

Your Intranet Needs YOU: How Information Professionals Can Add Value to Intranets and Portals

Abstract: This article by Allie Lustigman argues that information professionals should have a significant involvement in their firm's intranets or portals and discusses how our skills can be used in this area. It outlines, with clear examples, the different spheres that we can become involved with in relation to intranets, which include; information organisation and search, taking ownership of intranet pages and spaces, allowing current awareness and news to flow through intranets, and training.

Keywords: portals; intranets; information management

INTRODUCTION

Intranets and the management of the information on them are becoming a large part of the information professional's remit. From my own experience, I have been involved in a number of projects involving intranets and at my current organisation, The Standard Club, the portal is one of my core responsibilities. They can fit into knowledge and information management in more ways than you would think; intranets or portals are essentially repositories for a vast amount of information which needs to be organised and easily accessed. If your team is involved in working with an intranet accessed by everyone in the firm, it can greatly increase your exposure and demonstrate your value. So if you are not involved in your firm's intranet, how can you be? This article outlines what our skills can bring to intranet management.

One point to make is that I am not advocating that our profession takes over from intranet managers or IT professionals who have specialised skills. The article is arguing that we should be working with these teams to ensure that our valuable know-how and expertise is brought into the mix.

INTRANETS, PORTALS AND THE WORKPLACE

The terms intranet and portal are often interchanged and they are very similar tools. The common understanding of the difference between the two is that a portal is more of a gateway that usually sits within an intranet, while an intranet can stand alone and work without a portal.

My company's use of both intranets and portals is a good example of how they work together. I work for

The Standard Club, which is one client of a professional services firm called Charles Taylor. For us the intranet and portal set-up is very useful and fits into our structure. We have an overall intranet for Charles Taylor with information relating to the whole company, and then various portals for the other sections of the company, including the people servicing The Standard Club.

Portals essentially work in the same way as intranets in that they are internal repositories of information but they usually focus on one area of the company, such as one project, one area of work and so on. At The Standard Club our portal focuses on our part of the company and is incredibly valuable to our employees as it is basically used as our intranet. It has information relating to our firm that is wide-ranging including business processes, key documents, useful information relating to areas of the firm such as Risk & Compliance, Human Resources and of course Knowledge & Information. Information on teams, personnel and access to resources are all found on the portal. It is also used as a partial document management system, with project and team documents found on there. Employees use our intranet to find out company information relating to the more mundane such as contact information and company structure, to more specific items including research resources, procedures and forms and precedents.

To give some context, The Standard Club is a mutual shipping insurance association owned by shipowners who join as members. It is a protection and indemnity insurance organisation with varying cover which includes loss of life and injury to crew, damage to ships and pollution as well as war risks and piracy. We get a lot of legal matters arising from claims and many of the claims executives are trained lawyers. Our information resources are therefore very similar to that of a law firm,

such as the usual core legal texts, law reports and legal databases.

When I arrived at The Standard Club I was told that managing the portal would be one of my main responsibilities. Working with the portal has been very interesting and exciting work, and is culminating in a new project to upgrade the system. I have had a great opportunity in being given the responsibility of our portal and it was during this time that I have realised how much the information professional can offer to the management of intranets. Working on our portal here I have been able to share my knowledge of structures, information search, storage and management for our portal and hopefully add value. The portal is heavily used by employees as it is essentially their intranet, and so I am involved in a number of projects with many people due to my involvement in the system. Below are examples that have been taken from my experience working with our portal, and from previous lines of work, which I believe other information professionals can bring to their own intranets or portals.

INFORMATION ORGANISATION AND SEARCH

As information professionals we are constantly using, and often creating, databases of information. Our jobs rely on legal research resources like Westlaw and Lexis, or internal knowledge databases and library catalogues. We are experts in searching using Boolean and keyword commands, as well as navigating taxonomies. Often we are the engineers of these hierarchies, through indexing documents or cataloguing books. All of this gives us a great deal of experience and understanding when it comes to organising, storing and accessing information.

It is this experience that we can bring to the table for our intranets. Consulting on search, organising information and making it more accessible to users are areas that we can be heavily involved in. The organisation of information is one of our core areas of expertise. Using our knowledge of taxonomies and additionally tagging, keywords and metadata we can assist with the effective storage and retrieval of information. Intranets can be vast repositories of information, so these skills should be highly valued.

Our experience of different search engines, databases and structures for content is extremely useful here and we should be communicating any ideas we have with the intranet teams in our firms. A practical example of information professionals doing just this, is with search projects for firm's intranets, particularly where a new search tool is being implemented. I've known information teams who have been an important part of their firm's search project, using their knowledge and skills to consult on and improve the search functionality, indexing pages and documents, and tapping their networks to find out about

new search platforms and tools. At The Standard Club I am currently training people on how best to index documents and the importance of setting up document libraries or folders with fields for metadata such as author, date, document type, etc. Improving the search functionality on our portal is a high priority for me at the moment and while various tools and add-ons can help, it is the information professional's knowledge of how best to index and retrieve documents that is key, as it is this knowledge and skillset that is essential for effective searching. I wonder how many of you have intranets with very basic search functionality, or a search box that is hardly used? They seem to be a common feature on many company's intranets but it could be worth you looking into yours and seeing how it could be improved.

Information architecture is another area that, if we have not learned or worked on at some stage, we should know a lot about from dealing with different sites and databases day-to-day. We can use this knowledge to improve the layout and structure of our intranets, making sure to take the users' views into account. I am doing this in my current role as part of our portal upgrade project. I am consulting with our IT teams and using focus groups to suggest a number of options for how we should organise the structure of our portal. It is a very interesting project and important as so many employees rely on and use our portal; getting the structure right will be massive help for how they do their day-to-day work.

Many intranets are used as document management systems or may have document libraries in them. Again information professionals are ideally suited to consult on how best to construct and store documents within these areas. We are able to ensure that these repositories are set up correctly to make them easily searchable and useful. This could be through the creation of guidance documents, workflows, training or simple consultation with IT teams. Again at The Standard Club I am involved in setting up a number of document libraries. As mentioned before we are training employees on how best to store documents to make them searchable but we are also busy tagging libraries behind the scenes, creating useful subject taxonomies, and ensuring that the documents are grouped and ordered effectively. Intranets are huge banks of information, which can often be difficult to navigate or to find specific documents; information professionals can be invaluable in aiding with this common issue.

Another side to document management is archiving old information. How many intranet pages or document folders have you come across with out of date or superseded information? Weeding and archiving information is a task that is often carried out by information professionals, usually in knowledge databases or hardcopy libraries. Records management can often be a cross-over function for those in information too. Therefore many of us should have some useful experience when it comes to creating policies and maintaining useful information.

Utilising this experience in relation to your intranet or portal can be extremely beneficial to your firm, ensuring that information does not become out of date and that document libraries or folders are being used effectively.

TAKING OWNERSHIP OF PAGES

Even if the overall management of the intranet is not part of your remit, there are plenty of pages or areas of the intranet that information professionals can be involved in. You probably manage a knowledge area on your intranet already, so why not branch out into other spaces? If you are able to create pages on your intranet, or even if you aren't but can design and request pages, this can be extremely valuable to different teams, practice areas and users.

The intranet can be an incredibly useful space for storing, presenting and sharing information on projects or enterprises within your company. By taking the initiative to create and manage spaces on the intranet you are able to offer your users a valuable tool for collating information on projects, firm initiatives, specialist interest areas and more. To give a few examples, I have been responsible for creating intranet pages for subject specialists in our firm, people who are the experts on certain sectors and topics. The spaces I created allow them to answer questions and store their answers, write blog posts, have libraries of useful documents and links to relevant websites. In the past I have created pages holding information on different jurisdictions and countries, with legal and commercial awareness data. A further example is a group of pages I worked on with information on a specific sector in the construction industry, which again held useful websites, documents and contact lists. Speak to the users in your firm and find out what projects they are working on, then see if you can help by collating the relevant information resources and providing a dynamic and collaborative space.

In the same vein as information professionals taking ownership of intranet pages, it is important to note the content owners of other areas of your portal or intranet. For example, at The Standard Club we are quite lucky that we have a group of people from around the firm who maintain sections of the portal that relate to their teams, therefore ensuring that the portal remains up to date with relevant content. My role has changed so that I have found myself coordinating this team by defining their role and responsibilities more clearly, and providing basic and refresher training, (more on training below). Although this doesn't quite fit into the information professional's traditional sphere of work, it is nonetheless a very useful task which allows for maintenance and consistency of content across the portal or intranet, something that is very important to, and resonates with our role.

Different firms have varying approaches to assigning who is allowed to create and edit intranet pages and your

firm may have a specific team that undertakes these tasks. However if these restrictions are not in place and the technology is not too complicated, I would highly recommend learning how to do this yourself. At The Standard Club there is an increasing drive in technology and everyone is encouraged to embrace it and provide new ideas for how it can assist in our day-to-day business processes. Everyone is given training on various tools; from my perspective, becoming an expert user in Sharepoint, believe it or not, has been highly rewarding. In our profession we are constantly honing and expanding our skill-set due to ever changing technologies, so whether it is Sharepoint or another platform – enrol on a training course; you will not regret it.

CURRENT AWARENESS

As information professionals, it is most likely that we manage our firm's news and current awareness resources, from trade magazines to newspapers, journals to specialist research tools. Many of these tools have now realised the opportunities that arise from being present on a firm's intranet, as it greatly increases their exposure. This works well for us too; having news stories that are consistently updated and accessed easily through the intranet is a valuable and easy way for employees to stay on top of current issues.

Talk to your contacts at these resources and enquire how their content can be accessed from your intranet. Whether it's through technology such as RSS feeds or landing pages that integrate with your intranet, there are lots of ways that we can ensure that these resources reach the users. Working with the providers and possibly your IT department, you can also find ways of presenting the information in a dynamic way; for example rolling news stories, images and tailored, branded content.

If your intranet has personalisation functionality, users can even pick and choose the types of news topics they would like to receive. All of these features can help to reduce the number of internal emails relating to current awareness, as people can use the intranet to access this information as they need it.

Adding this current awareness functionality onto our portal is something we are hoping to do at The Standard Club as part of our upgrade. It is important that a portal or intranet contains relevant information, whether internal or external. We feel the portal is an excellent platform for these types of communications.

TRAINING

There are other ways you can get involved with your firm's intranet, including training users on how to navigate it and find the useful areas that are relevant to them. Not many companies provide training on intranets and often it is up to the user to simply find their way around. Being

'in the know' is often part of our remit, and it is useful for information professionals to know where specific information about our firm is held. Therefore, it makes sense to gain an understanding of your intranet, its search capabilities and areas of interest to your users.

Training on how best to upload and store information on Intranets is also a highly useful skill we can impart to others. As mentioned above, intranets are often used as document repositories with employees across the firm filing documents and information on them. Many information professionals will have experience of indexing documents to put on various kinds of knowledge databases or tools, to make them searchable. It is these skills that should be imparted to all employees saving documents to their portals or intranets. By teaching users the basics about metadata and simple folder structures, we can help to ensure that document libraries are set up correctly and documents are filed in a way that means they will be found again.

At The Standard Club, I am providing training sessions aimed at the whole company, on how to search and navigate the portal and how best to file documents. I also send a bi-monthly update with hints and tips on searching the portal, as well as recent additions such as new sites or pages that have been created. This is all very useful knowledge for employees and I've had some very positive feedback on these initiatives. Allowing the portal or intranet to become more transparent, familiar

and easier to understand or navigate is highly valuable for users and will allow them to find information more easily.

Training is an incredibly valuable way to reach out to practice areas or other teams, enhancing your profile within your organisation. It also serves the practical purpose of ensuring that users understand the capabilities of the company's tools and that best practice is adhered to across the organisation. When it comes to the intranet, which is used by so many people, this is extremely important.

CONCLUSION

Intranets or portals are often overlooked with ever changing knowledge tools and ideas springing up, from big data to social software. However, these platforms are hugely valuable tools for your firm and they can be excellent resources to aid information professionals in making knowledge and information available, searchable and dynamic. Furthermore, we are ideally placed and have the necessary skills to really add more value to our intranets; whether through enhancing their search or making more useful spaces on them, we can make intranets much more worthwhile technologies for our users. So why not take a look at yours and review what you could be adding to it?

Biography

Allie Lustigman is the Information Manager at The Standard P&I Club which insures shipowners, operators and charterers for their liabilities to third parties arising out of ship operations. The information service includes the provision of legal and commercial research, current awareness and management of The Standard Club portal.