



Intranets: Not Just For Big Companies

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Many people assume that these platforms, which foster communications and a sense of community between employees in different places and across more subtle barriers, are inappropriate for small business. Those people should think again.

INTRANETS: NOT JUST FOR BIG COMPANIES

Everything happens through conversation. Conversations are the medium through which personal and business growth take place. We build relationships, culture, and business through our conversations. And all businesses, small and large, are faced with the challenge of enabling conversations in a healthy, constructive, and productive way.

When people are working together to achieve common goals, there is a sense of shared ownership. Yet most businesses are complex, and creating the sense of shared ownership is often difficult when employees work in disparate locations and time zones, on different floors, in different departments, and represent many levels in the hierarchy. As the complexity grows, the ability to convey important information and share knowledge through company-wide conversations becomes increasingly difficult.

This was precisely the challenge faced by one of our clients, LA-based New Wave Entertainment, just two years ago as it changed its business model to encompass new offerings and a new strategy. As a result, the New Wave workforce expanded to 240 employees now housed across three buildings, creating conversational complexity. Michael Clow, New Wave Entertainment's Director of Engineering explained, "With our shift in strategy our company quickly became very complex, with many little groups within groups." Face-to-face conversations, meetings, emails and calls only go so far. "To stay competitive we had to change the way we worked with each other."

One of their solutions was to create an Intranet. Says Clow, an Intranet creates a "level playing field" where all the time-space challenges dissolve. They are replaced by one conversational growth engine designed for the mutual benefit of all.

Intranets have many advantages—and significant challenges.[See [Intranets: Pros and Cons](#). But what exactly *is* an Intranet? At its most broad definition an Intranet is a system "that integrates web-based tools" into an internal system "behind the organization's firewall," explains New Wave's Clow. As the world becomes faster, smaller, and more interconnected, and as technology solutions evolve, conversations are being redefined from a linear exchange of information to an interaction free of time and space. Today these technologies mean we are able to create conversations with anyone, anytime, anywhere. Thus, an Intranet allows businesses to harness the benefits of web technologies, while keeping an organization's sensitive and valuable information in-house – limited to only the users it invites/allows into its network.

Myth Busting – Intranets Are Suited to Smaller Companies

Smaller businesses tend to think of Intranets as something for only large companies. Yet in some ways that would be like saying the Internet is only for large companies. In an increasingly networked world, the Intranet moves information sharing beyond a shared computer drive to a powerful platform that can be customized to meet any business' needs. The reality is that once any business gets larger than a small group of people sitting around a board room table, keeping everyone on the same page gets more difficult. An Intranet allows you to have one secure place – accessible 24 hours a day – where anyone in the company can post and access information. In small companies, Intranets are a way to create a shared platform for literally everything - weekly updates, success stories, and challenges - anything you can imagine that is useful for your employees to be thinking about.

The Intranet also serves as a far better document control manager. When was the last time you worked on a presentation only to find out it wasn't the latest one? People can work together to create presentations and keep better control of the drafting process. What's more, the biggest benefit is that the time from idea to realization is shorter, meaning you can capitalize on what is coming through your network – fast!

For the last 25 years at Benchmark Communications, Inc, we have been studying "Creating WE" – working with clients to change from I-centric to We-centric practices, in order to build healthier, thriving organizations. Our research has identified that people thrive when they are included, valued, and are making contributions to a community – it's what we call the "code of interdependence." When companies establish their own Intranets as a vehicle for interconnectivity, they establish their essential "codes of interdependence."

When the Intranet is put in place, it becomes a new platform for sharing information, having a voice, exploring each other's best practices, celebrating successes, and deepening relationships, all vital to the growth of relationships, community, and the business. The Intranet offers a platform to making Creating WE a reality, offering a way to reduce and/or circumvent complexity, while creating connectivity.

Organizations around the world are utilizing the Intranet to grow a community in virtual space, connecting employees at all levels through constant and ongoing conversation.

When it was first introduced in business, the Intranet was used as a great repository for information storing, for the company history, processes, and policies – even for the preservation of Intellectual Property. However, this has changed. Says Clow: "It has grown from a place of storing information, to sharing information and keeping all informed on new strategic directions -- 'a one stop shop' and 'online help desk' that provides employees with the answers to most of their common queries. It is interactive."

Over the two years it's been in place at New Wave, the Intranet has evolved to a very sophisticated, multifaceted system, including a shared client database and the integration of inventory, purchasing and workflows. Many elements of accounting and HR are handled through the system. Areas of the Intranet are opened to clients in order to share ideas and increase two-way feedback. "Every month a new aspect emerges." Most recently there has been discussion of whether to incorporate forums/shared messaging into the system.

The Intranet as Community Builder

More than a system, we believe the Intranet acts as the most innovative community builder yet to come on the scene. It's a community created in virtual space that has the power to connect employees at all levels, in constant and ongoing communication about the things that hold this community together. And it is not just New Wave who is benefiting. Organizations around the world are realizing its power.

In the 90's, Textron -- a very large billion dollar company -- chose to use the Intranet to help coalesce an organization around its key business challenges. Every month, the CEO would post a challenge for employees to respond to. Everyone, in all of the business units, could see what other employees were thinking and respond. Soon, this incredible medium became a way for employees to connect and communicate around key issues facing the company. All of a sudden, the large, multi-location company became a small community where hierarchy did not matter any more. Everyone read the challenges irrespective of title, and soon there was a dialogue that engaged people in thinking as one mind. The result: an incredible commitment to the evolving corporate goals and challenges, and an incredible surfacing of new ways to win in the marketplace.

In 2003, IBM chose to use the Intranet for what they called a World Jam, where employees could post, over a 72 hour time frame, things that they felt were important to the future success of the organization. The company's Intranet thus offers an alternative to the informal communication channel. It's a way for people to connect on issues both important to their success at work and to their fulfillment at work.

Though these two examples are about large companies, they serve to highlight the diverse uses of an Intranet. Whether it's a need to give everyone an ongoing voice in meeting a company's challenges, to capturing ideas that enhance your business' sustainability – all businesses face these challenges and the Intranet is one of the most vital tools a company of any size can use.

However, "there is a caution" warns New Wave's Clow. "It is important to ensure there are policies in place on its use that respect appropriateness, and measures of accountability and responsibility." It is also important to take into account the time that may be required for its creation, ongoing evolution, and training people to use it -- though these days technology is getting more user friendly and simple to use without too much technical understanding.

The beauty of an Intranet is that it offers a way to circumvent complexity and create connectivity at the touch of fingertip. Many companies are turning to employees to find out how they want the Intranet to serve them. Pose a challenge and ask people in your business what they would use it for; allow them to evolve it to accommodate their needs; ask employees to share their ideas and vision for the companies future – and you will find that the result is a 'call to leadership,' and a way to empower them to participate more deeply in the business.

Inclusion is one of the most powerful equalizers and organizers of human dynamics, and with the Intranet, companies of all sizes, from any industry can create a sense of community where sharing, dialoging, innovating, and expressing all come together to create a sense of shared ownership of the future. Perhaps it is time your business capitalizes on an Intranet? Adds Michael Clow, "I don't think we could have done what we have done so successfully without it."

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