

Intranets

The human side of intranets **PART II**

In the second part of this series, Paul Chin looks at the interplay between intranet, organisational culture and the user communities within these cultures.

DOES AN organisation's culture change to adapt to a new system or does that culture alter the shape of the system itself? The answer to this question can be found in the natural world – by looking at how large rocks alter the direction of water as it rushes downstream. While these rocks influence the movement and path of the current, they don't go unchanged themselves. As water moves over and around these immovable rocks, their jagged surface is slowly reshaped into a smooth, marble-like finish.

Similarly, there's a symbiosis between organisational culture and the systems developed to support that culture: Both influence the course and outcome of the other. An intranet affects organisational culture and the way in which its members function as much as that culture shapes – and in certain extreme cases, completely changes – the outcome of the system.

Understanding your culture

Organisational culture is comprised of the collective attitudes, personalities and behavioural patterns of all its members. Most new employees will get a sense of their organisation's overall culture within a few days of working there. They will know whether their work atmosphere

By Paul Chin

leans towards the traditional and conservative, or if it's a more laid-back environment where employees aren't shy about openly mocking their neighbour's favourite football team with a carefully placed sign.

Culture plays a big role not only in defining the shape of an intranet, but also in determining its ultimate success or failure. Even the most carefully planned and developed intranet can fall flat if the user community isn't willing to accept it into their day-to-day operation. This is because "paper planning" only accounts for a portion of an intranet's outcome; the rest is dictated by the users. And like the ebb and flow of water, no one can really predict which way it will go. One minute you're sitting quietly by the beach listening to the calm; the next minute the wind picks up and you're in up to your neck.

You must have an understanding of your organisation's culture and work habits before defining an intranet. There will be times when you're forced to compromise between what you would like to do and what your organisation's culture

will allow you to do. For example, original intranet specs might have included online collaboration tools such as discussion groups, community-driven knowledge-sharing wikis, and online conferencing. But what if your organisational culture is based on a clock-in/clock-out attitude and isn't conducive to knowledge sharing? If users aren't willing to co-operate and share information at a basic human level, they won't be likely to do it at an electronic level either.

In this situation, including online collaboration tools will be a huge gamble – one that may be expensive to take. You need to address the problem at the social, interpersonal level instead of adding another layer of technology to an unco-operative environment. The best case scenario would be that the introduction of these tools winds up improving overall collaboration – both interpersonally and electronically. The worst case scenario would be that the tools go unused, and the time and money that went into developing them will have been for naught.

The big decision that you'll need to make is whether to develop the system to match the habits of your user community and culture or to develop the system to best support your processes and have

trust in your culture's ability to adapt to the changes.

How negative cultures affect intranet outcome

Whenever new systems are introduced – especially ones that affect a large portion of an organisation's user base – an action-reaction effect is created: Either the intranet will change the way users work or the culture will dictate the final outcome of the intranet.

Whether it's the intranet or the culture that ends up yielding to the other is highly dependent on your users and how well they're able to adjust to new systems or processes. It's not uncommon to see some organisational cultures regress instead of progress when new elements are introduced. Rather than adapting to these changes, they will actually warp the new systems or processes to match the way in which they're used to working, outdated as they may be.

It's the responsibility of any intranet team to improve upon existing systems and processes, but a culture's inability, or unwillingness, to accept the necessity for change will impede these efforts.

This type of devolution will hamper the progress of your intranet and can significantly shorten its lifespan. It's crucial that you do not allow negative cultural habits and attitudes from adversely affecting your intranet. But there's no silver bullet here.

Most users will at least give new systems a chance before passing judgment. However, there will always be those within your user community who will either actively or passively reject anything you propose. These are the users you need to pay special attention to because their negative outlook can have a cascading affect on the rest of the user community.

But don't try to bowl over these doubters by taking a "my way or the highway" attitude; it will only push them further away. Instead, work with them and try identifying with their points of view. What are their primary concerns? Why are they so adamant in refusing to accept new systems? How do these changes affect their daily routine?

The primary doubters within organisational culture

Renegade developers

Non-IT affiliated developers who openly undermine the official intranet by developing unsanctioned applications outside organisational standards, insisting that they have better ways of doing things.

Sceptics

Users who constantly, and often baselessly, insist that whatever is brought forth will never work. Rather than giving new ideas the chance to take hold within the organisation, sceptics will hinder progress with unfounded and negative reactions.

Traditionalists

Users who are uncomfortable with new systems and technology. They prefer to maintain a rigid *status quo* regardless of changes in processes and business requirements.

Understanding these issues will be vital in ensuring that negative cultural attitudes don't adversely affect your intranet.

Cultural roadblocks to a healthy intranet

The effects of organisational culture on your intranet are as subjective as they come. The acceptance of a new system – or a substantial set of new features in an existing system – is dependent on the user community and how they have responded to changes in the past.

In order to create and maintain a healthy intranet, you need to be aware of the more influential cultural roadblocks that will affect your system:

Lack of team atmosphere

Much of an intranet's success relies upon the co-operation of contributing members within an intranet community. If there's a lack of teamwork within this

community, it will be reflected in the quality of the intranet and its content.

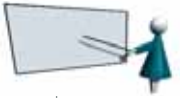
Resistance to change

People are creatures of habit – and these habits are often difficult to break. When users become accustomed to doing something a certain way, they may find it difficult to adapt to new systems. While those more technically inclined view new applications as an opportunity to test out new technology, casual users might perceive it as an unwanted disruption to their daily lives.

Information hoarding

An intranet is much more than the sum of its technological parts. It's fuelled and driven by content provided by members of the user community. Unfortunately, some employees might not be inclined to contribute to the organisation's intranet, choosing instead to hoard information

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for personal gain, self-promotion, or job security.

Fear of the unknown

People are afraid of the unknown and things they don't understand; for many, technology is at the top of the list. Some of the more timid and less technically-inclined users may be reluctant to experiment with new systems or features for fear of doing something wrong.

Unaccustomed to self-reliance

Intranets are self-service applications that provide users with a high level of autonomy. They allow users to eliminate the need for an informational middleman. But some users are accustomed to delegating the task of information gathering to others and may be uncomfortable with the level of self-reliance provided by an intranet.

Easing culture shock

Everyone needs to adjust to change, whether it's personal, organisational, business or technological. But few of us will take kindly to being thrown into ice cold water without being given the chance to adjust to the change in temperature.

While most users learn to adapt to conditions around them, problems will occur when changes are forced upon the user community without giving them the

chance to adjust. In order to minimise the potential negative affects of organisational culture, keep these three tips in mind:

Always allow a period of adjustment

Certain organisational cultures will have a difficult time making that transition from an old to a new system – especially those uncomfortable working with technology. To ease this changeover, it's always a good idea to run both systems in parallel while slowly phasing out the old. The only exception to this is if running parallel systems will cause data collision or duplication.

Provide education and training

To eliminate the fear of the unknown, provide users with system demos, training sessions, detailed documentation, and quick reference cards. This will take much of the mystery out of intranet usage and functionality. Rather than seeing it as some strange foreign object, users will be much more likely to use a new system once they become comfortable with it.

Make a pre-launch announcement

You should never sneak up on your users. Those who will be directly affected by the introduction of a new system must be given adequate prior notice before anything new is launched into the production environment so they won't be caught completely off guard.

All part of the whole

An organisation's culture is as much a part of an intranet as the technology and content used to build it. Intranets, more so than most other IT implementations, are community driven; and it makes perfect sense that the culture of that community plays a role in defining the shape of the system. You can have the most technologically advanced intranet in the industry with gigabytes of content, but if it conflicts with the work habits and culture of the community, the bulk of the system will go unused.

The affects of culture should never be left up to fate. You can't implement something new and hope that users will take to it. By recognising and acknowledging the idiosyncrasies of your audience and its culture during planning and development, you'll greatly improve your chances of getting users to accept what you have to offer. Otherwise, if you ignore the influences and impacts of culture on your intranet, the resulting system will look very different than what you had originally set out to build. ■

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