

An intranet can be thought of as having five purposes or roles, the first four of which are generally well accepted:

1. making **content** available
2. delivering **communications**
3. promoting **collaboration**
4. supporting task **activities**

The fifth purpose, is to reflect, influence and help shape **culture**.

Organisational culture is often expressed as 'it's the way we do things around here', though this is a less than satisfying explanation.

More helpful is to think of culture as being to an organisation as personality is to a person: essential, unique and difficult to define but surfaces at the point of interaction and shapes the experience of the relationship. A strong culture may only require a single (delightful? belittling?) interaction to inform a staff member, or indeed a client, as to what the organisation's defining cultural characteristics are.

More generally, culture emerges from the sum total of interactions and organisational relationships.

These cultural outcomes can be influenced by very tangible factors, such as:

- the broad physical environment (office building, freight terminal, cockpit)
- more immediate variables (desk size and adornments, meeting room shape and style, the cleanliness of the workplace)
- type of tools used (be they tractors, scalpels, or computers)



Stephen Byrne is an organisational psychologist and senior consultant at Step Two Designs, an intranet and content management consultancy based in Sydney, Australia. Stephen specialises in intranet strategy and design, knowledge practices and organisational change.

Culture: 'It's the way we do things around here'

Culture is also conveyed and sustained through intangibles such as day to day workplace activities. These include:

- non-verbal behaviour between people (dress code, how meetings are conducted, punctuality, safety attitudes, security protocols)
- interaction styles, like how staff and clients communicate (personal, objective, defensive)
- how staff identify with things (awards, uniforms and logos)

The intranet and culture

The intranet team may see themselves as quite removed from organisational culture. However since culture is generally transmitted through the exchange of information including messaging, visual cues, documents, policies and training, the intranet can play a significant role in reflecting and conveying organisational culture.

Though intranet teams are not entirely responsible for driving the culture, their part is often very visible. They may be asked to play a role in resolving, changing or championing certain cultural outcomes. Looking at some of the more challenging tasks asked of the intranet from the perspective of culture, helps to clarify this 'fifth-purpose'.

The cultural challenges faced regularly by intranet teams that we examine here are:

1. reducing silo boundaries
2. making the organisation 'more social'
3. improving collaboration
4. keeping the organisation 'on message'
5. supporting change initiatives

1. Reducing silo boundaries

Social environments, by definition, are about groups and organisational groups have the same drivers as non-organisational ones. Tendencies to favour those within the group you identify with is hard-wired behaviour, so the development of silos is completely natural. Silos can be based on geography, specialist discipline, department, rank or some other organisational grouping.

As there are factors that work to amplify group differences and in turn reinforce silos, by extension, there are a number of things that can be done to erode silo boundaries.

For example group members are more likely to work with those outside their group when they:

- are familiar with out-group members
- see similarities with those outside
- are working towards a shared goal
- see others as non-threatening

Intranets generally emerge from a need to centralise information and heighten visibility across the organisation. The specifics of

how this operates will depend on the organisation but starting points include:

- orienting individuals within and across teams
- informing staff of other groups, how they are composed, and what they do
- clarifying how teams are working to achieve organisational outcomes
- demonstrating how to engage with people in other teams

This highlights why a comprehensive directory is so important. Other more systemic aspects of the intranet also play an important role. For example, do project and team sites exclude outsiders for good reason, or just because they are outsiders? Heightening visibility across teams will engender openness and trust whereas making people feel excluded convey messages that strengthen silos.

The degree of openness on the intranet can send strong messages to staff. Encouraging a 'default-open' policy where staff can access material of other teams conveys the importance of transparency throughout the organisation.

The screenshot shows the 'Customer circle' page on the Stockland intranet. The page has a blue header with the Stockland logo and navigation links. Below the header, there are search boxes for 'Employees' and 'Intranet'. The main content area is titled 'Customer circle' and includes a 'Welcome to the Customer Circle!' message, a 'What's new' section with a post input field, a 'Calendar' section with a table of events, and a 'Circle members' section.

Title	Location	Start Time
NSW - Brooks Reach Pizza Party	Sales Office 359 Bong Bong Road Horsely NSW	12/02/2012 14:00
NSW - Murrays Beach BBQ	Murrays Beach Poolside, 11 Shoreside Row Murrays Beach	12/02/2012 16:30

Using organisational goals is a powerful way to unify groups (called 'circles' here) from different organisational areas. This 'circle' unites staff from across the organisation through discussions, suggestions and activities that support customer outcomes. Screenshot courtesy of Stockland.

Some of the ways the intranet erode silo boundaries include:

- facilitating shared activities
- reinforcing common goals
- reducing competition between groups

Silos might be very legitimate for privacy or security reasons

More subtle forms of siloing can also happen. For example:

- Does your intranet overly represent head office perspectives?
- Are field staff well connected to each other and back to central team members?
- Does the intranet fairly represent all groups throughout the organisation, particularly minority groups?

Remember though, that silos might be a very legitimate cultural component where confidentiality or security needs are paramount. But even in these instances, while specific content might be locked down, information about teams and their members need not be.

2. Making the organisation 'more social'

When it comes to intranets, silence is rarely golden, but particularly when staff feel they have nothing to contribute.

The group behaviour that underpins silos discussed above also works to sustain silence. People feel safe in the group, and remain quiet lest they get noticed and singled out for unwanted attention. Staff who are reluctant to participate openly may fear:

- criticism
- the possibility of sanction
- being seen as foolish

This means that to encourage people to contribute they need to feel safe. Without a doubt, the single most effective way to get people to participate is to provide encouraging feedback, not every time, but early and on an ongoing basis. This feedback may need to be deliberate and structured at first, but if done well can become a virtuous circle.

Evaluate your current intranet by asking:

- When staff provide private feedback to the intranet team, is this acknowledged and responded to?
- Is there a safe way (e.g. thumbs up 'like') for content contributors to get positive feedback from other staff?
- Is inappropriate online behaviour responded to in a constructive and consistent manner?

It might seem that allowing staff to contribute anonymously will help encourage contribution. However keeping contributors accountable for their input, is more likely to discourage negative commentary and so identifying contributors is a preferred approach. Identifying contributors also helps enable and encourage conversations.

Some ways to sustain contributions include:

- good role modelling by senior executives, both in what and how they contribute, but more importantly, how they address negative criticism and in turn conveying confidence, leadership and resilience
- assigning an 'invisible hand' what works in the background to encourage, energise and steer online community conversations

Collaboration is less about tools and more about relationships

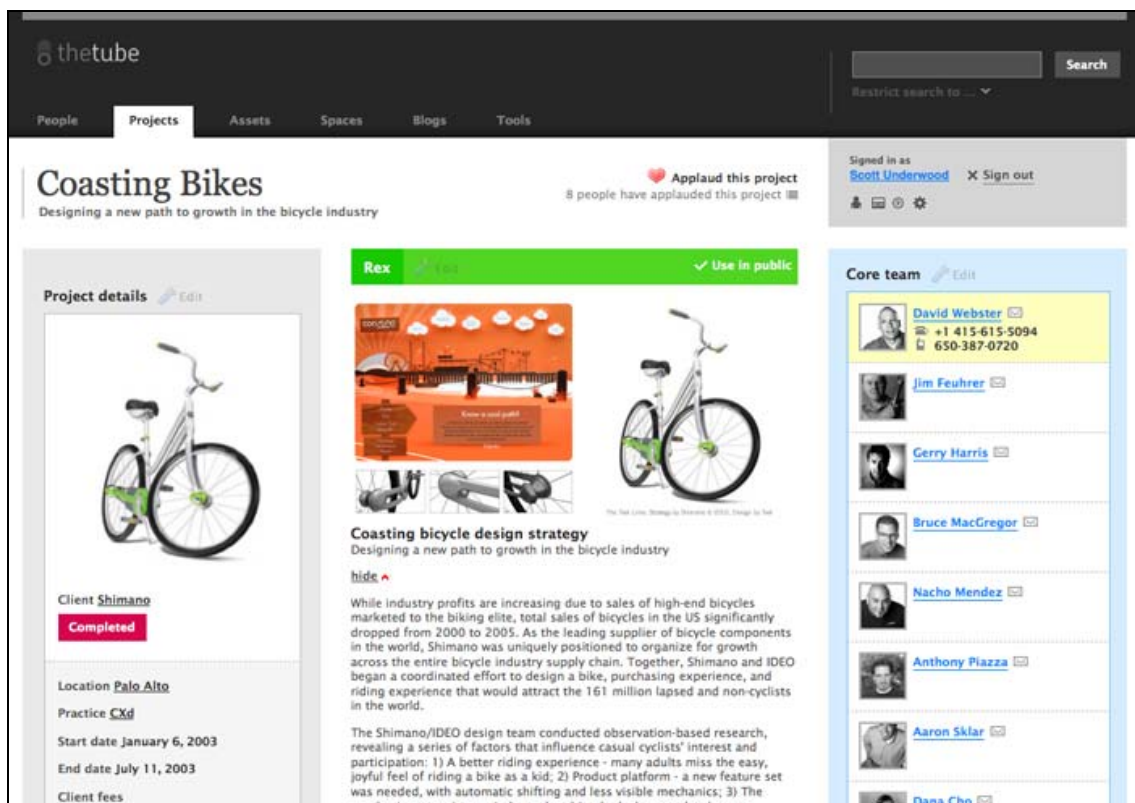
3. Improving collaboration

Collaboration is not a set of tools. It is a set of relationships that need to be seeded in the culture, nurtured and only then can the rewards be reaped.

Participating in a social way helps employees build connections, get to know what others are working on and spot opportunities to contribute beyond social commentary and small two-way interactions. But before diving headlong into collaboration solutions, you need to ask how these solutions will address real needs and issues in the organisation.

Start by identifying where collaboration is already happening:

- business-as-usual or special projects
- team efforts
- multi disciplinary committees



Making projects default-open allow design teams to share their work-in-progress inviting input from staff. This sends strong cultural messages about sharing and inclusion. Screenshot courtesy of IDEO.

Examine how these are working and what the essential enablers are but also what constraints hamper better collaboration.

The organisation itself often hampers collaboration by design. Well formed, focused, cohesive operational groups embedded in a strong hierarchical structure may deliver on existing operational requirements, but may struggle to engage collaboratively across the organisation.

This might be reflected in a culture where:

- all decisions go through a single person
- senior executives don't communicate and have different understanding of a shared initiative
- team members are rewarded for competing outcomes
- project roles and responsibilities are ill-defined
- team members speak a different language (literally and figuratively)

We have already seen how the intranet can work to narrow the distance between silos, and foster participation. With collaborative initiatives it is not enough to provide a generic suite of tools. Technology tools by themselves will not remove collaboration

roadblocks, but well chosen ones, as part of a broader strategy can work well.

Alongside collaboration comes innovation which often emerges when traditionally disparate and disconnected entities begin to collaborate. Whether this is manufacturing and sales departments, or seemingly unrelated university faculties, innovation requires more than the sharing of messages and documents. It's about sharing ideas, passion, solutions but also sharing space, resources, glory (and failures).

The environment needs to be understood, and the tools enabled and crafted to addressing the specific needs and challenges represented by the different teams.

4. Keeping the organisation 'on message'

Who are we as an organisation? Organisations put significant effort into crafting their external identity but what staff see from the inside is rarely so composed. Even organisations that appear monolithic with single rigid identities are more often seen internally as federations of related and sometimes independent entities.

Like other cultural elements discussed, the intranet operates alongside strong organisational drivers. Internal cultural identity is closely associated with leadership. This is less about telling people what to do, and more about clarifying where the organisation is going, and perhaps most importantly why it is going there.

Intranets generally see a great deal of emphasis placed on leadership in a very explicit way through executive messaging. But keeping the organisation 'on-message' in this way will be difficult if the visuals of the intranet are sending powerful contradictory messages.

What does your intranet(s) tell staff about the organisation?

- does the intranet project one identity or many?
- is the home page an organisational battleground or do different interests happily co-exist?
- is the corporate brand respected throughout the site, or is it so relegated to be ineffective?
- is the home page well styled, and carefully crafted or a patchwork of uncoordinated elements?

- is the intranet conveying boldness and confidence or appeasement and compromise?
- are information areas and structures well organised or do they appear to be information dumping grounds?

The intranet won't create great leadership but it can make it more visible. Brand, identity, structure, order and style are strong visual cues that can help unite and bind an organisation together.

5. Supporting change initiatives

Change is difficult in any organisation, but this article provides a framework within which to understand how an organisation's culture is likely to support to change.

If your organisation:

- has strong connections across divisions
- is open and communicative
- is collaborative and innovative
- has strong identity
- has clarity of purpose

this would suggest an organisation that is change ready.



Helping staff stay 'on-message' does not have to mean 'one message'. This intranet shows organisation-wide messages (left), are not more important than team messages (centre) with topics of individual interest (right) equally prominent. Screenshot courtesy of Coca-Cola Enterprises.

One of the most powerful change drivers is peer influence. People want to fit in and be accepted – they do this by emulating what they see around them. If the organisation has long been sending messages that reinforce and support change readiness, then when change comes it will be resisted less.

There is no ideal culture but there are ideals worth pursuing

If your organisation is struggling with change, perhaps a review of the preceding cultural elements can provide clues as to where, over time, improvements can be made.

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Remember though that the intranet and its supporting team can only do so much. Taking on cultural challenges alone without the full support of parallel initiatives across the organisation are likely to be immensely challenging at best.

The road to cultural improvement may be long, but you must start from where you are now rather than trying to attain some perceived ideal in a single step.

Also, there is no single ideal culture since the nature of a business, the roles that predominate, and the operating environment all determine what culture will help the organisation to flourish. Attempting to transplant cultural elements from other organisations needs to be done with caution.

However, there are some cultural ideals that are worth pursuing. These are characterised by a work-place where:

- diversity and fairness are embraced
- staff are engaged and enthusiastic
- employees realise their full potential
- there is a clarity of message
- great leadership exists
- staff are innovative and customer focused

Keep culture in perspective

By all means strive for the cultural elements that will work best for your specific business model and environment be it social or otherwise, but ensure that staff needs remain central to any planned changes.

Addressing staff needs by attending to the other four intranet purposes of content, communications, collaboration and activity will in turn support the cultural outcomes you are trying to achieve within your scope of influence.



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