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An overwhelmed communicator's intranet guide

How to choose which new technologies your intranet needs, and how to go about selling the idea to management, to IT and to the organization as a whole.

By Stacy Wilson, ABC

My 92-year-old grandmother asked me the other day what a "wiki" is. She overheard my father and me talking about the wiki my firm uses for client projects. I explained that it is a Web site that anyone, even she, can edit without knowing anything about programming. I explained that it allows people in different parts of the world to have discussions, share and review documents, and collaborate on content—all using the Internet.

She shook her head and said, "I'll never understand why we need all this stuff."

Point taken.

And that is precisely why, as Shel Holtz points out in his article in this edition of the *Journal*, so many corporate intranets and portals are stagnating, failing to take full advantage of the amazing new technologies flooding our environment. Corporate communicators are weary and they don't know which technologies will truly make a difference for their companies.

Of course, it is easy for us to point out amazing technologies and challenge corporate communicators to use them; but their real challenge is to identify the business value for each new technology, determine which ones can contribute the most and sell a business case to their leadership.

The role of IT

Before I address some of the value in several key technologies and demonstrate how you can build a business case, I'm reminded how often the core issue is the convoluted, discombobulated information technology process. How many of us have wanted to launch a new technology, but (heavy sigh), have been daunted by our IT shop's implementation process.

The IT folks are tied up on other projects so it's a "get in line" response. Sometimes it's about what-have-you-done-for-me-lately. Ultimately, it comes down to prioritizing and squeezing into an already tight pipeline.

This is why it is crucial that you develop a positive and productive partnership with IT—year-round, not just when you need them. It is also important that you understand their processes and learn how to work within that system. The IT framework (it also helps to speak the language!) is just like any other business cycle: The steps are there for reasons. You don't want to push something out and bring the entire system to a screeching halt.

Most importantly, know that someday your IT team will purchase, install and announce a great new technology without answering any of these critical business questions:

- What business need does it address?
- Who will manage it?
- How will it be communicated?
- How will it be embedded into our organizational culture?
- How will it be managed (the people side, not the technology side)?

How many of your IT shops have launched instant messaging with a simple announcement: There it is, go use it, isn't it wonderful! Employees wonder why, how is it different from my e-mail, what abbreviations can I use, and what are the legal

ramifications for millions of quick bursts of strange truncated conversation? Where was communication in this process? Don't be roadkill on the new technology implementation highway.

Finding value in the vague

New technology comes with vague promises of amazing functionality. But, what will that functionality really do for you? Is knowing that podcasting allows the sales people to listen to the latest sales leadership summit on *their* terms enough? Is knowing RSS allows employees to pick and choose which IT notifications they really want enough? You get the point.

Let's look at the value of some of the more commonly discussed technologies.

Blogs: establish relationships; create awareness; improve search engine results; generate ideas; engage stakeholders in discussion; generate collaborative communities; manage knowledge

Instant messaging: faster; doesn't rely on phone lines (great in certain types of crises); builds trust; diminishes demographic influences; possible edge over the competition

Podcasting: reinforces the brand; engages stakeholder more intimately; offers greater user flexibility; connects users to speaker; gives user control (with RSS); reaches virtual users (connected but remote)

Portal: productivity improvement; elimination of duplicative effort; reduction in infrastructure; integration of content and applications; role-based personalization
RSS: develops stronger relationships; creates brand loyalty; improves search engine results; develops new revenue streams; allows user control of news streams; next refinement of paperless news (OK, a bit of a stretch, but clearly possible)

Wiki: fuller, broader collaboration; speeds business processes; engages virtual teams/customers; engages non-technical users; engages the best and brightest regardless of their current function or relationship

When developing a business case, you need to decide which business need the technology addresses. Divine this and you will be on your way toward at least knowing what data you need. That is the next step because executives typically don't buy the vague promise.

A business case template

Some organizations have formalized their business case process with fancy online submission tools and instructions. Others have a simple form. Still others have nothing. This is for that last group. After reviewing multiple business case templates, I've culled it down to this outline:

- Executive summary
- Purpose and benefits of the initiative
- Process or approach (current and recommended changes)
- Assessment of available technology and communication channels
- Analysis of the change effort
- Cost estimate and return on investment analysis
- Proposed schedule
- Risk assessment
- Proposed measurement approach

For a generic version of the template, see the item on this article on my Web site, www.eloquor.com (click on the Articles link under the Speaking/Authoring drop down).

When it comes to introducing new technology, here are some additional thoughts. First, the purpose and benefit had better be tied to a business goal—even better, a business goal drawn from a crucial business cycle that drives success, for example, the sales cycle.

How can we improve the sales cycle? How can we close sales faster, more efficiently and with greater revenue?

Second, give great consideration to how the technology you want to introduce influences:

1 Existing technology (How will instant messaging fit in with e-mail and voicemail, and how can you help employees understand when to use which one?)

2 The people responsible for managing the new technology (Do you have people with the know-how, time and commitment to blog often enough to make it worthwhile?)

3 The organizational culture (By introducing a portal that allows everyone to contribute content are you challenging an entitlement culture?)

Third, consider what risks might be introduced with the introduction of the new technology versus the risks of not using the new technology at all.

Finally, work on getting those whose support you will require for implementation on board before you present the business case. In fact, if you can make the whole business case a partnership with them, even better.

The wrap

It is impossible to wrap up when there's a new technology around every corner. I've focused on those I get the most questions about. Most of all, it is important to be pragmatic, so:

- Know why you need the technology
- Understand how you will manage it to success
- Be prepared for unanticipated roadblocks
- Be patient

Remember, some futurists believe that we are only just now, in 2006, beginning to realize the productivity rewards of the personal computer.

Technologies Defined

Never assume that your leadership understand what you are talking about. Wikis, blogs, podcasting, RSS. Sounds like a new alphabet soup. Here are definitions in story fashion you may use in the process of educating and selling them on the benefits.

Blog: Blogging is one individual or a team of people on a Web site talking about what they know and allowing others to respond to what the "bloggers" say.

Instant messaging: See that kid over there typing furiously on his phone? That's IM. He's sending a message to his friends — the message is just text, no audio. IM relies heavily on abbreviations to have real conversations. Messages go to either a wireless phone or an individual's computer.

Podcasting: The delivery of audio or video electronically to an individual's computer or his or her device that plays such files. The individual can choose to be notified when the new podcast is available and then download it to the player, or simply play it on the computer.

Portal: A software tool that allows for the organization of a large quantity of content, applications and other tools into a personalized and customizable view. When combined with a content management system, which keeps all that content neatly organized, the portal can tell who you are and give you exactly what you want and need.

RSS: It stands for "Really Simple Syndication" and it is a news feed that tells you just enough about a news item or podcast so you can decide if you want to read, view or listen. Softwares that organize the news feeds you choose to receive are called aggregators.

Wiki: A Web site that allows users with no programming skill to edit the pages, incorporating content changes, new pages, uploaded files, calendar items, etc.

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Resources

“All About RSS,” <http://www.faganfinder.com/search/rss.shtml>

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“Spreading the Word with RSS,” P.G. Daly, April 18, 2006, Intranet Journal,

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