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Five Myths That Hobble Your Intranet

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information and knowledge management (I&KM) professionals aiming to advance their organization's intranet or employee portal are hampered by five widely held myths about intranets: 1) information should be organized on departmental lines; 2) user research isn't required; 3) the intranet is just a repository of information and self-service apps; 4) design doesn't matter; and 5) few people use the intranet. Intranet teams must challenge these pervasive misconceptions in order to add value to corporate intranets.

OUT-OF-DATE BELIEFS KEEP INTRANETS FROM EVOLVING

Intranets are the Rodney Dangerfield of information and knowledge management. Although the majority of companies have at least one and they've been around for more than 15 years, intranets, as Dangerfield always said, "don't get no respect." More often than not, corporate intranets are underfunded, understaffed, poorly designed, and receive little attention, let alone high-level sponsorship from senior management.¹ According to our Workforce Technographics® survey of US knowledge workers, intranet use remains centered on communications and HR-centric activities that represent the early stages of Forrester's intranet maturity model.² These intranet activities were already widespread five or more years ago.

The neglect of the intranet is encouraged by five prevalent myths:

1. **Org charts offer good navigation models.** Employees use intranets because they have specific needs and specific tasks to accomplish, such as learning about parental leave policies, locating information on a competitor, or creating a team project site. Intranets that are based on departmental organization can create unnecessary barriers. Efficient, cross-repository search can go a long way toward quickly getting employees to what they need, but it can't fully replace a navigation structure and information architecture that reflects the task-oriented use of the intranet.
2. **There's no need for user research.** Knowledge workers vary significantly in how they work, how they organize information, and which specific tasks they perform in which specific contexts.³ User-centric research — which can start with surveys but should include direct observation and exercises such as card sorting — guides the design process to produce an intranet that is responsive to employee needs rather than merely a reflection of their job title or role.⁴ For example, the devotion of one North American retailer to user research and design allowed them to create an award-winning intranet despite the handicap of an archaic technical platform.

3. **Good design doesn't matter.** Just as consumers abandon a poorly designed Web experience, employees will devise ingenious ways to avoid using an irritating intranet. The work-arounds — such as calling HR with a question or emailing large attachments rather than using a team document site — usually cost the organization time and money. Alternatively, employees will waste time doggedly looking for content on a poorly designed site. In Forrester's Workforce Technology survey, 45% of respondents said they spend three hours or more per week searching for information.⁵
4. **Stickiness isn't important.** On early stage intranets, which are used primarily to access a piece of information or a self-service tool, the aim is indeed to reduce the amount of time employees spend *on* the intranet so they can get back to their work. But today, knowledge workers flounder in a sea of applications and repositories, jumping from one to another just to complete a single task. Reducing the chaos and hassle is precisely why organizations should aim to evolve the intranet to the later stages of the maturity model. Here, the tools for “real work” — such as collaboration platforms, workflows, and expertise locators — are presented in the context of the intranet. As you move toward the information workplace, the aim becomes to reduce the amount of time employees spend *outside* the intranet.
5. **No one uses the intranet.** There is an obvious perception by IT decision-makers that few people use the corporate intranet. As recently as this year, IT professionals estimated that only 38% of their workforce used employee portals at work.⁶ Yet when we asked US information workers themselves, a full two-thirds use an intranet at least monthly, and more than 40% do so daily. For comparison, that means intranets are used almost as much in total, and in frequency, as spreadsheets such as Microsoft Excel.⁷ Because intranets are used often by a broad population of the workforce, any improvement in their efficiency or effectiveness can have a significant impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

BREAK THE CYCLE OF INTRANET NEGLECT

Supposing that employees can just “get along” with a bad intranet is like giving your call center staff phones that can't maintain a connection and your field repair teams trucks with flat tires. I&KM professionals can lead the effort to create intranets that meet today's needs. Start by:

- **Benchmarking your intranet adoption levels against your peers.** Many factors influence the types and frequency of intranet use in an organization. To obtain clear and actionable insights, benchmark your firm against peer organizations using Forrester's Workforce Technographics survey methodology.⁸
- **Identifying where and why your intranet is failing to support employees.** Gaps and traps that impede intranet use can remain hidden from site owners (who are often blind to them)

and to employee users (who put up with them). Use a heuristic analysis like Forrester's Web Site Review methodology to expose existing barriers to use and adoption.⁹

- **Leveraging user-centric design practices to optimize tasks and information needs.** Forrester clients often ask what kind of information and applications an intranet should include. The best answer remains: Ask your users. Be sure not to stop with those who use the intranet frequently today. It's often infrequent users and non-users who offer insights to make your intranet more useful for more people.
- **Evolving your strategy toward the Information Workplace.** Slowly but surely, intranets are evolving toward the Information Workplace, with integrated, context-driven, business process support across multiple applications, repositories, and channels. Keep abreast of new vendor solutions (most recently Microsoft's SharePoint 2010 and Oracle WebCenter) that can aid your efforts to create an information workplace.¹⁰

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In our recent SWOT exercise with several information and knowledge management executives, the majority reported strong support for their projects from senior management. Bear in mind, however, that we conducted the SWOT largely with attendees at an I&KM Council meeting. The executives' presence at this daylong peer meeting is itself an indication that senior management acknowledges the need for productive internal information networks. See the December 16, 2009, "[State Of Play: The Information Workplace](#)" report.
- ² For a graphic depiction of the intranet maturity model and the key characteristics of the four stages, see the July 7, 2009, "[Pump Up Intranet Adoption With User-Centric Design](#)" report.
- ³ Forrester's framework for creating ECM strategies that reflect the business context of content and processes can be adapted to intranet projects. See the December 27, 2007, "[Business Context: A Better Way To Define An ECM Strategy](#)" report.
- ⁴ For a discussion of user-centric design practices, see the July 7, 2009, "[Pump Up Intranet Adoption With User-Centric Design](#)" report.
- ⁵ A knowledge worker with an \$80,000-a-year salary who spends three hours a week searching for information is paid \$6,000 per year just to look for stuff he needs to do his job. See the October 7, 2009, "[The State Of Workforce Technology Adoption: US Benchmark 2009](#)" report.
- ⁶ Source: Forrester's Enterprise And SMB Software Survey, North America And Europe, Q4 2008.
- ⁷ According to Forrester's Workforce Technographics®, US, Canada, and UK Survey, Q3 2009, 65% of US knowledge workers use an intranet or company portal, and about 70% use spreadsheets. Frequency of use was almost identical. See the October 7, 2009, "[The State Of Workforce Technology Adoption: US Benchmark 2009](#)" report.

- ⁸ For a detailed analysis of our Q3 2009 Workforce Technographics findings, see the October 7, 2009, “[The State Of Workforce Technology Adoption: US Benchmark 2009](#)” report.
- ⁹ Forrester has applied the Web Site Review methodology to more than 1,100 sites of all types, from eCommerce internets, to intranets and employee portals. See the September 11, 2009, “[What’s Holding Back Your Intranet](#)” report.
- ¹⁰ Forrester defines the Information Workplace (IW) as follows: An Information Workplace (IW) is a next-generation digital workplace based on portal, collaboration, content management, and office productivity technologies, plus many emerging technologies in the Web 2.0 and Social Computing space. An IW is quite different from the collaboration, content, and portal products in use in most organizations today because it provides a role-based, contextual, seamless, guided, visual, multimodal work experience for the user. See the December 16, 2009, “[State Of Play: The Information Workplace](#)” report.