# Inside Job:
# A Guide to Intranets

THIS YEAR HAS BEEN DUBBED the "Year of the Intranet" by such computer denizens as Bill Gates, president of Microsoft, and Lee Levitt, a presenter at this year's Internet Society meeting. The term has infiltrated business and computer publications, as well as corporate boardrooms. So, for those of you who are still in a fog about intranets, here are some basics that will help clear the air.

When asked to define "intranet," computer experts will likely offer many answers. One definition, found on the Internet, is, "a secure information-sharing system in which Web-client software accesses data over an internal corporate network." Others describe an intranet as "the Internet in a bottle" or a private Web site devoted to one company.

## Internet versus intranet

If you already know something about the Internet, then it's only a short leap to understanding an intranet. The two systems offer interactivity, chat rooms, bulletin boards, file-transfer capability, and a browser interface. Both also deliver timely, customized information—on demand.

One main difference is that an intranet is protected by a firewall, so that information is kept within the virtual walls of a company. Another is that on an intranet, information is generally distributed and organized around specific organizational needs and goals. On the Internet, distribution of material is disorganized and random.

According to United Kingdom-based JBS Computer Systems, many Internet characteristics—such as universal communication, reliability, and low cost—are applicable to intracorporate information systems. And sometimes, those technologies

work better over an intranet.

Kevin Kruse, president of Advanced Consulting, Green Brook, New Jersey, says, "Because an intranet's link to the outside world is controlled, it can usually offer better security and speed than true Internet-based connections." For example, delivery of videos over an intranet is faster than over the Internet because the users don't have to download data from a remote server; information is stored on a local server computer.

## Information ASAP

One of the most convincing reasons to implement an intranet is to boost organizational communication. In companies with multiple sites or with international divisions, an intranet can close the distance gap and promote rapid exchange of information. Also, intranets shift the flow of information.

According to Steven L. Telleen, Amdahl Corporation, Sunnyvale, California, the flow of information moves away from information creators and toward people who access and use information. If a user can easily retrieve and view information when needed, then information no longer needs to be sent "just in case" it's needed.

An article from *PC Week* describes three basic intranet applications:
▶ An intranet functions as an internal bulletin board and displays such commonly used information as a corporate telephone directory.
▶ An intranet moves information from place to place, much like e-mail or groupware systems.
▶ A corporation relies on its intranet to support daily business functions, such as tracking sales information and customer requests.

The American Red Cross uses its

■ *On an intranet, information is distributed around specific organizational needs and goals* ■

intranet for these functions:
▶ virtual meetings and classes
▶ daily organizational news and information
▶ policy manuals, organizational guidelines, and project status reports
▶ subject-based Web discussion forums (bulletin boards)
▶ live access to corporate databases

- special events information
- companywide e-mail and directories
- hyperlinks to other Internet resources
- an online software support system for the organization's access software
- online ordering for its internal supply warehouse.

Tyson Food's intranet connects 100 sites and more than 5,000 employees. New York-based Pfizer has between 5,000 and 10,000 users, including the drug company's strategic partners.

The intranet at Levi Strauss & Co., San Francisco, California, lets employees in different time zones share information. The company's Editor's Guild, which includes Web-site developers and authors, meets about once a month to share best-practices and set corporate guidelines for the look and feel of the Web site.

According to San Francisco-based Silicon Graphics, the most popular ways companies use intranets are for

- corporate news and information distribution
- database mining
- sales tools
- work groups (virtual teams)
- internal support such as orientation manuals, benefits and compensation information, and organizational charts
- employee training.

An intranet is more than just a glorified name for a corporate LAN. It's the integration of information, intellectual capital, organizational goals, and improved communication capability.

According to Business Research Group, Newton, Massachusetts, the percentage of corporate intranets has grown from 11 percent a year ago to more than 55 percent today. By January 1997, BRG predicts that 70 percent of corporations will have an intranet. A 1996 study, conducted by Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Forrester Research, found that out of 50 *Fortune* 500 companies, two-thirds already have or are considering some type of intranet system.

### Purpose, planning, and policy

The development of an intranet takes careful planning. Here are some areas that should be addressed:

**Purpose.** Is the intranet going to be used mostly for internal or external communications? Will it function across several departments? Will it be used for employee training? How can an intranet improve organizational performance?

**Security.** How will your company protect propriety information? What type of a firewall should be installed? What about passwords and encryption?

**Privacy.** Will employers be able to track where employees go on the site? How will confidential information, accessed by employees, be protected? Who will have access to log files (files that show which sites users have visited)?

**Corporate policy.** What is considered

> ■ *As intranet technology develops, more complex interactive communication is becoming possible* ■

appropriate use of an intranet? Who will be responsible for implementing the organization's intranet policy?

Regarding the policy, areas to consider include

- access to information
- use of proprietary information
- copyright-protection issues
- e-mail use
- data transmission and downloading.

**Training.** How will employees be trained to use the intranet? What resources (internal and external) are needed?

**Administration and project management.** Who is responsible for the intranet's maintenance, content updating, and troubleshooting?

Because fresh material is vital to the success of an intranet, it might be helpful to separate content. In that way, different departments or individuals are responsible for different sections, and they can update material easily.

**Repurposing.** How easily can your organization reformat information to fit the client/server environment. What will it cost to make that transition?

**Growth.** How scaleable is your server? What tools will you need to add multimedia functionality to the system? Can you can add or increase computer memory, hardware, and software?

The investment in a corporate intranet can be minimal if it is built in stages. Because intranets are accessible via most computing platforms (such as UNIX, Macintosh, and Windows), much of the needed hardware and software are already in place in many businesses.

As intranet technology develops, more complex interactive communication is becoming possible. Already, some intranets provide these capabilities:

- memo distribution, comment, and reply
- interactive database queries
- surveys and feedback from both employees and customers
- CD-ROM-based training.

"Some people consider multimedia interactivity on an intranet a bleeding-edge application," says Cinny Little, director of New Media at Harvard Business School Publishing. But the use of interactive technology, such as audio capability, is increasing.

Even if your company hasn't explored the advantages of a corporate intranet, it's important to recognize the potential of this maturing technology. Intranets can improve internal communications, customer relations, and interdepartmental collaboration. Don't wait until the technology is old to get involved in its implementation.

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