

A fistful of content: intranet content governance and ownership

Effective content governance is one of the biggest challenges to achieving intranet success, with the need to resolve myriad ownership issues driving demand for a defined governance model.

MANY YEARS ago, at the dawn of the intranet era, content management was the Wild West of the corporate world. The sheer expanse of the unexplored territories offered limitless possibilities, and content pioneers flocked in search of their own stake in the intranet. With promises of gold, fortune and adventure, how could they deny the call of the wild?

Instead, what they found was solitude, hardship and danger. As more and more people – content owners, developers and end-users – migrated, the situation grew steadily worse. Everyone claimed ownership over pieces of the intranet whether it was theirs or not. It was bedlam. There was no established infrastructure or organisation of any kind; workers did what they wanted, when they wanted, with little respect towards others.

Information wielding content owners strutted about posting whatever they felt was relevant, and then leaving their wares unattended to gather up dust. Hapless users who stumbled upon this content were not quite sure what to make of it. Was the information still applicable or was it left there months ago?

The corporate powers that be recognised the need for some semblance of order. Things couldn't go on the way they were without eventual disaster. It was a powder keg just waiting to blow. So they met and decided to formalise a set of processes on proper intranet content governance.

By Paul Chin

Where does content come from?

Before we can begin to discuss the issue of content governance and ownership, we need to understand where content comes from. While intranets serve different purposes within different organisations – content management, online collaboration, web-enabled database applications – an intranet's content is usually composed of two primary data types: internal knowledge assets (IKA) and external information sources (EIS).

Internal knowledge assets

Internal knowledge assets represent an organisation's intellectual property and are produced through the collective efforts of internal corporate employees. Unlike general information obtained from external third-party sources, IKAs consist of highly focused and industry-specific information.

Although IKAs take more time to produce, they get to the point quickly and don't contain a lot of the embellishments often found in content destined for an outside audience. Given that they represent employees' knowledge and expertise, IKAs require a far greater level of confidentiality since this type of information is unavailable – and should not be made available – to the general public.

External information sources

External information sources are content that can be obtained through the public domain such as websites, newspapers or trade magazines. They can also be obtained through paid subscriptions to third-party information vendors who aggregate and deliver content based on user-defined topics. EISs are a great way to obtain a large amount of content in a fairly short period of time.



It's quite common for employees to use EISs as the basis of research in the development of IKAs. However, there are two caveats with EISs: first, since EISs – whether delivered automatically or collected manually – are not developed in-house and can be easily obtained in large quantities, an intranet may become a tempting dumping ground for all of this information. Second, the copyright laws and usage conditions associated with content to be used in an intranet must be respected. Otherwise, unlawful use or reproduction of content may result in costly litigation.

Who governs and owns this content?

Large-scale corporate intranets are often divided into several sections, each governed by its own content owner, or group of content owners. It's the responsibility of these content owners to identify, process and deliver intranet content to an organisation's user community. And it makes sense that those who know their content best be the ones to hold ownership over it.

Unfortunately, too many content owners leave this responsibility in the hands of IT. This makes about as much

	Pro	Con
IKA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly selective and focused on the specific industry, projects or contracts of the organisation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created from scratch and require more time and effort to produce.
EIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtained through the public domain or content vendors and result in quicker content delivery times. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is more generalised. The sheer volume that can be obtained may also turn an intranet into a dumping ground.

sense as IT giving an end-user full administrative rights to the web server. IT, or any third party for that matter, has no vested interest in seeing that content is kept up to date, or whether the content is even relevant. Content owners who thought it important enough to post a particular piece of information should also see the importance in ensuring that this content is maintained properly afterwards. Intranet content management requires content owners to ensure the integrity of the information they enter into the system over the course of its entire lifecycle – it's not a 'post it and leave it' affair.

If content owners orphan their content after it has been entered into the intranet, it will eventually grow stale and clutter up the system. This will not only reflect very poorly on the intranet and those affiliated with it, but it will also cause the user community to doubt the true usefulness of the system. And once users lose faith in the intranet it will be very difficult to win them back.

Encouraging content owners to manage their content

It's perfectly understandable that content owners have other commitments and responsibilities beside the corporate intranet. Hectic schedules and other project deliverables may force them to

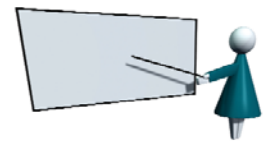
push content management issues aside or to carry them out hurriedly.

But intranet content management should not be allowed to become a footnote on someone's task list. Content owners' efforts and attitudes, or lack thereof, will reflect upon the quality of the information they input into the intranet. If they believe in the system and take pride in what they are doing, they will be more likely to put in that extra effort. But if they were somehow pulled into the project against their will, they will lack the motivation to carry out their duties.

The role of content owners

- Identify the content needs of their users;
- Research and development of relevant content, and managing this content on their section of the intranet;
- Ensuring the overall integrity of their section of the intranet.





The role of the intranet overseer

- Acts as a liaison and co-ordinates the efforts of all the various intranet team members – developers and content owners;
- Acts as the key point of contact in all matters relating to the organisation's intranet;
- Ensuring the overall integrity of the system: intranet, content and team members.

While the cultural dynamics of every organisation are different, here are five key ways to help encourage content owners to govern their own section of the intranet:

1 – Set corporate intranet standards

All content owners and IT personnel must agree upon a formal set of intranet standards and guidelines related to the governance of both the system and its content.

2 – Allow a certain level of autonomy

While each intranet section's content owner must comply with the overall

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standards and guidelines set by all members, they shouldn't be ruled with an iron fist. Each content owner must have a certain level of autonomy – within the scope of the agreed upon standards – in governing their section of the intranet.

3 – Avoid content owner conscription

Never pull someone into a project against their will. This destroys morale and will cause resentment towards the system and those working on it. Some may refuse to participate, while others may vent their frustrations by undermining the integrity of the intranet.

4 – Provide them with the infrastructure

Make it as easy as possible for content owners to add and update their content. This is usually IT's mandate: to provide content owners with the tools to manage their content without becoming overly involved with the technology behind the system.

5 – Provide adequate training

People tend to fear the unknown, so throwing someone into the responsibility of governing an unfamiliar system will cause them to walk on eggshells. They will be afraid to touch anything for fear of something going wrong. All content owners must be provided with proper

training. This is especially true for those who are not technically inclined.

Appointing an overseer

Most, if not all, large-scale content-management systems rely on the co-operation of distributed multidisciplinary groups of self-governing content owners. But, with so many people involved, it's easy for things to get out of hand. Each content owner will naturally be looking after the best interests of their own intranet section, and this may sometimes happen at the expense of other content owners.

An independent, non-partisan overseer must be appointed to co-ordinate the efforts of all the various intranet content owners in order to ensure there's no duplication of effort and to help identify key areas of improvement within the intranet. In certain cases, the overseer even acts as a mediator when groups don't agree on some aspect of the system.

It's the overseer's responsibility to ensure the integrity of the intranet, its content and its team members as a whole rather than any one particular segment. This is vital in preventing any one group from hijacking the system and undermining the objectives of other groups.

What's IT's role in content governance?

IT should never be pulled into the role of managing content. The primary focus of this department must remain with the technology and infrastructure behind the system, not its content.

IT needs to work towards developing and implementing a content-management infrastructure that will enable content owners to govern their section of the intranet without having to know too much about the technical aspects of the system. The less content owners have to worry about the nuts and bolts, the more they can concentrate on their content.

The role of IT

- Implementation of tools and infrastructure that will enable content owners to manage their content without having to rely too heavily on IT;
- Provide technical support and training to the content owners;
- Ensuring the overall integrity of the intranet's infrastructure: security issues, data backups and restores, maintaining disaster recovery procedures.

THE WORKSHOP... continued

It's in IT's best interest to put in place all the necessary tools and procedures so that content owners can manage their content with a fair amount of self-sufficiency, thus minimising reliance on IT for content matters. To accomplish this, IT needs to:

- Provide content owners with the proper tools and infrastructure to manage their content. This can be in the form of commercially available products such as FrontPage or Dreamweaver, or in the form of an in-house developed application;
- Automate as many intranet content housekeeping tasks, such as content archiving, in order to minimise the need for human intervention;
- Provide content owners with proper training on the use of intranet management tools.

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Intranets are ongoing projects

It's important to remember that intranets are an ongoing effort; they evolve to meet new and changing business requirements. And all those involved with intranet management – at both the content and technology levels – must stay in tune with these changes. As intranets grow and become more content heavy, the importance of proper management increases as well.

A well-developed intranet must never be allowed to revert back to the days of the Wild West where everything was up for grabs and no one was accountable

for their content. If content owners and technology personnel ride off into the sunset expecting the intranet to take care of itself, it will only be a matter of time before all users do likewise. And then the only thing left behind will be a desolate ghost town that was once a flourishing community known as the corporate intranet. ■

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