

Introduction: Internal Communications

Finding a way to effectively communicate knowledge within a set of employees is not a new issue facing organizational leaders. Members of management at any given company face the decision of not only what to communicate, but also how, in a Web-savvy world that offers a cadre of communication tools. While the old guards like IBM's Lotus Notes are still used by hundreds of organizations worldwide, fresh new tools like social networking sites are viable replacements or supplements to the former. This report centers on both social networking as intranet hosts and the usability of Lotus Notes in a particular organization. Academic research, news stories and a usability test have informed this report and support the author's argument that social media should be adopted to at least supplement the Lotus Notes procedure database used at her place of employment. Informal polling of co-workers indicates a dislike of the Lotus Notes environment, which houses hundreds of procedures that can be difficult to find based on Notes' search process.

Knowledge Management and Intranets

According to a July 2000 issue of *Information Management Journal*, "knowledge is information that has been enriched through interpretation, analysis, and context ... Capturing why a decision was made and providing insight into the circumstances surrounding the decision-making process (who, what, where, when, why, and how) is the context that makes knowledge so valuable." (Duffy).

Duffy proposes that databases of policies and procedures, made available through some form of an organization-specific intranet, and subsequent threaded discussions among employees are vital components of a company's "knowledge assets"; hence, the implementation and maintenance of knowledge management. A 2005 article for *Information Services & Use* defines an Intranet as part of a company's internal information system, "dedicated to the support of group work and mastering of the organizational knowledge" (Bottazzo, 79). An intranet should support productivity by supplying

information arranged in an easily-accessible manner. (Please see Appendices 1 and 2 for components and benefits of well-planned intranets.)

According to experts in the field of internal communications and knowledge management, some companies are turning to three methods in particular of social networking: Web logs (blogs), Really Simple Syndication (RSS) Feeds and wikis. These tools serve as employee intranets, workspaces and forums for interpersonal communication, and are often free or low-cost. However, companies still face the question companies faced at the dawn of the World Wide Web's widespread accessibility: Do they choose a Web-based solution to communicate internally?

What organizations are using: Web-based Groupware and IBM's Lotus Notes

Many Web users already use some form of the three tools, making adoption of intranets developed on these platforms simple among employees who may already be familiar with blogs, wikis or RSS Feeds. However, Lotus Notes has been widely used to house company intranets globally for about two decades, and experts say this groupware still holds a lion's share of the market. Because competitors such as Microsoft Outlook have not been able to overcome the popularity of IBM's product, companies worldwide continue to use Lotus Notes despite its shortcomings: difficulty interfacing with the Internet, problems with replication, and the tendency for Notes to "creak" when used by more than 50 users are among common complaints, as is the lack of a rich set of scripting languages available on Web-based applications (Ginsburg and Dubilla, 5). When Ginsburg and Dubilla wrote their article in 1997, they acknowledged that Lotus Notes would inevitably suffer as more Web-based intranet solutions became available (23).

Lotus Notes offers replication as a way to track changes made to documents in its database (Hawkins, 1). However, as Ginsburg and Dubilla pointed out in their study of Lotus Notes versus Web-

based groupware, the replication process is flawed; the edit-tracking available in current groupware options such as wikis far outshines Lotus Notes' replication process.

In his 1995 article, Hawkins lauded Notes' searchable database, which permits users to search for information by subject, date or publisher (3). However, once key words are entered, the database is not intuitive enough to produce the most appropriate document. As documented in a Notes usability test (Appendix C) performed at NCIC, a user may be bombarded by dozens of documents about topics unrelated to their search because the database searched for any document containing the entered keywords – often, the user is forced to scroll down the results list to find the document he or she needs.

This unintuitive nature of Lotus Notes is at the core of an article in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, which observes that much of the application's fan base is composed of administrators, not user. The article notes:

“Where Notes does win praise is from those who administer it, who say it is secure, stable and flexible ... However, most people aren't administrators, and while Notes' back-end functions have advanced, its user interface has continued in a parallel universe where Windows never happened” (Arthur).

Blogs, RSS Feeds and Wikis

According to knowledge management expert John Fleenor, blogs, RSS Feeds and wikis are part of what he calls the “new Internet.” These three Web-based tools can serve as effective platforms for knowledge sharing in organizations, as well as storing information on effective employee practices and allowing employees to collaborate with others. In an article for *Leadership in Action*, he acknowledges these tools are impacting the way organizations do business and also impacting leadership in these organizations (Fleenor, 14).

According to Fleenor, RSS Feeds distribute content directly from the Internet. These feeds can be directed to a number of devices: mobile phones, pagers and computers (14). Jessica Levco, a writer for Ragan Communications, says RSS Feeds target only those people interested in receiving updates, and this allows companies to efficiently send organizational updates directly to those interested parties. However, organizations must aim for subscribers to opt-in to this information (Levco).

Fleenor notes that blogs, which he defines as unfiltered online journals, have been adopted at organizations to spread news of events, products and news from leadership (14). However, technology analyst Christopher Harris-Jones writes that while a blog is “a good method of distributing information...its value really ends there” (Harris-Jones, 21).

Among the literature about these “new Internet” tools, wikis are the stand out. Derived from “wikiwiki,” the Hawaiian word for “quick,” a wiki is a simple Web-based tool that generally allows any user to update Web pages within the application. Organizations that have moved to wikis watch their intranets blossom through staff-wide collaboration (Fleenor, 14). Wikis are frequently available through open-source software, meaning the tool is often free; as the need for certain design features or subscription services arise, an organization may face a nominal monthly or annual cost for its wiki (see Appendix D).

The Argument for a wiki

A wiki’s substantial ability to provide a secure and well-monitored intranet often falls victim to widespread pop-culture knowledge of the mother of all wikis, Wikipedia. This widely used online encyclopedia permits any viewer to contribute to its content. However, what many people don’t know is that wikis themselves offer tools that control access by limiting the type of access users have (Harris-Jones, 21). In a January 2009 *Intercom* article by wiki consultant Stewart Mader, the open-edit format Wikipedia may lead employers and employees to initially dismiss the idea of a wiki:

“This can lead to employees becoming concerned about all wikis being a free-wheeling, potentially anarchic mess. People look at Wikipedia and think they don’t want that inside their organization. But wiki use inside an organization and Wikipedia are two completely separate worlds” (Mader, 15).

Mader notes that wikis allow organizations to organize content appropriately: by department, project or team. Harris-Jones observes that wikis can be used “to create multiple workplaces with page hierarchies and page linking” and any user can contribute to the development of these pages; however, in a corporate setting, wikis offer the ability to “assign read-and-edit permissions” to the appropriate staff persons (Appendix G). Leadership can keep some content private, accessible to only certain staff members; other pages can be accessible to the organization as a whole. Because information is organized in one place, Mader says wikis are ideal for building documentation and reduce reliance on e-mails to share information.

“A team of people can use a wiki workspace to draft the content, make revisions, and produce a high-quality finished product that incorporates a wide range of input, with minimal e-mail and less time spent in lengthy meetings...people can simply subscribe to receive updates from the wiki via RSS or e-mail” (Mader, 15).

In addition, Mader notes that another advantage to managing content in a wiki is its portability: content can be exported into Microsoft Word or Adobe PDF files, allowing for printed documentation or e-mail attachments. As a Web-based application, a wiki is accessible wherever the Internet is available; that way, users with appropriate credentials can anywhere pull up information they need from a wiki intranet (15).

An article in the May 2007 issue of *T+D*, a publication of the American Society of Training and Development, discusses organizations that have successfully adopted wikis for internal communications.

These companies laud their wikis not only for the password-protected access and security, but also for its navigational tools and prompts that alert users to new document updates (Appendix F). A wiki functions in the background on MWA Bank's online "contact us" page; the wiki organizes a customer's information and request directly onto the employee intranet. The Defense Intelligence Agency uses an intranet called "Intellipedia"; Blackboard, an online software course management company, also uses a wiki for its intranet. Blackboard's Manager of Client Support, Jason Minkoff, is quoted saying the wiki is "searchable" and that it's "easy to create articles" on the tool. The article's author, Michael Laff, reports that Blackboard has consolidated all its internal communications in its wiki, where some of its documents are "read only" and "mistakes can be edited by experts as necessary" (30-31).

The consolidation of information is a time-saver, Laff points out, and this is one area in which not-for-profits benefit from wikis: using this tool, a not-for-profit can enter the answer to a commonly asked question and preserve it for the life of the wiki, rather than use manpower and resources to find an answer. He writes:

"The promise of the wiki is the ability to consult a single source for questions that seem to be asked repeatedly." (Laff, 31)

A March 2006 *Information and Technologies* analysis of wikis reports the tool was improved by yet another feature: Page History. This feature tracks previous versions of any given wiki page (Appendix E). That way, organizations can have a "safety net" that captures information previously contained in the document and its edits. The WikiTrail appears at the top and bottom of a document page, allowing users to easily access edits (Chawner and Lewis, 36-37). An *InfoWorld* article from 2004 points out that wiki's built-in lack of structure, which may be at first off-putting to some users, is actually a positive: the information housed in a wiki can be set up in any way that makes sense to the organization, without restriction. The wiki also allows for a news section, a community section in which employees can offer

and see feedback, an a monitoring tool that allows employees and administrators to track documents (Appendix I).

Conclusion

Rich Maggiani, a Society for Technical Communications fellow, wrote in the March 2010 *Intercom* that social media is useful for one-to-many communication, which is what many organizations try to achieve with their employees.

“Social media is immediate communication without borders. Social media is exponential and viral, allowing people to pass along messages to an ever-growing circle” (Maggiani, 33)

Maggiani notes that people use social media to communicate with coworkers in the very same building in which they work. He says they do so to eliminate the need for small talk, and because using a social media platform allows them to be “concise and succinct.”

Considering expert testimony regarding the usefulness of social media – wikis in particular – NCIC would seem to benefit from at least test-running a wiki among members of the Information Team, leadership and a sample of staff members. A wiki’s ability to automatically update employees via e-mail or RSS Feed when document content is changed would free up time the Information Team and leadership currently spend alerting employees to important changes in the Lotus Notes procedures database; this time could be spent managing the actual content of procedures, making them more user-friendly, concise and accurate. These goals can be obtained by using a wiki’s hierarchical structure, system of page linking and edit trail (for an example of a page link, see Appendix H).

Experts quoted within these pages acknowledge it is important to maintain procedures and other relevant content on a hard drive after adoption of a Web-based intranet. Companies that have deployed social media-based intranets likely still maintain their content on a client-side server like Lotus Notes offers. Were a Web-based intranet adopted as a supplement or replacement to the Lotus Notes procedure database, Lotus Notes could still be used for its e-mail and calendaring features. That way,

the assuredly significant resources the Society has spent to obtain and maintain Lotus Notes would not go to waste.

Results of the Employee Usability Test (Appendix C) show that any given Lotus Notes procedure can take any given employee between one and six minutes to find and navigate. A Web-based solution may offer better search options, better results and a more user-friendly way to organize procedures and related procedures.

Effective intranets can be achieved using one or a combination of the three social networking tools (blogs, RSS Feeds and wikis), and if the last ten years of Web trends are any indication, these tools are here to stay – if not grow to achieve even greater potential and reach. NCIC could capitalize on the easy access, cheap deployment and efficient platform of any one of these tools to prepare its employees for the new wave of internal and interpersonal communication – a wave that is already almost entirely riding on the Web.

(Author's note: To access the sample wiki set up for the purposes of this report, please visit www.wikispaces.com and enter in username "AngieTest" and password "testing.")