

THE HINDU Business Line

Business Daily from THE HINDU group of publications

Monday, Mar 26, 2007

Scoring more hits

Companies are tapping the intranet for more functions besides internal communication. A sampling of innovation to boost the bottom line.



Smartness lies not so much in doing different things as doing things differently, say the experts. The intranet is a case in point.

Until recently, the intranet focused mainly on internal communication. But now companies want it to drive business and reflect in cost savings. Hence, they are looking to use it as a business tool too.

Here's a sampling of responses from companies big and small that eWorld sounded out.

At Perot Systems, if your keyboard breaks down, you don't call the service department. Message a complaint to the human resources (HR) team through the intranet and it will be listed, tracked and addressed shortly.

This practice applies across the administration, hardware, software and HR departments of the company. In fact, there are service level agreements between departments to track work progress. The result — 60 per cent cost reduction in administration and staffing.

"Today, we have only 15 HR employees handling a 2,500 headcount," says Vardhman Jain, Managing Director, Business Process Solutions India Operations - Perot Systems. Other organisations of this size have about 50 HR employees.

Data access - 5 times faster

Polaris spent over a year developing its intranet. According to V Balakrishnan, CIO, Polaris initially used PeopleSoft's tools to design its backend database containing forms and employee details. It later developed a flexible front-end portal using IBM's Domino platform.

Though employees used the front-end more often, they still had to access the back-end portal for filling forms such as leave application. Moreover, making changes on the backend portal was difficult and time-consuming.

There were two solutions to sort this problem — set up separate user logins for both portals or link the two through a single user login. Balakrishnan's team chose the latter.

Today, employees work only on the front-end and a super channel automatically transfers changes to the backend. The result? — Data access is at least five times faster.

This gave the team the confidence to work on another aspect: linking Intranet modules on revenue forecasting, revenue accrual, invoicing and collection so that minor differences and delays could be avoided.

Enter domain - and voila!

Buoyed by these successes, the team incorporated some more features into the intranet.

For instance, while composing mail to project-specific e-mail groups, one need not even remember the name of the project. Just enter the project domain (banking or insurance for instance) and voila, all your team members are automatically included. This is a boon for employees who are part of multiple projects and senior management personnel who handle different job roles.

Other interesting features are voice mail and a Polaris Wikipedia.

Virtual M&A bridge

Mergers and acquisitions can make employees insecure. While it is impossible for HR personnel to clarify doubts and reassure staff individually, the same can be done using the intranet, as demonstrated by Tata Consultancy Services (TCS).

During the integration of Tata Infotech with TCS in 2005-06, the intranet brought employees from both the companies on a single platform. A standalone microsite created on the TCS portal linked Tata Infotech offices. "This became a virtual bridge between us," says Harish Menon, Head, Internal Branding and Communication, TCS.

The microsite hosted joint discussion forums where employees of both companies participated on topics such as 'achieving synergies', 'steps for a smooth transition' and 'ten best practices'. Common goals and business interests were also shared.

While this may not have impacted business costs directly, it may have prevented attrition to an extent.

The TCS intranet has also been used to facilitate contributions towards victims of natural calamities. While 50,000 employees contributed to the Tsunami relief, more than 3,000 US-based employees accessed the portal for contributions to Hurricane Katrina relief.

For employees travelling abroad, the intranet offers guidelines on technical English in an interactive format. Information on visa and travel advisory is also available. Adding such content has resulted in expanding the intranet development team from four to 13 members. "In 2002, we created an average of seven new pages a week. Now, it is 12 new pages a day," says Menon, indicating that intranets today are getting niche.

Skirting the extra spends

Take the instance of Natural Search, an 85-people strong Internet content development company. Its intranet has super specialised research communities where employees share knowledge on topics such as "keyword generation" and "google ad words quality index". The company's Director, Ravi Shankar, says this has avoided the costs to set up a full-fledged research team. He also feels the intranet will help initiate technical employees into developing interest in marketing-related research.

Share and sell

But how does a large technology marketing company structure its intranet? Ask Vikram Franklin, Group Brand Manager, Systems Advisers Group, whose intranet is accessible to his clients and partner companies besides employees. "Sharing data on marketing campaigns, collateral, sales and pre-sales has helped our design and advertising companies reduce marketing proposal preparation time by up to 15 days," he says.

Think smart

24/7 Customer has used its intranet to get ideas from employees to improve business operations. Employees can post their ideas on an online suggestion box. If these ideas are accepted or implemented, they are rewarded. "We have received over 2,000 suggestions and successfully implemented some of them, either to improvise a process or cut costs," says S. Nagarajan, Co-Founder of the company.

Torry Harris Business Solutions too has worked on an idea to develop a skill management system to track individual skills. Employees can update their certifications on the intranet, which is then automatically mapped on to the individual skill matrix.

Ajuba International uses intranet quizzes to train and test employees on domain knowledge and compliance-related issues in the US healthcare market. Companies such as Slash Support and ThoughtWorks use their intranet to share the hands-on experience of employees while servicing clients. This could mean dedicated portals for technology support engineers, developers, lean software development and many others. IT hosting company NaviSite stores relevant external consumer research, besides in-house data.

The comfort cushion

Besides business and learning, some companies have also used the intranet to enhance employee comfort. Scope International has a virtual concierge service that takes care of employees' off-job requirements such as domestic help, making travel arrangements, paying bills and maintaining homes.

Technology solutions company Infogain facilitates carpooling and room rentals through its intranet.

WNS Global Services has tie-ups with entertainment, food and beverage companies to offer discounts to employees. The discount details are available on the intranet, besides other content such as music and videos.

At Ilantus Technologies, employees even get to design their own intranet!