



INTRANETS AND THE USERS WHO LOVE TO HATE THEM

"There's a bunch of stuff here about my company on this site, but it really doesn't help me function in my job."
(Anonymous employee response to survey about the company intranet.)¹

Both users and creators of corporate intranets are frustrated. In a recent Moreover survey, 58% of respondents said the Internet was their primary information resource at work, but only 11% considered the Intranet to be their main source of information.² Given all the money and effort that's gone into intranet sites, why do users find so little value in them?

By 1998, companies were already spending billions on intranets under the assumption that they would improve communication and lower costs. Soon private intranets began to look pretty much like the public Internet, an un-navigable mess of links and pages. Merrill Lynch, for example, recently reported having 200 separate intranet sites – sites, not pages. It's not surprising that busy users vote with their mice and head for Google.

What is surprising is that intranets have made so little headway, despite the many software solutions available. Content management applications allow managers to control the look and feel of their sites and slow page proliferation. These tools lessen the administrative headache, but they don't seem to be making the intranet any more attractive to employees. Perhaps it's time to set technology solutions aside and find out what the users want.

We know that people have come to associate the Internet with research and information delivery. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that of 126 million users in the U.S., 80% have used the Internet to answer a question.³ People seek all sorts of information on the Web, from health advice to product information to government forms, so it's not surprising that when workers have a question, they also turn to the Internet. It's fast, familiar, and easy to use.

If the users are satisfied with the Web as an information resource, it's tempting to let them use the Internet for research and the intranet for in-house content. However, searching for business information is more complicated than personal research. Users tend to underestimate the difficulty and overrate their own skill.⁴ Expert searchers know that search tools vary and often a different tool will yield a better result. However, few users try more than one search engine, even if the results are poor.⁵ Web-skills instructors report that users often depend on simple search strategies and pick an answer from the first page of results, assuming the search engine got it right. Simple search strategies are fine for locating a recipe for mango chutney, but inadequate for comprehensive research about a competitor's new product.

Persistent users may be willing to put more effort, but that's time consuming. Outsell, Inc. reports that the average knowledge worker spends about 8 hours a week searching. Most people are paid to find, not to search, so it's reasonable to help employees access information more efficiently and recoup some of that time. Both the worker and the company benefit from an intranet that offers search training and on-demand assistance from information professionals.

Another important barrier to serious research is the invisible web. For every page available on the free Internet, Bright Planet estimates that there are 500 pages behind firewalls or registration screens. Many of the best resources, from the Wall Street Journal to the prestigious journal Science, are not free because publishers wish to make a profit. The more credible and important the information, the more likely you will have to pay for it.

One approach that addresses both searching proficiency and efficient use of for-fee services is to treat the intranet as a virtual library, and to use the time-tested methods of organization and information provision that librarians have established over decades of information management. Users gain quick access to reliable sources, and managers can assess both the cost and the usage. A virtual library can help turn the intranet into a real portal with both key internal and external information available in one place.

Users have come to depend on the Web as an information resource for its speed and ease of access, but many of them need help to use it as a business tool. The thoughtful selection and organization of information resources gives users a good reason to go to the Intranet—it saves them time. They don't have to filter through all the stuff on the Web. Instead they know that by making the company intranet the first click, they will have the best chance of quickly finding what they need.

¹ Comment by a anonymous employee during a usability test, reported by Alison J. Head.

<<http://www.intranetstoday.com/Articles/?ArticleID=5279&IssueId=181>>

² "Intranets Take Second Place to Public Intranet." *Atlas Venture News*, February 9, 2004.

<http://www.atlasventure.com/home/news_content.asp?ne_id=1897>

³ America's Online Pursuits: The changing picture of who's online and what they do. December 22, 2003.

<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=106>.

⁴ "P.G. Daly's Intranet Talk: What Happens When the Intranet Users Have Spoken?." *Intranet Journal*, July 2000.

http://www.intranetjournal.com/articles/200007/ia_07_20_00a.html.

⁵ Chris Sherman and Gary Price. "The Invisible Web: Uncovering Information Sources Search Engines Can't See. 2001: Information Today. p.26