



Evolution of the intranet

- **Finding your way through the intranet technology minefield**

'An intranet should have a single home page that integrates a directory hierarchy, search, and news. Most intranets are chaotic, under-funded, and lack design standards, causing huge losses in employee productivity'.

- Jakob Nielsenⁱ

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1. Introduction

Portals or dashboards are the next step in the evolution of the intranet. Important considerations such as development platform, features, and future scalability cannot be left to chance. A comprehensive, coordinated approach will ensure that money is not wasted and efficiencies are optimised.

If you can answer 'yes' to any of the following questions, it's time to reassess your intranet solution.

- Is staff usage of the intranet low, or not growing?
- Is the majority of content out-of-date, incomplete or inaccurate? Does this impact on your customer service? Or is there a lack of trust in the information provided?
- Is the updating of content and site architecture an entirely manual, time-intensive, process?
- Is the same content recreated by different people, on multiple areas or sub-sites of the intranet?
- Is the volume of e-mail used to send news and updates unmanageable, or slowing down the network?
- Is the intranet inconsistent in appearance, particularly across sections managed by different groups or departments? Is your internal branding inconsistent?
- Is most information on the intranet reference material, not news or recent projects?
- Are most sections of the intranet solely used to publicise the existence of business units within the organization rather than anything truly useful?
- Is it not really the place to 'get things done' but rather to just read information or satisfy compliance requirements?
- Does senior management fail to see the intranet as a strategic resource?
- Is funding for your intranet inadequate or hard to justify?
- Does your site require a veritable army of maintenance and IT support staff?
- Does the intranet 'live' on numerous servers and in a multitude of databases?
- Do you use a number of different applications to give you all the functionality you need? Are they separate from your intranet?
- Are you tired of the command and control approach to content management? Would you like to show your staff you trust them and free up other resources for other strategic purposes?
- Are geographically dispersed staff poorly supported by your current intranet or network?

Once you have confirmed the need, then you have to find the right integrated intranet product.

2. The intranet portal

Intranets are now the norm but many companies have found that they have not lived up to their expectations. A portal or dashboard improves the prospect by offering benefits in terms of usability, return visits and stickiness, improved communications, consolidation of infrastructure, and freeing the knowledge silos created by traditional departmental site design. CEOs have traditionally used dashboards to find information and other tools at a glance. This is now available for everyone through what is commonly referred to as an intranet portal or dashboard.

An intranet portal, in other words an integrated intranet with applications, means useful business tools such as a content management system or a document manager, that previously existed separately, can be brought under one roof using the same development platform and interface. Processes and workflows can then be improved by making the intranet better aligned to business processes and providing supporting tools such as document or forms management.

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2. The intranet portal (Cont'd)

In a nutshell an intranet is used for:

- **Content publishing** - using the intranet to deliver news and other information.
- **Internal communications** – using the intranet to push consistent communications out to staff, to support the management message, and cultivate a sense of community.
- **Email** - implementing an email system that integrates seamlessly with the intranet, allowing information to be both "pushed" and "pulled".
- **Document management** - using the intranet to allow users to find, store, view, print and collaborate on documents.
- **Branding** – using the intranet to deliver consistent branding of internal and external communications through digital assets and photo libraries.
- **Workflow** - using the intranet to automate processes and improve administrative workflows.
- **Databases** - using the intranet as a front-end for organization-specific systems, such as corporate “People Search” databases or compiling company-wide calendars.
- **Discussion** - using the intranet as a means for users to discuss and debate issuesⁱⁱ regardless of peoples' location or organizational unit.
- **Training** - using the intranet to deliver training or to organize training sessions.

2.1 Business advantages of an integrated intranet space

‘A poorly managed intranet quickly disintegrates into an anarchic situation in which Web sites proliferate, applications abound and processes are nonexistent.’

- Gartner Researchⁱⁱⁱ

Decision-makers need to weigh up the benefits and disadvantage of integrating various tools into their intranet system. Strategically, integration means that you can achieve consistency across the board, centralized access, better management and control of resources, reduced infrastructure costs and reduced cost of ownership.

Infrastructure and Maintenance

The functions and features commonly developed ad hoc in response to user needs, are now found in an integrated intranet space or dashboard. A good system will allow you to customise these components or build new functionality as required, in the same development environment. This means that you can avoid costly redevelopment projects, or disparate products from multiple vendors. You can avoid what Gartner Research calls the “wild west” intranet look.



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2.1 Business advantages of an integrated intranet space (Cont'd)

With a common IT platform for future development, a company can streamline application deployment, operations and site maintenance. If the system has consolidated online help for all its features, it can reduce end-user Helpdesk support requirements. If you keep buying and integrating different vendor products and hybrid architectures, your support and maintenance costs will rise and reliability will decline. The same applies if you continue developing an endless number of in-house applications that you need to maintain and support yourself. You also do not want to be tied to a vendor, or worse yet, multiple vendors.

The ideal intranet would have wizards to speed up installation and customisation of 'out-of-the-box' features or components of the dashboard. The platform ought to allow for cheap and quick development of any additional functionality. Instead of an agglomeration of bolt-ons, the resulting system and interface should be seamless.

Processes and Workflow

An integrated intranet facilitates more efficient processes. By tailoring applications to enhance your work practices, time and money can be saved. For example forms can be found online, and employees can search the database for the correct process to follow instead of searching the office for the right person to talk to.

Teams can collaborate on documents. The number of redundant copies in circulation can be reduced, saving on server space. People in different locations can still work together on a project at the same time or asynchronously using communication tools.

Resource availability, such as meeting rooms or even people, can be identified quickly and easily through one central interface.

Centralized Access to Tools

A number of tools can be accessed through a centralized hub. For example, you would ideally be able to search the employee directory, and survey your staff for their ideas or opinions. You can reduce travel costs by using online collaboration tools built into the system. Large files can be managed by sending links to the document exchange rather than sending huge emails. Branding can be controlled and accessed centrally through asset libraries available to the entire organisation or department. Then they can be updated seamlessly from one central location. A world time calculator would enhance international communications and travel. An *Acronym Manager* would enhance the collective understanding of company specific terms and business 'lingo'.

Perhaps most importantly, the ideal intranet should create a user experience that keeps people coming back for more. According to Jakob Nielsen, 'much of the value of intranets comes from making it a communications tool employees check everyday'^{iv}. This entails simplifying their lives and making it easier to find information through one or more 'killer apps' and enabling them to do their job more effectively. For example, they should have access to company-wide calendaring, resource scheduling and a prominent search function. They should have tools to aid branding, travel, and internal communications.

'..the dream behind the Web...is dependent on the Web becoming so generally used that it becomes a realistic mirror of the ways in which we work and play and socialise.'

– Tim Berners-Lee^v

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2.1 Business advantages of an integrated intranet space (Cont'd)

Standardisation and Governance

Administration of the site and governance issues are more easily managed because of the centralized interface. Internal communications are branded consistently and can be reused at different times by other sections of the business. Senior management messages are clearer and more consistent. They can be coordinated for release, leaving no office 'out-of-the-loop'.

The link between employee satisfaction and organisational performance is documented. Providing timely information and transparency is key. Interactive tools can help build a sense of democracy between staff and management.

The entire system should encourage a consistent vocabulary, and creation of standard meta data. Governance is something that is often lacking in the compilation of intranet content.

A Single Gateway to Information

An integrated intranet site extends beyond being a single gateway to corporate information, but helps intranet users find actionable information. Information that was previously scattered across email mailboxes and PC hard drives and then forgotten, or spread across ad hoc internal web sites, becomes more manageable and searchable. A consolidated interface means that end users can learn how to use the site faster and more easily. Information can be organised and retrieved from one central place, and the user is drawn to the space by useful features such as live news feeds, sports tipping, the company calendar, or a facility to provide feedback to managers. A dashboard should be for everyone, not just the CEO. The intranet also replaces the need for traditional paper-based information sources.

Internal Communications

From a management perspective, the toughest audience a company has is its employees^{vi}. Internal communications are supported by a central access point such as the Intranet DASHBOARD, ensuring messages are current and undiluted. Consistent messaging can help build a sense of community and identification with the brand or assist in the assimilation of new staff during mergers and acquisitions.

Content Management and Dissemination

One major business enhancing tool is the content management system. Content is made fresher, more consistent and manageable. It can be updated across the globe from several different locations, yet retain consistency over the regions or offices. From an administrative point of view, employees can be empowered to manage a select area of content. There is no longer a need for each different department to create the same or similar content if the system allows previous content to be used as a global resource. Rather than departmental sites combined into one increasingly less manageable mass, a consolidated intranet is just that - consolidated.

The ideal intranet portal or dashboard should offer content control over a distributed environment. Large organisations may have millions of pages over thousands of sub-sites^{vii}, so a quick and easy way to create new pages and sites within a logical navigational structure, is essential. The system should enable content administration to be delegated to content owners while the design remains centralized and consistent. Admin users could customise the dashboard layout through a usable interface, tailoring sub sites for different locations or departments. It should allow coordinators to perform administration tasks that pertain to the entire workspace, such as managing content sources, profiles, categories, as well as assigned user roles^{viii}.



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2.1 Business advantages of an integrated intranet space (Cont'd)

Productivity, Efficiency and Cost Savings

Finally, the financial benefits of a consolidated intranet include increased employee productivity from time saved, and improved knowledge management. Workflow is optimised through desktop integration with MS Office and other built-in applications. Dedicated publishing roles can be eliminated through a distributed authoring system. Content management contributes to reduced costs of printing, communication and photocopying. Less paper and server rationalisation result in space savings. If the intranet uses template-based technology for site creation, this lowers the cost of site design. As mentioned, infrastructure costs are reduced, and help desk calls are minimised.

E-metrics

Measuring the internal communications program is essential. E-metrics provide an easy way to quantify the success of your internal communication initiatives. The ideal intranet should allow content coordinators to measure usability and content effectiveness. A superior intranet system will have this functionality built-in without having to rely on third-party software. Built-in e-metrics help businesses to tailor their communications and assist them to respond to user needs, creating a 360° feedback loop.

Types of products on the Market

Many products have tried to make the vertical move to the intranet portal or dashboard. Vendors well-known for their collaboration tools, or virtual teaming products, have attempted to cover dashboard offerings to various degrees of success.

The first set of products that come to mind are development centric^{ix}. They focus on keeping customers 'in the fold' of proprietary products. They 'trap' clients in proprietary relationships, and they sometimes forgo high usability standards, content management tools, or the breadth of communication tools and other services which keep users coming back for more.

The next category is the framework centred. They concentrate on pulling other applications together to provide the features people look for. As a result of this, people can end up with a mish-mash of proprietary products competing for desktop resources. Typically, this kind of product does not allow for creation of new content.

Finally we have the database centred products that focus on pulling in enterprise data. These applications are best at integrating back office systems and are not specially suited to the development or management of intranet content.

Intranet DASHBOARD is a new product developed by **The ADWEB Agency** that aims to capture the main functionality of each of the above categories of products but offer applications straight 'out of the box' in one consolidated package. It eliminates the need to purchase costly add-on after add-on. **Intranet DASHBOARD** is unique in that it offers an operating system, development platform, content management system and suite of applications in one integrated package.

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2.1 Business advantages of an integrated intranet space (Cont'd)

Figure 1 illustrates Intranet DASHBOARD's relationship to these main product types.

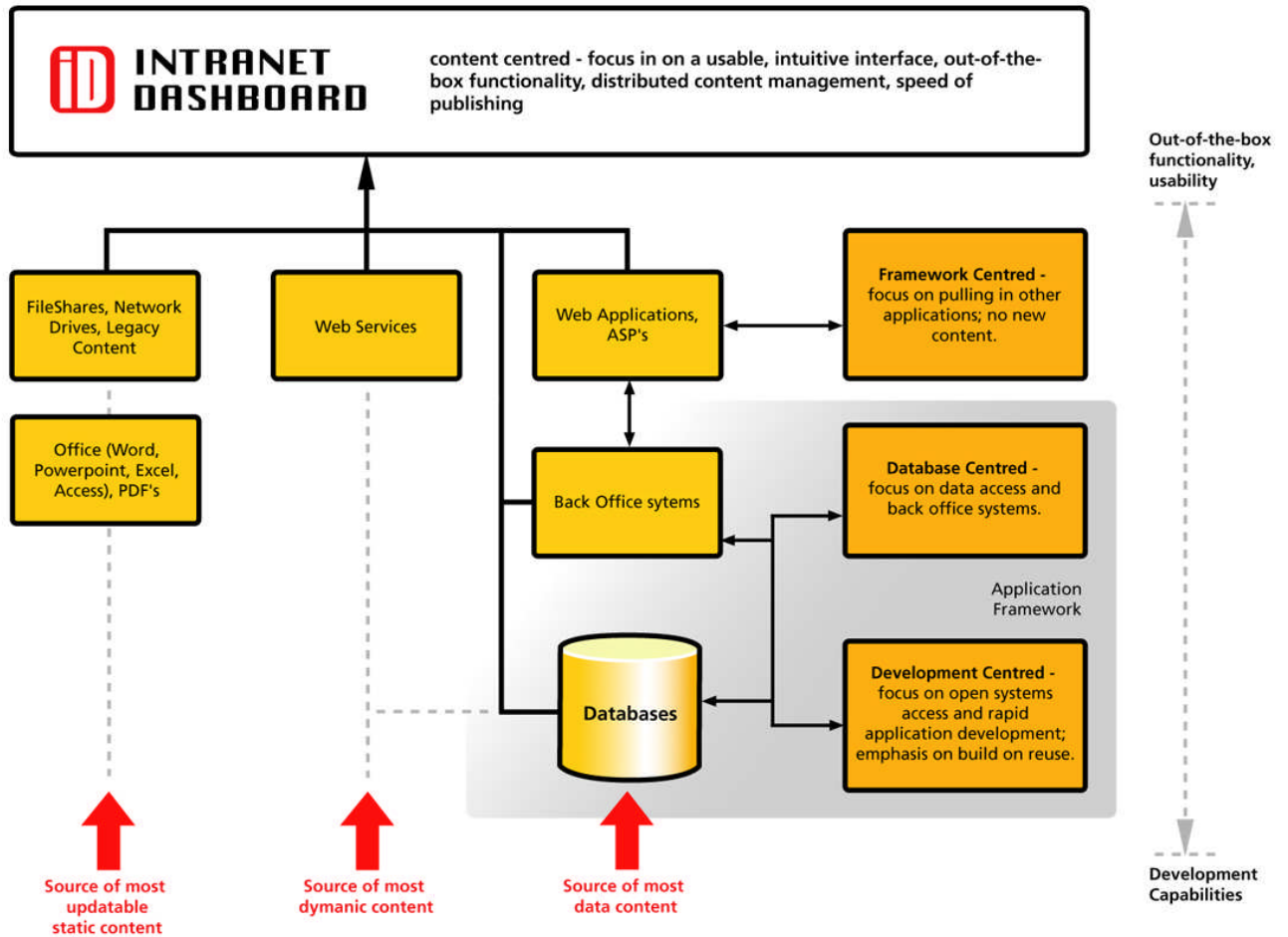


Figure 1. Types of intranet products on the market

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3.0 Overview of Intranet DASHBOARD functionality – a holistic approach

Intranet DASHBOARD competes with products from existing world-leading vendors and is one of the first to offer an integrated intranet management system with comprehensive out-of-the-box functionality. The breadth of features built in to **Intranet DASHBOARD** to support the business is impressive...



Figure 2. Intranet DASHBOARD applications

3.1 The concept of user control of user content

Empowering your staff to address content needs is very different to the traditional command and control approach taken by many organizations. Not only does this reduce the need for dedicated publishing roles but refocuses the onus on staff to take responsibility for internal content. Content can be reused in different situations, instantly. For example, an Australian news release might be altered to reflect the local currency. An easily customisable template means the company 'look and feel' remains consistent despite multiple authors working on multiple sub sites.

3.2 Knowledge management features

The first of the knowledge management tools under discussion is the *Forum*. A forum is a way for your organisation to cultivate community, socialise, support project teams, or simply collect feedback.

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3.2 Knowledge management features (Cont'd)

Threaded discussions are hierarchical, searchable and the system has the potential to push out a notification to recipients when a post is published, to prompt them to read it. Recipients can choose whether or not they would like to receive this notification once a day or immediately.

The *Document Manager* allows you to post a document to a central repository and then set permissions for user access. It is supported by a comprehensive search function.

The *People Search* enables you to find 'who knows what' in the organisation. It searches on name, surname, job title, or keywords – basically anything in the Active Directory.

Contacts Manager enables you to search both internal and external contacts with further details such as knowledge expertise, photos, etc.

3.3 Feedback tools

Quick Poll enables administrators to gauge staff opinions or preferences. It can be used to gather feedback on management initiated ideas, or the intranet itself, or fun things like the location of the next staff retreat.

Survey Pro is an application that enables more in-depth surveying. For example, rather than hiring a third party to manage your potentially sensitive HR surveys, the in-built feature would allow you to gather instant feedback. Survey data remains confidential and in your control.

Feedback Director – create online forms to report feedback or for any other purpose.

3.4 Forms management

The *Forms Manager* also facilitates the streamlining of office processes. By encouraging self-service, an employee can find what forms they need, an outline of the process they are about to undertake, and a link to other forms they may need along the way. Reducing or eliminating the redundant steps in such processes can produce significant time-savings, and reduce employee frustrations or a sense of bureaucracy.

3.5 Managing large files

The *File Express* tool enables employees to send large files across the network without using email. Often mail system restrictions forbid files being sent over a certain size. Rather than emailing a file, a user can upload it to a central space and just send a link to the recipient for them to download the file at their convenience without clogging up the email system.

3.6 Managing digital assets and branding

The *Digital Assets Library* allows an organisation or department to store its media in one central location. Sub-sites can create their own personalized library as well and share it with whoever they decide needs to see it. For example, the sales sites could share streaming video files, icons, purchased images and product images across the U.S. and Australia. By setting permissions, this reduces the need for a Communications Department to control external content.



Image Library offers a home for corporate images. This creates a digital history of the organisation and can be used in marketing material, or just for fun. New employees can browse the library to get a better idea of the culture of the organisation.

The *Brand Manager* is used to manage the consistency and quality of the company brand or brands. It can be accessed across the entire organisation, worldwide.

3.7 Staff offers

Staff Offers enables organisers to manage deals with third parties. This is a great way to boost morale and create a sense of community, or belonging to a special club – your organization.

The *Travel Agent* provides your travelling staff with discounts on cheap airfares, the details of preferred suppliers, and deals on hotels and restaurants. Staff can rate the performance of these suppliers to guide your next negotiations.

3.8 Company-wide communications

The *e-newsletter* function makes management of internal company newsletters easier. Using it in concert with the People Search feature, content can be brought in from other parts of the intranet and laid out in a consistent template.

The *Company Calendar* pools information from all the sub-sites to help people schedule events and projects. This is a much easier way to work out what is going on around the company rather than trying to juggle individual calendars and a mish-mash of possibly out-of-date bulletins.

The *Acronym Manager* allows people to enter frequently used company acronyms. This is particularly useful for new employees, or employees from different departments, to learn what people are actually talking about in meetings.

3.9 Organise meetings and resources

The *Meeting Room Booking* provides a sophisticated method for securing rooms. As an extension of the *Company Calendar*, it allows you to list resources such as rooms, projectors and whiteboards.

The *World Time* calculator facilitates overseas or interstate conference calls. A user simply needs to select the two cities involved and the time at either end is automatically calculated. There is no need to know in which time zone a city is located.

3.10 Unique content management system

The built-in content management system allows employees to publish to the intranet without any need for HTML or Web development knowledge. Novice users can publish content quickly and easily. There is no longer such a need for a Communications Department or traditional Webmaster. Distributed publishing empowers employees in different parts of the organisation to take control and responsibility for their area of expertise. Multi-level permissioning eliminates the need for an approvals process. You know exactly who is responsible for what, and it demonstrates that you trust your staff enough to manage internal communications.

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Concluding remarks

Intranet DASHBOARD offers the most comprehensive selection of features, plus a built-in content and document management system. It is based on the .NET framework which generally makes development cheaper and faster than those built on other frameworks such as JAVA.

In summary, **iD** is a superior choice for your intranet or intranet enhancements because it offers:

- Infrastructure and maintenance cost savings
- Reduced development costs
- Faster and cheaper application deployment
- Applications that are already integrated and come with the package so there are no extra costs
- Improved business processes
- Standardization and governance of your intranet and content
- Empowerment of employees to publish content without needing technical skills
- Content dissemination from a central position and through multiple communication channels
- Multilingual capabilities through the end-user interface
- Freedom from being tied to one or multiple vendors; once the product is purchased it is yours to develop independently if you choose to do so
- Great online and offline support and regular version enhancements
- Built on an industry standard platform, .NET, making it scalable, robust and 'future proof'
- The essential pre-requisites of any intranet system but with added value

More information on **Intranet DASHBOARD** can be found at www.intranetdashboard.com

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Appendix A – Glossary

Clever tools

Clever tools are 'components' or 'gadgets' that are available on an as needs basis. You would be hard pressed to find this set of enterprise applications on other intranet portal products. See Appendix B for a full product description

Sub sites

The **Intranet DASHBOARD** administration interface allows you to create sub sites. For example, you would create a sub site for a department. You can also then create specialised roles within these sites for managing content.

Multi-level access and permissions

Multi-level access refers to the multiple levels of permissions that can be assigned. Permissions can be based on regions, roles, pages, or sections of pages.

Open Standards

Open standards refer to widely supported industry standards for application development. In this case it refers to the Microsoft® .NET Framework. **Intranet DASHBOARD** will therefore integrate with other existing applications or enterprise systems.

Dashboards

An intranet dashboard, as used in this discussion, differs from Internet dashboards or portals in that it does not just present information to users, **it actively assists them perform tasks and activities**. A traditional portal is used to pool information and resources into one single interface. Traditional dashboards, the type that CEOs or board-members use, are usually just a set of charts and trends related to the business. A truly consolidated dashboard should not just be a conglomeration of reports, but a fully integrated product in itself. It should offer the basic prerequisites of any intranet site, but allow for company-wide communication management and other functionality as the business requires.



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