

## Drawing clear lines between information systems

In many organisations, the intranet competes with e-mail, file shares, the document management system and records management. Information is scattered between these systems, making it difficult for users to know where to look.

What is needed is a clear policy about when these information systems should be used, and what they are for.

### Information systems

Most large organisations currently have a wide range of systems used to manage corporate information, including some (or all) of:

- intranet
- e-mail
- corporate file servers
- users' local hard drives
- document management system
- records management system
- online discussion groups
- databases
- Outlook Public Folders
- Lotus Notes

### Sources of confusion

While each of these systems have been implemented to meet specific needs, the lack of a clear overall policy often leads to the situation where they are now *competing* for use in the organisation.

When this happens, project managers don't know when to use each platform, and new content or applications ends up scattered across the various systems.

Even more of a problem is that staff aren't given a clear understanding of what each of the information systems are for, or what is contained within them.

Therefore, to find a specific piece of information, staff first need to know where it is stored, before attempting to navigate through the system itself.

In practice, staff often use the simplest system to store their documents or pages. This typically

leads to a considerable amount of information stored on file servers and public folders, in a very unstructured way.

In contrast, the most structured and effective information management systems, such as intranets or document management systems, languish unused.

Finally, with no strategic direction, it becomes very hard to know where to allocate funds and resources. Individual projects then upgrade or enhance the information systems as required, leading to a patchwork of different versions and capabilities.

### Developing an information management policy

It is not possible, or sensible, to attempt to eliminate most of the information systems within an organisation. The answer to all these problems is instead to develop a clear *information management* policy.

This policy would cover aspects such as:

- Overall strategic direction for the information systems in the organisation, including which platforms will be expanded, and which will be phased out.
- Primary purpose and role of each system.
- Types of information and content that should be stored in each system.
- Simple description for staff about what is in each system, and when they should be used.
- Clear guidelines about what information should be stored on each platform, particularly for the less structured environments such as file shares and public folders.
- How the different systems will be connected together, to form a seamless information management environment.

Overall, the strategy is not a document just for the IT section. Instead, most important is to clearly communicate to all staff how the systems operate, and how they should use them. This should be viewed as managing a cultural change within the organisation.