



## **KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT**

# A Manager's Guide to Knowing What You Know

by Jerry Lawson

**In the 1990s when Hewlett Packard was a world leader** in technology, its chief executive officer, Lewis Platt, observed: "If only HP knew what it knows it would make three times more profit tomorrow."

If government offices knew what they know, most also would see striking boosts in productivity. Unfortunately, knowledge management—the science of "knowing what you know"—is not that easy. (See the fall issue of *The Public Manager* for a forum on knowledge management.)

Most offices maintain paper files, but computer networking tools can take the concept to a whole new level. Intranets use central shared computers (servers) to organize institutional knowledge, a practice sometimes referred to as "knowledge management."

Many government organizations have adopted intranets to manage knowledge. With rare exception, the results are disappointing mainly because of the way they are managed—or, more precisely, not managed.

### **Barriers to Success**

Intranet-based knowledge management depends on users recognizing when they have created or found something that has value to the organization and

Intranets can be useful tools to codify organizations' knowledge, but only if managed properly. The biggest pitfall is a purely human issue.

## Intranet Basics

An intranet is a private website for use by members of a particular organization. It uses the same technologies as the public Internet, but restricts access to members of the host organization.

An intranet could be as simple as an organized collection of folders on a shared network drive, possibly supplemented with a static HTML page containing hypertext links to key resources.

It could be based on a commercial product such as Microsoft SharePoint, or be a custom design. It could be operated over a local area network. Some organizations are deciding to base their intranets in “the cloud”—the public Internet—but with access restricted to members of the sponsoring organization through the use of passwords or other security techniques. Google Apps is a popular cloud-based intranet host.

Here are a few items that might be included on an intranet:

- memorandums
- forms
- checklists
- collections of resources related to particular practice areas
- training materials
- wikis (user-editable web pages; good for sharing information)
- blogs (good for distributing and archiving announcements).

Many intranet owners find great value in including administrative materials such as office policies, announcements, or calendars. Office directories can be annotated to indicate areas of expertise, especially useful in larger offices.

As public offices increase the use of telework, having a high-quality intranet is becoming even more important.

taking the time to add it to the group’s store of knowledge, or help organize the knowledge. The biggest intranet pitfall is a purely human issue, something economists call the “free rider problem.”

Voting is an example: High voting rates provide theoretical benefits to society as a whole. However, in purely economic terms, voting does not make sense for individual voters. Voters incur costs when taking time off from work and driving to the polls. If the voter stays home, someone will be elected anyway. The practical effects of electing Candidate A instead of Candidate B rarely make a difference significant enough to repay the voter for the time and money invested in voting. Therefore, the economically rational course of action for most citizens is to stay home.

Intranets are a form of the free rider problem because return-on-investment to any individual contributor is typically too low to make contributing worth the contributor’s time. The economically rational course of action for most members of the organization is to be a free rider: Avoid contributing to the intranet, but make use of any worthwhile information others contribute. A friend at the National Science Foundation remarked, “People love to find stuff in those intranet directories, but it’s like pulling teeth to get people to share info and save it in there.”

Personality and power issues also come into play. Some employees hoard knowledge because they believe it will make them more important or powerful. Other employees distrust technology or have only a tenuous grip on it.

## Blinded by the Light of Technology

The glitter of technology may prevent managers from recognizing the problems. There is a tendency to assume that once an organization sets up the server and software, an intranet will magically self-populate and self-organize. As a professional evaluator might say, a functional intranet server is an output, not an outcome. It’s an intermediate step, not the desired end objective.

Ordering employees to contribute to an intranet works about as well as ordering people to have fun at a party. Establishing minimum contribution quotas is probably more harmful than beneficial. More subtle leadership techniques are needed.

## Introducing the Intranet to Your Users

Some people think about the “roll out” (first introduction to the user base) the same way that earlier generations thought about honeymoons: If this mysterious and critical event is concluded satisfactorily, a long and fruitful union is assured. A good initial experience with the intranet will give you a head start toward creating a successful intranet. Here are a few ideas:

- The best trainers will often be respected line employees, not information technology (IT) staff.
- Rather than a long initial orientation, it is better to have a short introduction supplemented by frequent and regular short training segments at staff meetings or via email and written handouts.
- Focus the training on practical examples that show the intranet saving time or improving the quality of the final product.
- Don’t rely solely on a live demo of the intranet.

## Training, Not Demos

Effective training rarely happens by accident. Most technically inclined trainers will assume that all they need to do is hook up their laptop to a projector and demonstrate for the audience how the intranet works. This almost never works as well as the trainer imagines it will.

It is difficult for audience members to follow a demonstration or remember how to do things once they are back at their own computers. Sometimes it's hard for the audience to even see the cursor, or tell which menu choice the instructor is selecting. There is a place for demos, but consider supplementing them with

- ♦ Paper handouts that illustrate and explain how to perform key functions. Screen captures can help. There's no substitute for a "take-away" the audience can reference later.
- ♦ A slide show presentation. Slide shows have a poor reputation because most are weak, but a good slide show can be an effective teaching tool, providing a conceptual framework for what you are trying to do with the intranet. Through the use of screen captures, enlarged and animated as needed, an audience can better see and understand the material.
- ♦ Periodic short, clear emails with simple explanations of how to perform intranet functions. These reminders build "mindshare," awareness of the intranet.

Consider generational issues. A generation that has grown up with Web 2.0 tools such as Facebook may be quicker to embrace online collaboration, but not all employees have such experience. Your training and motivational efforts should take these differences into account.

## Operating Your Intranet

First, understand that Intranets are not "fire and forget" weapons. Many course corrections will be needed at the beginning, and tweaks will always be necessary.

### Get De Facto Leaders on Your Side

Every organization has leaders and influencers who are not always apparent by looking at an organization chart. Involve these people with the intranet development from the beginning. These leaders will not always be "techie" types. This is a good thing, because your goal is to get your employees to think, "This is not a techie thing. It's for regular guys like me." Stress recruiting the most productive and respected employees, not necessarily the most technically inclined.

## Appoint the Right Administrator(s)

A minimum floor of technical knowledge is necessary, but beyond that, good judgment and enthusiasm are more important than technical skill. The best candidate will be someone your employees respect. Help the primary administrator(s) develop a team to help with the intranet.

## Give Users Reason to Visit the Intranet

Build awareness of the intranet. You have key information your workers will want, like office directories—or party invitations? Distributing by email attachments is convenient, but posting instead only on the intranet, with an email providing intranet location, is better in the long run.

The "flatter and suggest" technique is a proven winner: When an employee develops or comes across a good resource, a manager should tell the employee it's so valuable that she should upload it so it is available to everyone via the intranet. The employee or—even better, her manager—should then circulate an email containing a hyper-text link to it.

## Keep Format Secondary to Substance

Managers of one intranet told employees not to upload PDF files unless they were computer searchable. There was no explanation of what "computer searchable" meant. This requirement was a problem because many, possibly most employees in the organization, had no clue as to what was meant. The predictable result was to give the organization's employees one more reason not to contribute.

Computer searchable files are more valuable, but avoid barriers to contributing. If you decide that you must allow only computer searchable files, it is essential to provide an explanation of what this means and how to comply. It may be even better to encourage employees to contribute in any file format, and provide "designated uploaders" to make any format adjustments necessary.

## Talk Up the Intranet

Publicize intranet success stories in staff meetings and elsewhere. Consider recognizing key contributors through formal awards, monetary or otherwise.

## Respect the 80-20 Rule

A century ago, the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto observed that roughly 80 percent of the land in Italy was owned by 20 percent of the population, and roughly 80

percent of the peas came from 20 percent of the pea pods in his garden. The 80-20 rule, also known as the Pareto Principle, is believed to apply across a wide variety of endeavors: 80 percent of the arrests come from 20 percent of police officers, 80 percent of sales come from 20 percent of customers, and so on.

Your intranet contributors likely will sort themselves out similarly. The more contributors the better, but it's not a mark of failure if a relatively small number provide a disproportionate share of the contributions. Remember that intranets are more a process than a destination.

### Balance Branding and Anonymity

Many intranets resemble giant Soviet-era collective farms. Contributors are basically anonymous. One of the ironies of the Soviet system was that the small farms that individual farmers were allowed to maintain tended to be more productive than large collective farms with more resources.

The same human tendencies apply to intranets. Take advantage of this phenomenon by finding ways to let employees, especially your most respected employees, stake claims to their contributions. This can benefit you in multiple ways:

- Creating pride of ownership will cause contributors to exercise more care.
- Intranet credibility increases. Allowing your top expert on contracting to take responsibility for maintaining a section on her specialty could work wonders.
- Perhaps most important, using branding will make people more likely to contribute. Recognizing contributors spawns more contributions.

A simple way to implement branding is to encourage employees to mark certain sections of the intranet as "Vetted by [insert employee name]." This lets the contributors be recognized. If the contributor is respected, users will trust that section more than one of unknown lineage. Another branding method is sending out emails every time a new file (or at least an important file) is uploaded, explaining what the file is and who contributed it. Some intranet or wiki software gives users the option to receive such emails automatically every time sections they want to monitor are changed.

Techniques such as these can make your intranet less like an anonymous collective farm and more like

a personal email list. Over time, subscribers come to respect some posters' knowledge and judgment.

### Anonymity Has Its Place

While branding can supercharge intranets, there are times when its complete opposite, anonymity, has greater power. Some of your best employees may have great material, but are too shy or too cautious to post something they don't have time to vet thoroughly.

Allowing anonymous contributions can make these employees more likely to contribute. It also will encourage those who fear that their supervisors resent time spent contributing to the larger group effort instead of concentrating solely on more parochial tasks.

Some also worry about the reliability of anonymous information. It does tend to be less reliable, but many times employees just need a lead that would not otherwise occur to them. Colleagues can expand or correct posted information.

### Fulfilling the Potential

From a technical standpoint, intranets are what engineers call a "solved problem." There are no technical mysteries a modestly competent IT staff cannot handle. This is not to say that getting significant benefits from intranets is easy.

Exploiting intranet potential can be quite difficult. Management and human issues are by far the most significant obstacles. A thoughtful approach to these issues should give managers and employees a head start on fulfilling the potential of this tool.

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