Is the corporate intranet a panacea for all information management problems? The ABSA experience

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1. **Introduction**

Businesses exist to satisfy customers. To do this they need to provide these customers with product(s) and/or services, which satisfy customer needs. Customers must be willing to purchase these products and services at the prevailing rates as determined by the business and its processes (supply and demand). At the same time investors in a business require adequate returns on their investments. These returns are a function of both the amount and cost of the product/service sold to customers. In this scenario a business will make use of resources at its disposal to achieve its stated goal/s. These resources include *inter alia* people (intellectual capital), capital, information, processes (including the related information systems), etc. By implication such resources must be managed as efficiently and effectively as possible. According to Taylor (1997) information drives corporate efficiency and productivity and must therefore be managed and used effectively. This article focuses on the use/role of an intranet as a possible tool to use in an organization in this regard. Furthermore the Amalgamated Banks of South Africa (ABSA) environment is used as an example for assessing the use of an intranet for managing information as a resource in an organization.

The question of how an Intranet can be used to assist an organization to manage information is addressed in this article. In attempting to solve this problem, the author investigates what an intranet is, the nature of information management and in what way, if at all, an intranet can be used to address the requirements of managing information. Lastly, the ABSA example of an intranet is broadly reviewed and a number of conclusions made.

2. **What is an intranet?**

An intranet reproduces the functionality of the Internet in the corporate network, by copying and building on an infrastructure similar to the public Internet. Its primary focus is usually one of rapid, simple communication and the sharing of data and documentation among users in an organization (CanTech Solutions 1998:1).

Technology

Intranets are generally based on open standards for example, POP3, HTTP, etc. and TCP/IP (a communications protocol), ensuring speed, compatibility with most other technologies and flexibility. These standards are simple, proven and not dependent on any specific hardware configuration. By using a Web-browser, a Web server and any Internet-compatible client - such as those which may be available as part of existing client/server architectures (LANS) and installations - intranets can be formed within organizational boundaries (firewalls) and so be protected from external violation (Wachter and Gupta 1997:393). This is contrasted with many other groupware applications that demand the use and maintenance of (expensive) proprietary infrastructures (Telleen 1996b) and which achieve much the same result.

Design

Intranets should be easy and pleasant to use, intuitive (using commonly understood symbols and approaches) and contain information that has been placed where the target audience would expect to find it. These are some of the essential characteristics of a well-designed intranet infrastructure. It is of equal importance to ensure that the design is kept current by following changing user needs and preferences. Clearly, major user input is required in the design of these networks. By definition, intranets are internal enterprise networks, protected from the outside world by firewalls and therefore not subjected to the same security problems as those of the Internet (Hannam 1996:31).

Purpose

According to Fishenden (1996:90), increasing amounts of data and information in enterprises are forcing the adoption of better ways to index, store, search for and retrieve such data. An intranet is seen as an ideal way of making available such data and information in a timely manner. General consensus in the literature seems to be that intranets are ideally suited for the promotion and implementation of communication and collaboration among users in an organization, provided that the prevailing organizational culture encourages this phenomenon. This view of the requirement of an encouraging organizational culture is also supported by Owens and Wilson (1997:19).

3. **What is information management?**

Information that is useful and provides value for an organization must be managed and protected (Telleen, 1996a). Information management deals with how people add context to data to produce meaningful information (Richman, 1995). It can therefore be concluded that people (users) must be able to use data within an information framework (right amounts, right time and right context) so that the data can have meaning for a specific purpose. This meaning is a function of how people interpret the data for a specific purpose as a result of previous experiences they have had or know of in related or similar circumstances.

According to Hannam (1996:31), three critical issues in managing information can be identified. The first, and simplest, is the *technology* used in the process. This aspect has been adequately addressed for the moment elsewhere in this article. The second issue relates to the *information* itself. Here cognizance must be taken of a number of aspects, namely ownership (who is responsible for accuracy, access, updating and deletion), management (e.g. controlling the provision and flow of information), protection (access to information), editorial control (yes/no to publishing/making available), push or pull (issuing information or allowing access to information) and information policy (who gets what). The third issue, and potentially the most difficult one, is *organizational culture*. Enterprises with successful intranets tend to have cultures of information sharing. This implies ensuring that users have access to technology and information, creating policies encouraging information to be freely available (within the required security measures for data), assisting people to acquire the skills for optimal information analysis and manipulation and reviewing of working practices to assist in making the most effective use of the potential that the available technologies offer, for example Web technologies making possible geographically dispersed working locations for members of an organization. An interesting observation is that the possession of information in itself does not constitute power, but rather what is done with that information or how is it applied.

4. **How can an intranet facilitate information management?**

Intranets should assist users in satisfying their needs for information by enhancing access to such information through making available links to other interrelated information (Hildebrand 1997). The pervasiveness of a typical intranet infrastructure throughout an organization and the resulting potential access to information by all levels of management negate the disadvantages of supplying information through intermediaries (various levels of management) from source to destination (Windsor 1996:133). An intranet can facilitate information capture and assist in leveraging existing information assets by promoting the re-use of such information because of its ease of access. Such information can typically be accessed by content and related attributes, for example author. The dissemination of information across organizational boundaries, such as between departments, can easily be enhanced through the use of an intranet (Huynh *et al*. 1996). Due to the rapid adoption of Internet technologies by various enterprises and the possibilities this situation provides for Intranet development, more and more core business applications are being Web enabled. The Web enablement features of such applications allow them to be run on the cost-effective and easy-to-use platforms that intranets provide (Wachter and Gupta 1997:394). The common look-and-feel of these environments also facilitates the rapid adoption and high proficiency levels of business users of such applications. The enterprise users can therefore become more productive more quickly as opposed to the skilling-up required by users to be able to use proprietary software applications at the same level of proficiency. Interestingly, this Web dynamic is increasing the awareness, expectations and demand for better access to information by users in an organization (Crane 1997:311).

5. **The ABSA intranet**

According to the ABSA Group Internet/Intranet/Extranet Policy the Absa intranet is devoted to ABSA employees. The main publishers on the existing intranet appear to be business groups closely aligned to the IT division. The type of information available is mostly of a very general nature and in some cases access to the relevant pages is controlled.

In assessing ABSA's intranet, it may be useful to do this according to a framework as demonstrated by Hannam (1996:31). In this regard also see section 3 of this article. This framework proposes three important assessment criteria, namely *technology*, *information* and *organizational* culture.

Technology

The requirements for running an intranet are *inter alia* a LAN/WAN running the TCP/IP communications protocol and a compatible operating system such as WINDOWS® NT. Although this technology is obviously running at head office with the existing intranet, there is limited availability to this configuration elsewhere in the group. The WINDOWS® NT operating system is currently being rolled out to the existing branch network. Until such time as this is completed, widespread use of the intranet in an operational context will not be feasible for ABSA offices outside of the head office LAN environment.

Information

Access to ABSA information at this time can be described as limited, because it requires one to have or have access to specialized knowledge about the existing data and information stores. The specialized data mining tools that are available in ABSA are used by a small group of specialists mainly, within the IT group. Furthermore, the data and information architectures, including the data warehouse content, are not common knowledge particularly to those information users and even knowledge workers who require access to such information. Access must be facilitated by third-party intervention and this constraint can often lead to time delays in completed information-related tasks such as supplying required management information, particularly on an *ad hoc* basis.

Organization culture

According to Hannam (1996:32), the people and related culture aspect are probably the most difficult of factors to address because they deal with the perceptions and attitudes of people in the organization. The perception of the author is that the current ABSA culture in terms of information use does not quite conform to an information sharing and collaboration paradigm. The history of ABSA relating to the merging of four distinct organizations (including cultures) into one must have played a significant role in the current paradigm.

Aside from the aforementioned factors, however, one can safely assume that current and future business realities are going to dictate, in no small way, the manner in which and who uses information in the organization. A more effective and efficient business, which is required if ABSA, as any other business, is to remain and ultimately become more competitive in the market, will necessitate *inter alia* that better use is made of available information in all aspects of the business. The current restructuring measures that particularly the IT part of the organization are going through are testimony to the newer thinking of management in this regard. These restructuring measures are also an attempt to ensure that the IT organization becomes even more business focused than was the case in the past. Clearly the increased use and further development of the intranet could potentially play a significant role in reaching this objective.

Financial

Notwithstanding the abovementioned assessment criteria, the author feels that there is a financial component, namely the cost of deploying an intranet in a group-wide context and the additional applications required to achieve the desired information management functionality. Furthermore, the current investment in technologies that do and/or could assist

with managing information should be carefully considered.

6. **Conclusion**

Investments in IT should be driven by business needs rather than for the sake of the technology itself. New IT applications must support business objectives and strategies by helping to create, store and provide access to the required information (Taylor 1997; Teo *et al*. 1998:198). The technologies deployed in building and maintaining intranets can also significantly assist in alleviating the problems of geographical dispersion of organizational entities inherent in many large enterprises, including ABSA. This is particularly so because of their open nature and the fact that they are comparatively inexpensive compared to, for example groupware applications with similar characteristics and capabilities.

Implementing and using an intranet in an organization to assist all relevant staff members in managing information can leverage the return on current investment in technology by its increased and more efficient use. It will also enhance and promote the productive relationships between employees. In this regard the corporate memory, that is the collective knowledge of experienced staff, can be made available in an attractive, effective and efficient manner to those requiring such knowledge so that business can be conducted in a competitively superior way. This capability must however be balanced against the investment, deployment and potential of currently existing information management tools.

Ultimately however, the author is of the opinion that the big issue is not one of technology, or finances or information. The most important aspect (and the most difficult to address) is the awareness of the people (staff) about the value of information and its contribution to the well-being of all concerned and the ultimate success of the organization. This does not for one moment infer that the other factors are not important - rather, it serves to highlight the importance of ensuring that the people (culture) issue has been thoroughly assessed and addressed before unrealistic expectations and heavy investments are made. To have spent the money, built the systems, organized the information and then to expect people to use the facilities will have been largely wasted if the people do not realize and accept the what's in it for me aspect. To change to this paradigm will require a concerted effort in educating the organization about information use, that is why should it be used and why should it be shared. Only then will information management tools like intranets and their associated applications come into their own as tools for the promotion and actioning of information sharing and use.

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