandoned print in their rush to embrace intranets, leaving the medium one of the few mass-distribution communication tools available. Yet employees who see what the Web has become—and have taken advantage of it both for personal and work purposes—can only roll their eyes and shake their heads at the static, one-way relic that passes for online content inside their organizations.

How we have found ourselves in this sad state is a subject for speculation (although it's not too much of a stretch to imagine executives, underwhelmed by what the intranet has produced against its original promise, rejecting the idea of sinking any more money into it). Of greater concern are the consequences: The company moves slowly, unable to react to competitive pressures. Employees are increasingly frustrated (and less engaged) as it becomes more difficult to find the resources and information they need to do their jobs. Top-flight job candidates accept competing offers from companies whose intranets

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JAMES YANG/VEER

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more closely mirror what they have come to expect from an online experience.

Bringing your intranet into the 21st century will pay huge dividends, but it is no small task. While the investment required to upgrade the intranet doesn't have to be huge (much of the software is open source and free, or at least very inexpensive), a commitment by the organization's most senior leaders to a new way of working is required, along with a high degree of trust in employees to use the resources in the company's best interests. In other words, a cosmetic face-lift won't do the job. Putting lipstick on a digital pig is a far cry from making some fundamental shifts in the role employees play in the internal online world. Companies have to stop looking at employees as consumers of information and view them instead as content producers.

A growing number of companies recognize that there is value in rejuvenating their intranets in the Web 2.0 mold, and they're not all the high-tech suspects you might imagine. Financial institutions, accounting firms and electronics companies are joining the likes of hardware and software businesses in embracing social media as core elements of their intranets.

The Web today

Today's World Wide Web—the one that has left most intranets in the dust—has expanded beyond its publishing model to become a collaborative environment. That's not to say it is no longer an excellent publishing tool (for some kinds of content). Rather, it has evolved to become a resource that allows regular people to share their own knowledge and information, not just that published by institutions and individuals with the financial resources or the technical chops that were once the price of admission to Web publishing.

Two phenomena have given rise to this beast dubbed "Web 2.0":

- **Social media**, which allow people to discover and communicate with one another, and to form communities based on their interests. Blogs, wikis and social networks such as Facebook and MySpace are the best known tools.
- **The move to Web services**, Silicon Valley's term for applications that run on the Net instead of on your PC. If you haven't seen what you can do online,

what's rss, anyway?

Does all the talk about RSS have you scratching your head? Here's a brief definition: RSS is an XML-based format for delivering regularly changing Web content. Instead of visiting your favorite web sites individually to read the latest content, you can subscribe to a site's RSS "feed" and be notified whenever new content is posted. The acronym stands for one of the following standards: Rich Site Summary, RDF Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication.

Want to know more? Visit www.feedburner.com/fb/af/feed101, or search the Web for "RSS."



about the author

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take a look at Google Docs or the Zoho suite of products, which have diminished the need for an office productivity suite such as Microsoft Office. There are even multiple sites that allow you to upload and edit video.

Employees in your organization are using these tools. They use them in support of their hobbies, their volunteer work and even their professions. The ability to use these tools at work is often hindered by mindless company restrictions of access, but that's a subject for another article. A recent study by Forrester Research finds that many employees are primed to use social media in support of their work efforts, and some—about 5 percent, according to the Forrester report "Passionate Employees: The Gateway to Web 2.0 Sales"—are merrily blogging and introducing wikis into their jobs without the approval or even the knowledge of IT. Using resources hosted externally or installing applications in violation of company policy, employees are risking reprimand simply because these tools work, and they work better than the existing, approved alternatives. Anybody who has used a project planning application or a knowledge management database knows how cumbersome and counterintuitive these programs are.

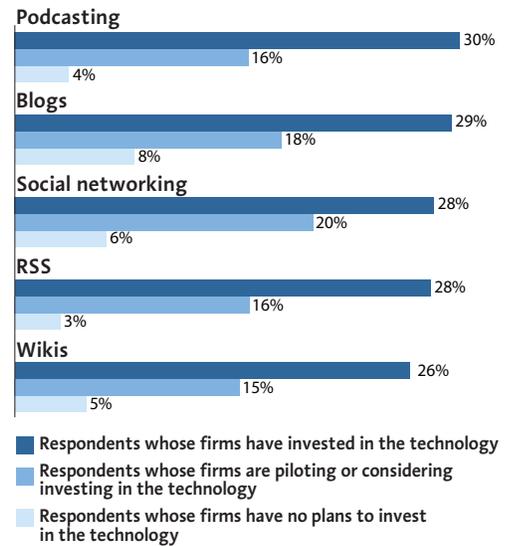
In fact, another Forrester study, "Web 2.0: Social Computing Dresses Up for Business," reveals that employee demands are the primary reason IT departments are implementing social media tools (request-driven implementation accounts for about 40 percent of the social media applications businesses are introducing to their intranets). Communicators should add their voices to the chorus: According to the research, internal adoption of social media tools doubled from 15 percent to 30 percent when IT invested in the infrastructure.

Work is social

A wise executive once suggested, "If you really want to know what's going on in this company, step outside and hang out with the smokers." Think about it: 25 or 30 smokers convene at the designated smoking area. The only thing the members of this group have in common (besides smoking) is work. Guess what they talk about. And because they represent a variety of different departments and business units, the knowledge

Employees are using Web 2.0

Forrester asked IT decision makers to estimate what percentage of their employees are using the following Web 2.0 technologies for business purposes either as part of a corporate initiative or on their own.



SOURCE: FORRESTER RESEARCH

proffered by one participant in this conversation is absorbed by the others, who carry it back to their departments.

Despite the best efforts of some organizations to quash it, the social nature of work will always reemerge, like a blade of grass pushing its way up through a crack in a concrete sidewalk. Thus, social networking behind the firewall makes good sense. It moves that smokers' circle onto the network and expands it to include everyone regardless of where or in what time zone they work. (And it's smoke-free to boot!)

Consider Motorola, which has given nearly 70,000 employees in 70 countries—along with some 9,200 external partners—social media tools that allow them to publish and share information. Dubbed Intranet 2.0, Motorola's network includes blogs, wikis, a social bookmarking utility, RSS (Rich Site Summary) feeds and a social search engine that, according to an *InformationWeek* article, "improves the quality of searches by injecting results that other users found most valuable."

The results? Ninety-two percent of Motorola employees have tapped into these resources, creating 38 terabytes of data. Included are 5,400 blogs, 4,500 wikis, 65,000 social bookmarks and 30 mil-

lion shared documents. On a daily basis, employees contribute nearly 100,000 documents to the company's storehouse of knowledge.

And because these are social tools, it's not just a flood of reports and spreadsheets populating Motorola's servers. It's conversation, employees reaching out to one another for assistance, forming communities around projects and areas of expertise, coalescing in a wholly organic way to solve problems or capitalize on opportunities.

Motorola, of course, is one of those high-tech companies that cause executives to roll their eyes and exclaim, "Well, that's Motorola" (or Microsoft or IBM or Intel or Sun Microsystems). For example, tell an executive that Intel has established a wiki called Intelpedia—modeled on the Web phenomenon Wikipedia—where employees are contributing their knowledge of all things Intel, and you're likely to get an answer that goes something like, "We're not Intel; we're a financial services company, for God's sake." But then you could point to Wachovia, the fourth-largest bank in the U.S., which is building a similar wiki that will be called (you knew this was coming, didn't you?) Wachopedia, according to *CIO Insight*.

Wachovia is also building an internal social network, a Facebook-like utility that will allow employees to share information, photos, videos and documents. They will also be able to form groups around subjects that interest them. The more employees who join a group, the more knowledge flows and the more resources become available to employees who previously knew only the people in their own departments and a select group of other employees with whom they have interacted for one reason or another.

"A bright 26-year-old MBA will be seeing the tools and comparing them to what they use in their own home, and they compare well," said Pete Fields, the bank's director of eBusiness for employees, in the *CIO Insight* article.

Wachovia is not alone. Dell, IBM and a host of other companies are beefing up the opportunity for employees to find and interact with one another through social networking applications offered by companies with names such as Leverage Software and SelectMinds. The big boys—Microsoft and IBM—are also releasing software that will make the introduction of social networks possible.

Too much?

Some critics of intranet-based social media argue that the creation of all this content does little more than create a flood of content that threatens to drown employees already suffering from information overload. There are some critical differences between social media and traditional content, however.

- **The content that overloads employees** is *pushed* at them. Social media are most often *pulled* by employees who want that particular content. It's hard to get too much information about the things that are important to you. Forrester calls it "proactive information delivery."

- **Social media is not just content.** It is conversation. And only the people who want to participate in a conversation do so; you cannot force engagement in a conversation any more than you can make someone go stand in the smokers' circle in order to absorb information about things in which they have no interest.

- **As the Forrester studies assert,** social media streamline processes that have contributed to the current environment of information overload. Consider that wikis and blogs allow team members to create, edit, approve, publish and manage content all in one place, with virtually no training required.

Another critical dimension of social media is that it actually makes information easier to find and easier to filter. Consider social bookmarking, which allows any employee to bookmark any page he or she finds useful and tag it with relevant keywords. Other employees searching any of those keywords will find content their colleagues have already found useful.

In fact, tagging underlies much of what works about social media. The same success will easily translate to intranets. At least, that's the view of Donald Rippert, Accenture's chief technology officer, who intends to duplicate the video-sharing megasite YouTube on the Accenture intranet. According to an article in *Business.ca*, "Rippert looked at YouTube and wondered why a teenager can find an amateur video on the site quickly and easily, but finding a video of a corporate presentation in a business's archives is next to impossible if you don't know the exact title of the file." With a YouTube-like repository for all company video,



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rss in practice

Cisco Systems' IT workforce was so inundated with e-mail newsletters that a majority of employees stopped reading them.

The IT communications team implemented a communication channel to dramatically improve internal communication. The My IT News custom e-mail newsletter delivery application used RSS technology so that employees could subscribe to specific news categories, which cut down on the number of e-mails being sent and ensured that each person received news that was pertinent to his or her job. My IT News has saved an estimated 10 minutes a day for each IT employee.

For more information about the Cisco case study and other innovative work plans, see the 22nd volume of *Best Practices in Communication Planning and Implementation* at www.iabc.com/knowledge.

any employee who watches a video can tag and comment on it; other employees can find a relevant video by searching for not only the video's title but also the tags and comments.

Rippert is also working to introduce a Facebook-like social network, a social bookmarking service, a wiki to capture companywide knowledge, and even a three-dimensional virtual world reminiscent of Second Life where employees can receive training and attend presentations.

But perhaps the most important answer to the critics who fear an unprecedented acceleration of information overload is RSS's function as the infrastructure of social media. The RSS subscription model allows employees to get regular updates about things that are important to them and ignore those that are not. RSS, along with tagging utilities such as social bookmarks, actually makes it easier to find just the right information—the cure to information overload. It's no surprise, then, to find that 44 percent of companies have either implemented or are pilot-testing RSS on their intranets, according to Forrester. Forty-seven percent have launched or are testing blogs, 48 percent are at the same stage with social networks, and 41 percent are there with wikis.

Interestingly, 52 percent have either launched or are testing podcasts as an internal communication tool—another no-brainer since podcasts provide an introduction to social media while maintaining some element of the control to which communicators and executives are accustomed.

Employee-generated content

Another concern of the naysayers is whether employees should spend their work time writing blogs, tagging content and contributing to wikis instead of doing their jobs. For the most part, though, engaging in these media is not an alternative to work. It's a new and—when managed effectively—far superior way of doing the job. The idea generally isn't for employees to blog as



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a replacement to an employee newsletter. A process engineer is likely to blog mainly about process engineering. Only those who perform similar work or have a work-related interest will be likely to read that blog, and then only if the content proves worthwhile. But it doesn't stop there. Readers who find the content useful also will write comments. That give and take is conversation; it's what makes the media social.

Not all social media on intranets need to be applied to employee-to-employee communication. The accounting firm Deloitte, for example, asked employees to produce videos articulating their views of the company's culture and values,

prompting 370 employees to submit their creative efforts. The entries were posted to a YouTube-like interface, where other Deloitte employees rated them. The winners will be uploaded to YouTube as part of the company's recruiting effort.

"With the explosive growth of social networking sites and the mass democratization of filmmaking (handheld cameras, user-friendly software), it's very clear to us that the integration of self-expression opportunities through film and other media is essential to recruiting and retaining top talent," says Cathy Benko, Deloitte's managing principal of talent. "Plus it's a heck of a lot of fun!"

It's little wonder that Deloitte is one of *Fortune* magazine's 100 best companies to work for and is considered the best company for new employees looking to make a strong start in their careers, according to a recent *BusinessWeek* poll.

The rationale for pushing your intranet into the 21st century exists; the business case is strong. The risks can be addressed through well-communicated policies and effective management, along with the adoption of adequate security measures. The costs are low. The results can transform a business. And communicators have a key role to play. Our intranets have been stagnating for far too long. It's time to push them to the next level. ●