

Oh, the Intranet! Communication leaders share their thoughts on what we've learned from 10-plus years of Intranet usage

Oh, the Intranet! Twenty years ago, back in the "stone ages" of employee communication, Intranets didn't exist in organizational communication (for the "old timers," how can one forget those Wang word processors).

Now, here we are in 2006 and the Intranet is the electronic bulletin board of the 21st century workplace. Some communicators see their Intranet as well liked and heavily used, while others are frustrated with lack of usage and the ambivalent attitudes of their employees.

Intranets are now entering the mature stage of their technological life. Looking back on the past 10-plus years of Intranet experience, what have organizations and their communication professionals learned from operating their Intranets? We put that question to several top employee communication leaders, and in the remainder of this article we'll share their thoughts with you.

Start with a vision...and collaboration does count

Some Intranets have been built piecemeal, in haphazard fashion, with no overarching plan to guide their development. That approach won't work, says Angelo Ioffreda, vice president of internal communications for Sodexho, Inc., North America's largest provider of food and facilities management and employer of 120,000 people.

Ioffreda has spoken to various groups in recent years about his highly regarded Intranet site, *SodexhoNet*. He told *Ideas for Employee Communications* that an Intranet site simply won't be effective if you don't start with a clear

vision of what you want it to achieve. "At the end of the day, *SodexhoNet* is about making the lives of our employees easier and our company more productive and competitive," he says. "We think of our site as an essential business and communication tool; it's got to have robust, timely, relevant and accurate content and be easy to navigate and search. Each step we take in improving our Intranet ties back to our strategic plan for this tool."

"A strategic plan for your Intranet is a must and so is close collaboration with your IT organization," says Keith Moore, who joined Fortune 200 industrial giant Textron last fall as manager of employee communications, but who has extensive experience with Intranets at previous employers. "You *must* build a good working relationship with your IT team and, most importantly, tap their ideas for software and design. Don't try to do an Intranet project on your own and shut out IT. Remember, the IT folks know the ins and outs of your organization's information technology infrastructure

(continued on page 2)

"Our managers are busy people, serving customers and clients. SodexhoNet (shown above and on page 2) allows them to conveniently access the information and applications they need, when they need them."

— Angelo Ioffreda, vice president of internal communications, Sodexho

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

But what about production employee access to the Intranet?	3
A blogging we will go... or not go?	4
Executive webcasts...one communicator's lessons learned . . .	5
Pondering portal planning	6
A message from Motiv8 Communications	6

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– Angelo Ioffreda, vice president of internal communications, Sodexho

SodexhoNet® offers navigation by department on the left side of the home page, business units are listed across the top, weekly highlights in the center, and quick links to key information are on the right.

and they can help you avoid a lot of headaches in implementation."

Adds Ioffreda: "There are two partnerships that are essential to a successful Intranet – IT and HR. IT because technology helps to enable the site, and HR because it owns most of the content (and self-service applications) of interest to employees."

'The Google Effect' means your Intranet must be easy to use

Building Intranet usage has been a tough nut to crack for many organizations. Some send out e-mails with teaser heads that contain links to more details or newly posted information to drive people toward the Intranet. Others simply have worked hard to make their home page a must read on a daily basis.

How well you organize and display material on your Intranet is critical for building user popularity. "Google is so popular because it's easy to use and it's a place where it's easy to find things. Communicators can't ignore 'The Google Effect' when they design an Intranet," says Textron's Moore. "The tendency is to

try and cram too many bells and whistles into a site and it becomes too slow and too complex for the user. Resist that tendency at all costs. Instead, put the effort into keeping your content fresh and informative."

Moore says it's imperative that communicators make the effort to learn what employees *really* want in their Intranet. "People need to find it real, and

(continued on page 3)

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valuable or they feel you are wasting their time, and the only way to know if you are on the mark is to do plenty of user testing," he says.

Moore notes that the Textron team tested several ideas with employees and the feedback obtained helped them. He advises communicators to be open and flexible to change. "Get feedback at all stages of development of your Intranet," he says. "Don't be afraid to experiment and change things on your Intranet. As your user input grows you will discover what works and doesn't work with your employees. Don't forget: this isn't print – you can change it quickly."

The little search engine that could

Several communication managers emphasized the importance of having a good search engine on their Intranet. "Don't skimp on the search engine," says Moore. "Busy employees want to be able to find information quickly and a mediocre search engine can turn people off to your whole Intranet." Moore says Google has a good application that organizations can buy and install for a fair price.

At the Federal Reserve Board, the search engine is called Index Quick Finder (see example, at right), a simple A-Z web page list with links. "The Quick Finder is by far the most used part of our site," says Tim Markey, manager of employee communications for the Board. "We have our editing unit maintain control so the list is well organized and we try to post only relevant topics on it so it doesn't get out of control."

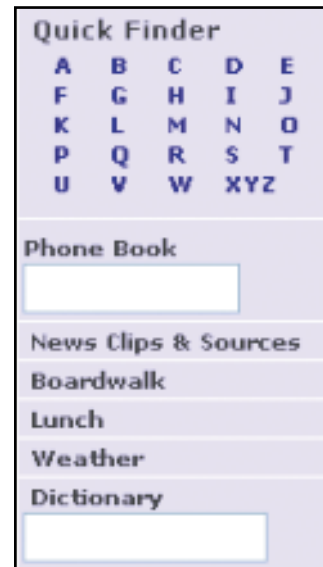
Making content meaty and meaningful

The Board's well constructed, easy-on-the-eyes "Inside the Board" Intranet home page is organized into three columns: the narrow left column lists the Quick Finder, phone number lookup, stock market watch, news clips, contacts, the Fed Web (a web page with Federal Reserve System links), external web site and other key resources. The narrow right column displays scheduled workshops and other self-help activities. The "real meat of the site" is the wider middle section that contains daily news

headlines and announcements about Board activities and people. Departments are listed in a color bar under the masthead and spot color is used to enhance readability. "You've got to group information in ways that make sense for your organization and make sense for the reader," says Markey.

Back over at Sodexho, *SodexhoNet* has navigation by department on the left side of the home page and business units are listed across the top. Other main areas of home page content include a search tool and phone directory, quick links to key Sodexho information, and a tip of the week to help employees be more effective in their work. "We also use banner ads which we swap out weekly or more frequently if needed," says Ioffreda. "For example, for Memorial Day we had a banner link to a list of Sodexho reservists to recognize their service. We also have links to the employee referral program and to our sales lead program."

(continued on page 4)



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But what about production employee access to Intranet?

Many communicators struggle with how to get information to shop floor production workers in an age of sophisticated electronic communication. Some develop kiosks or dedicated computer work stations that are set aside for production employee access.

But a truly satisfactory solution eludes most companies. "In my judgment, kiosks aren't very effective," says Textron's Moore, who echoes the feelings of many professional communicators.

"Production employees tell me they just can't find the time in the work day to access computers to check Intranets and e-mails," says Ron Hess, president of Motiv8 Communications. "In addition, employees are reluctant to use their personal time at lunch or before or after work for this kind of company business."

Some companies counter the problem through robust bulletin board programs where managers are urged to post key e-mail and Intranet information on well maintained bulletin boards in heavy traffic areas. This is a common solution, according to a random check of U.S. HR managers and professional communicators.

In other companies, a representative from HR or Communications will post the e-mail on the general communication bulletin boards on the production floor, by the time clocks and near the restrooms.

The other solution: just provide employees with Intranet access at home. If our readers have some ideas they'd like to share on this topic, drop us an e-mail at motiv8comm@aol.com.

(continued from page 3)

A growing number of communicators are developing specialized Intranet pages for restricted use by the management team. The focus is on, guess what, communications! "Managers click on a box on the home page and type in a code to reach the dedicated page," says Textron's Moore. "This is a site we manage that has tools on key issues and communication tips and links. We have tried to make this page a place to learn and share and we eventually hope to establish a bulletin board on the page so managers can share ideas with each other."

"Putting these kinds of resources at one's fingertips really expedites communication and helps people get things done."

– Colleen Perrin, director of organizational communication, TO&PS, Wyeth

Sodexo's site is becoming a "one-stop shop for all our managers' information needs and is an indispensable part of a Sodexo work day," says Ioffreda. "Our managers are busy people, serving customers and clients. The Intranet allows them to conveniently access the information and applications they need, when they need them."

In an age of cross-department, cross-site collaboration and teamwork, Colleen Perrin, director of organizational communications for Wyeth Pharmaceuticals' technical operations and supply organization, says that the most popular spot on her group's site is a listing of all manufacturing locations and the key products each one makes. "We've found through research that people really like that, and we keep it fresh," she says. "We also include names of key leaders there, along with contact information. Putting these kinds of resources at one's fingertips really expedites communication and helps people get things done."

Measurement is vital

"Whether you manage an Intranet or an Internet or both, it is absolutely imperative that you measure," says Ioffreda. "We think of measurement as a three-legged stool that allows us to continually improve. We have: 1) surveys, focus groups, and other user feedback; 2) Web usage statistics that tell us where people go, when they go, and how

long they stay; and 3), we do usability testing to ensure that our sites are easy to navigate, relevant, and make sense from a user's perspective. We call this a 'data-driven' approach to web site improvement."

Where is it all going?

"I see a continued drive toward personalization and customization of Intranets," says Textron's Moore. "I think we'll see Intranets also develop more as two-way communication tools."

Shiv Singh of leading technology and design firm Avenue Razorfish (www.avenue-razorfish.com) adds this perspective in an article on the firm's web site: "Today, corporate e-mail, telephony, mobile warrior applications, virtual team rooms, executive dashboards and enterprise Intranets are distinct tools with independent owners, budgets and business cases behind them. However, in the not-too-

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distant-future, you'll have a single, integrated voice and data interface that will combine these tools in a dynamic, natural and adaptive manner. Expect this trend to hit you in the next two to three years."

No matter what form or direction Intranet development takes, professional communicators need to keep alert and stay abreast of the leading thinking in the field. Your organization's competitiveness depends on it.

A blogging we will go... or not go?



One of the most difficult issues for communication professionals these days is whether or not it makes sense to add an internal blog to the portfolio of employee communication system products.

"Generally, I think organizations are taking a cautious approach," says Ron Hess of Motiv8 Communications. "Some continue to look at it closely and adopt it, while others recognize the dangers of angry employees pulling off comments on controversial subjects and sending them to the media, or writing false or damaging info that they share with co-workers. The other big issue is the communication professional's time – if you are asked to play a role in managing content. This could be a minefield for a communicator."

Certainly, blogs can be fabulous for getting employee input and ideas, but organizations may continue to use other knowledge sharing approaches, including some interesting new approaches like wiki, which uses the Wikipedia concept, in which smaller companies allow employees to add or edit content on their Intranet.

"For sure, the most successful blogs are the ones where the writers keep their comments business focused rather than going off on tangents," says Hess. "The big question: Can employees stay on topic and will the people who have something really important to say be reluctant to say it?"

To accomplish that, some businesses have set up basic ground rules to keep blog user comments and discussion on topic and professional in tone.

With more than 8 million blogs – and growing – in the United States alone, employers will find themselves dealing with issues related to personal blogs, too, just as they scratched their heads a decade ago when they tried to decide how to deal with employee e-mail and Internet use. "Your job as a communicator: put employees on notice of the do's and don'ts of blogging," says Hess, "and help your organization develop a well-thought-out blogging policy if it doesn't have one, or at the very least, add references to blogs in your company computer use policy."

Need to put together a senior executive webcast?

An experienced communicator offers some do's and don'ts

Christy Hawley, manager of corporate communications and news services for Dana Corp., has the confidence of her leadership when it comes to employee communications. She and her CEO have been in the business of preparing and conducting webcasts for three years now. What follows are some lessons learned from Hawley's experiences.

- ✓ When selecting a webcasting vendor, do work closely with IT to ensure that whatever provider selected is compatible with your company's internal capabilities. Be sure that your webcasting team includes the executive IT professional to handle all technical aspects of the event.
- ✓ Do have a strong understanding of what your leadership's needs are for webcasting events. How often will your CEO hold a global webcast? Will he/she hold the webcast in front of a live audience?
- ✓ Discuss with your leader whether he or she expects secured webcasting. Outside vendors host webcasts on their servers. Therefore, your company's firewall will not be protecting potentially confidential information that could be shared during a webcast. Be sure that everyone is in agreement before signing any contracts.
- ✓ Do test your webcasting capabilities multiple times. You do not want your CEO to lose credibility because you didn't realize that half the organization didn't have audio streaming capabilities.
- ✓ If you are part of a global company, select a time for the webcast that ensures the best possible attendance worldwide. Provide a secured replay of the event for those that are unable to attend the live meeting.
- ✓ Do provide employees with the opportunity to ask questions, via the web, during the webcast. This may be the only time they have an opportunity to interact

with top leaders. Simply don't underestimate the importance of employees being able to interact with top leaders.

- ✓ Shy away from having the entire leadership team participate in global webcasts. Let the chairman/CEO have the spotlight with an occasional guest speaker. Face the facts: most people want to hear the President speak, not the VPs.
- ✓ Allow employees to submit questions before the event. If they do not, draft 5-10 questions you think employees would like answers to, and have Legal review them. Sometimes employees will be timid about asking questions during a live event. This process will allow your CEO to answer questions and hopefully, give people the chance to think of additional questions.
- ✓ Be wary of allowing live questions over a phone line during the webcast, particularly if your company is publicly traded or unionized. If your company is publicly held, be aware of selective disclosure laws and involve Legal in the script and slide review, as well as the Q & A.
- ✓ Keep a log of all the questions asked before and during the meeting for reference for later webcasts. You will find that employees tend to ask the same questions event to event.
- ✓ Do provide employees with as much advance notice as possible of the date, time, and topics covered in the webcast to ensure their attendance.
- ✓ Do develop surveys so that employees can provide feedback of the event.
- ✓ Do have back up computers, equipment, and a plan in place for the webcast to ensure that it can continue in the event something fails. Test this plan several times before the actual event.

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– Christy Hawley, manager of corporate communications and news services, Dana Corp.

- ✓ Recruit enough people to help you the day of the event and practice with them to ensure they are comfortable with their roles.
- ✓ If you elect to use an outside company to host your event, spend plenty of time learning their software. The sales staff will tell you how easy it is to use. Don't bank on that....study it inside and out. All software has glitches. Be sure you don't discover them during your CEO's live event.
- ✓ If possible, have your leadership attend a dry run on the first event so they are comfortable with the process. If you are using microphones, this is a good time to test the sound levels and make adjustments accordingly. Have a check list and a plan to follow and share copies of this with everyone involved.
- ✓ Keep topics basic and relevant. It is best to have the CEO speak on one or two major points as opposed to trying to cover as much information as possible. Remember, the point of the CEO speaking to the company is to communicate a vision and instill confidence in the leadership of the company. Details about every facet of the business are not necessary. Keep the event snappy – less than one hour, preferably thirty minutes – and that includes the Q & A.

"Based on the feedback we get, a large majority of employees appreciate the webcasts and said they greatly benefited from them," says Hawley. "The main reason is because it is one of the few times they may get the chance to interact with the CEO in a

(continued on page 6)

Webcasts

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company the size of Dana. Webcasts are not only a great way for leadership to share their vision, but also their own personality and character, which I believe is a very important part of leading."

She continues: "Another benefit of holding executive webcasts is that people are

able to hear information straight from the horse's mouth. All too often in large companies, middle management fails to communicate major initiatives effectively, or not at all. If employees hear these initiatives brought by the CEO, it forces middle management to address them.

"Gotta run," concludes Hawley. "I'm off to rehearse for tomorrow's webcast!"

Communicators: Got a story idea for us?

If there are subjects you would like us to focus on in future editions of *Ideas for Employee Communications*, send your idea to us via e-mail at: motiv8comm@aol.com.

Reminder: Previous issues of *Ideas* can be found at the Motiv8 Communications web site at www.motiv8comm.com.

Pondering portal planning

Portal software platforms are all the rage these days as organizations see benefits of consolidating applications and content into a single, customized package. Christy Hawley, manager of corporate communications and news services for big auto parts maker Dana Corp., offers these tips to communicators preparing for a future portal blast off:

- Get executive support throughout the organization, but preferably have an executive champion
- Involve the business constituents prior to selecting a portal product. Make sure IT and Purchasing groups understand the business needs. This must be *collaborative*
- Don't publish content for the sole purpose of utilizing a new tool that was included in the portal software package.

"A portal-driven Intranet, with its many capabilities for collecting and sharing information, can be a tremendous competitive tool for an organization."

— Christy Hawley, manager of corporate communications and news services, Dana Corp.

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