Intranet — not Internet

How to take advantage of a captive Web site   **Interviewed by Chelan David**

In this digital age, it can be frustrating for employees to have to root through paper files to locate the contact information of their insurance provider. Ditto for having to look through earmarked pages of an employee handbook to determine the correct procedure for a certain task.

Developing a custom intranet site not only alleviates the need for employees to thumb through cumbersome paperwork, it can also help in relaying important information such as revised sales quotas. Of course, only members within the organization are privy to such information.

It is important to note that an intranet differs from the Internet.

"An intranet is a Web site that is inside your network," explains Hormazd Dalal, president of Castellan Inc. "It functions the same way as the Internet, but is available only to people from inside your network."

There is no magic formula that makes an intranet desirable for employees to peruse. To make it a part of their daily routine, it is important to provide relevant information that is pertinent to their job description. When managed effectively, it can be a strategic asset that provides a competitive advantage.

Smart Business spoke with Dalal about the benefits that companies can receive from having a custom intranet site, how its applications differ from groupware software packages and what factors to consider when outsourcing the development of an intranet.

How can a business benefit from having a custom intranet site?

There are many uses for an intranet site. It is, in effect, a bulletin board: a place where up-to-date sales figures can be put and where you can post documents for immediate download. It's a central location where private, personal information that is only available for either certain work groups or the internal company is available. Examples would be a copy of the employee handbook and a calendar of company-related events like paydays, people's birthdays, important how-to docu-

Hormazd Dalal
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ments and information about the tasks that they perform. Of course, the uses of an intranet vary from business to business.

How does an intranet differ from groupware software packages?

Groupware software packages are based on the user. A user, as a member of a group, can interact with other members in the group. Groupware software packages such as Outlook, with Exchange in the back end, allow you to perform such functions as maintaining public folders and tracking tasks.

An intranet is a Web site, so it typically doesn't actively prompt a user to do a task. A user can go to an intranet, however, and look at a list of tasks or information.

One of the biggest differences between an intranet and groupware software packages is that an intranet is more passive, although more sophisticated portal products such as Microsoft's SharePoint are more active.

How secure are intranets?

Intranets are very secure. In fact, they are as secure as any other file on your internal network. They get backed up inside your

network, and typically, they are not accessible from the outside. They shouldn't be, and that is what defines an intranet.

What factors should a company consider when outsourcing the development of an intranet?

Development of an intranet is no different than development of a Web site, so it can be done internally. The one difference between an intranet and the Web page on your external Web site is that the intranet is far more dynamic — changes are made to it readily. For example, we have a customer who maintains their entire force's sales figures on a monthly basis. Someone internally typically needs to have the ability to upload this easily.

The intranet needs to be developed so that it can be managed by an internal person. Posting information on the bulletin board should not be outsourced; that needs to be done on the inside.

Once up and running, how should an intranet be managed?

Once up and running, you should have one person who is responsible for the integrity of the information on the intranet. It is their responsibility to make sure that is updated and has all of the latest and greatest information such as new hires, birthdays, changes to documents, etc.

What are some of the initial costs of setting up an intranet? In other words, what types of software and hardware components are needed?

If you have any Windows server running in your organization — which most businesses do — you already have the software and the hardware to run your intranet. The costs of setting it up are just the labor and the service cost of having someone actually build and develop the Web site.

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