

Establishing an intranet community of practice

Many intranet teams have struggled with the role of ‘gatekeeper’, setting standards and attempting to enforce them on the intranet authors and publishers.

An alternative approach involves establishing a ‘community of practice’ that involves all intranet stakeholders. This group then takes on shared responsibility for maintaining and improving the intranet.

This approach has been used very successfully by a wide range of organisations, in both the public and private sectors. Indeed, establishing an intranet community of practice is now seen as one of the ‘critical success factors’ for an effective and sustainable intranet.

Members of the community

The intranet community of practice must have broad membership, including:

- authors
- publishers
- reviewers
- central intranet team

In other words, everyone directly involved in creating or maintaining the intranet. For a large organisation, this may involve upwards of a hundred (or more) people, although in practice not all will be involved to the same level.

Purpose of the community

Shared ownership

The intranet community of practice takes on ‘shared ownership’ of the intranet, including the responsibility for ensuring the intranet is a success. This involves improving both local sections of the intranet, as well as the global elements (such as the homepage). The community also ‘evangelises’ the benefits of the intranet to the wider organisation.

Setting standards

The community of practice takes on the responsibility for defining standards and guidelines for the intranet. This includes authoring policies and processes, as well as addressing the design and structure of the intranet.

Providing resources

While there will be some amount of centralised funding for an intranet, the site as a whole relies on the commitments made by individual business units. The community of practice can identify and manage intranet resourcing.

Learning environment

The community of practice provides an ideal environment for supporting the ongoing skills development of intranet stakeholders. In-house workshops can introduce new techniques, while mini case studies can be used to share ideas between different business units.

This is perhaps the most important use of the community of practice, and much can be done to grow the internal capabilities and knowledge of intranet-related staff.

Benefits of the community

Stakeholder buy-in

By establishing a shared sense of ownership, the community of practice strongly supports the ongoing cultural changes required to make the intranet both successful and sustainable.

Peer pressure

Like any social group, internal peer pressure can be very powerful. This can be used to encourage adoption of better approaches, by highlighting the successes of individual business units.

Diverse approaches

Having many different people involved in the management of the intranet will undoubtedly introduce new and diverse approaches. This is a valuable resource that can be harnessed by the central intranet team.

Tackles the ‘people issues’

Successful intranet teams have recognised that the intranet is not a technology problem. Instead, it will only succeed if the complexities of internal politics and other ‘people issues’ are directly addressed. The community of practice provides an effective mechanism for managing these human relationships surrounding the intranet.