

Chapter XXXI

Intranets: Interactive Knowledge Management Tools of Networked Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter deals with the importance of intranets as knowledge management tools/media enabling efficient knowledge exchange and development within an organization and the “community” of stakeholders. Communities are analyzed as networked systems of interested parties. The importance of intranets is even more stressed today when most company activities are project based—with project members working together from all over the world. Intranets serve as project coordination support as well as organization functioning generalization through combining different project activities into organizational efficiency analysis. This chapter analyzes possibilities of different approaches to development and management of intranets, and thus of networked people creating a certain networked “community form.” These developments are crucial to virtual workplaces as well as for increasing business efficiency

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the importance of intranets as knowledge sharing support systems. Virtual communities have become more dynamic than off-line communities making them of great interest for all businesses, especially when internal (company-related) communities are analyzed. The best

platform facilitating virtual communities is the intranet—along with the extranet as its extension.

The importance of intranets is even more stressed today when most company activities are project based, with project members working together with no time-space constraints. With worldwide increase in competition, companies’ performance (and efficiency) has to be measured

and fine-tuned at the smallest possible level of analysis. In such complex situations, intranets serve as project coordination support but also as tracking tools at project component level. By combining project components' individual efficiencies, intranets generate the analysis (later referred to as reporting) on the overall organizational efficiency analysis. They can inductively analyze a company's performance based on the data collected at the project-level intranets.

This chapter also analyzes the virtual communities and their importance in the context of organizational culture. Furthermore, it analyzes the possibilities of different approaches to development and management of intranets and thus of virtual communities. These concepts are crucial to virtual workplaces as well as for increasing business efficiency.

BACKGROUND

Due to the fact that the business environment is more and more volatile and globalized, companies face the increasing problem of effective coordination and efficient work. Requirements for efficiency (concerning time and other resources) have pushed companies' coordination efforts to the limits—making it impossible for “slow” human force to manage it. As a result, intranets have started to be developed mostly to facilitate the growing need for administration management (i.e., document exchange, joint calendars, etc.). Their first feature presented an important improvement, but also served as a type of barrier for greater intranet implementation. The administrative component of intranet was relatively cheaply developed and implemented (especially now that hardware is already available) and thus managers seldom realized the possibility for implementation of more complex intranets, providing extra benefits, but also enduring extra costs. However, with the development of interactive technologies, intranets have become strong powerful tools providing companies (which adequately utilize

them) substantial competitive advantage which could not be ignored. Thus, more and more they have started to be implemented as overall management tools—serving as support systems for knowledge management, process management, project management, and so forth.

In order to analyze this powerful business tool, we provide the following discussion which points out some of the most important concepts surrounding intranets and their implementation.

We define **intranet** as being **the internal network using Internet-like infrastructure and protocols which efficiently facilitates communication, collaborative work, information exchange and strong knowledge development platform providing incontestable competitive advantage** (Baker, 2000; Bland, 2002; Bodendke & Denton, 2006; Chou, 1998; Cumming & Cuthbertson, 2001; Damsdaard & Scheepers, 1999; Denton, 2006; Denton & Richardson, 2006; Delarge, 2003; Dolphy & Kala, 2001; Edenius & Borgerson, 2003; Mphidi & Snman, 2004; Siegel, Hartmen, & Quershi, 1998; Standing & Benson, 2000; Stenmark, 2006; Wen, 1998; Wen, Ye, & Lin, 1998; Wen et al., 1998; Vlasic, 2006). As seen here, many authors have recognized these characteristics of intranets.

Before further analyzing intranets, we need to define a closely related concept: the extranet. Some authors see it as a network of intranets (Angeles, 2001). Others view it as an extension of intranets, allowing “outside” users to access data (Bland, 2002). Similarly, Baker (2000) defines extranets as providing secure access to defined (usually vital) data to select outside users. Delarge (2003) stresses the point that extranets enable suppliers and distributors to contribute more efficiently to value adding (Lee-Kelley et al., 2004).

Bernard (1998, p. 363) defines an extranet simply as the “use of the Internet to reach intranet.” Likewise, Siegel et al. (1998) indicate that extranet present a “bridge” between the “public” Internet and “private” intranet. O'Shea (2002) points out that extranets enable greater control while completely utilizing all the advantages of Internet. Similar

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