

Intranet discussion forums are an often used mechanism within organisations. While they are implemented using a variety of tools and technologies, they all serve the same basic purpose of supporting communication and discussion.

In practice, however, many discussion forums fail to prosper, with few (if any) posts being made to them. In other cases, discussion groups are hailed as great successes.

This article explores the differences between these experiences, and introduces two critical success factors for intranet discussion forums: a clear purpose, and a common community.

Many names, same goal

Intranet discussion forums may be called many things, including:

- bulletin boards
- discussion groups
- online forums
- collaboration areas

Regardless of what they are called, they are all designed to provide an area where staff can post questions or comments, or to hold discussions with other staff.

The underlying purpose behind implementing these tools is often to increase the 'interactivity' of the intranet, and to support 'knowledge sharing' goals.

It is also worth noting that many of the same issues discussed in this article also apply to email lists, when used within organisations to facilitate discussion between staff.



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Why do some online forums prosper, while others fail?

Mixed experiences

It is extremely interesting to talk to a group of intranet managers about their experiences with intranet discussion forums.

Half of the group will say:

These were a complete waste of time! Staff asked for them, so we implemented a number of bulletin boards, but no one used them. We're definitely not doing that again!

The other half of the group will say:

These have been a huge success. There are many posts to the discussion groups every week, and they've taken away a lot of 'all staff' emails that were causing a lot of frustration.

In general, the success of online discussion forums has been very 'hit and miss'. Without a clear sense of when and why they work, some intranet teams have found them to be successful, while others deem them to be entirely useless.

The obvious next step is therefore to compare exactly what each of these groups has done, to identify the underlying patterns.

Two critical success factors

An examination of intranet discussion forums in practice quickly uncovers two critical success factors:

- There is a *clear purpose* for staff to use the discussion forums.
- There is a *common sense of community* amongst users of the forums, giving participants the confidence to post entries.

Each of these points will be discussed below, followed by a number of examples that outline how these success factors work in practice.

Clear purpose

The first critical success factor is that there must be clear purpose or reason for staff to use the discussion group.

Staff must be able to see that their posts will have a direct impact on a particular issue, or will provide some tangible benefit (for the organisation, or for other staff).

All too often, online forums are put up to 'discuss an issue', or to provide a 'forum for feedback'. Without a clear statement of what will be done with the input gained, the forum may be viewed as even less relevant than the many surveys that are sent out within most organisations.

Staff are also busy, with a responsibility to focus on their day-to-day job. This makes it hard to justify contributing to a discussion forum that does not have a clear purpose.

In practice, the greatest participation is gained when the use of the discussion forum directly benefits an individual's job or situation (the 'what's in it for me' factor).

There must be clear purpose in using the online forum

Common sense of community

Online discussions must also draw upon a common sense of community if they are to be successful.

Staff will always be reluctant to post messages out into a public forum, without having any sense of who might be reading it, or what they might do with the posts. This is always viewed as a potentially dangerous situation, where the possible consequences are unknown.

There must also be a common basis for the discussions, some cultural or other element that can provide the backdrop for meaningful conversations.

Within an organisation, there may be few situations in which the whole organisation would consider itself to be a common community (although a few examples are given below).

In most cases, a sense of community is built at a lower level, within specific staff groups. For example, engineers may comfortably discuss specific technical challenges with

their peers, but be reluctant to post to a public forum read by the whole organisation.

A general rule of thumb is that online discussions work best when they support an *existing community*. These communities are most often grown via face-to-face interaction, which can then be supported via online tools.

In practice, it is very difficult (if not impossible) to create a community using online collaboration. Without the level of trust that is built up face-to-face, it is hard to foster rich and ongoing discussions.

Online discussions should support an existing community

The role of moderation

Within some corporate cultures there are strong fears about the consequences of inappropriate posts made by staff to intranet discussion forums.

The concern is that these postings may expose the organisation to legal issues, negatively impact on other staff, or be used to express unwelcome opinions about corporate policies or actions.

In some cases, a single inappropriate post by an individual has led to all discussion forums being shut down.

These fears can also encourage organisations to *moderate* discussion forums as a standard policy. In these situations, all posts are reviewed and approved before they appear on the discussion forum.

In practice, there are few (if any) situations in which moderation is appropriate or needed. There are strong costs involved in moderating posts, the most obvious of which is the time spent by moderators. A policy of moderation may also send a negative signal regarding the use of the discussion forums, and may reinforce existing cultural issues.

In most cases, the issue of inappropriate posts is actually one of not having a common sense of community. Only when it doesn't exist do staff tend to say things online that they wouldn't say to others face-to-face.

It's also an issue of management. If a staff person acts inappropriately in a meeting, this leads to certain management steps being taken, up to and including sacking the staff person in question.

The same rules should apply to online discussion forums, and they should be treated like any other form of communication (such as emails or face-to-face conversations). Staff must also be aware that they will be held suitably accountable for their postings online.

As a result, it is generally recommended that anonymous posts not be allowed to online discussion groups. This generates a stronger and more visible sense of accountability for online posts.

At the end of the day, if staff can't be trusted to act appropriately in online forums, then they shouldn't be established in the first place.

The role of facilitation

In certain situations there may be a role for a facilitator to assist in running online discussion forums.

In this context, the role of the facilitator is to encourage discussions, 'seed' new topics, and to connect people (both online and offline).

This potentially can be a very valuable activity, particularly when supporting the sharing of knowledge between professionals. For more of this, see the discussions on 'communities of practice' at the end of this article.

Viability of online forums should be assessed before establishing

Testing the viability of online forums

The two critical success factors (purpose and community) should be used by intranet teams to test the viability of online forums before they are established.

There will always be situations in which specific areas of the organisation request the establishment of new online discussion forums.

It is then the responsibility of the intranet team to provide best-practice advice on the feasibility of establishing a new group, based on the two fundamental principles and the experiences of other organisations.

Even where there is a corporate desire to establish new online forums, this must always be tempered by a realistic view of when they are likely to work.

This is best demonstrated via a number of real-life examples, as explored below.

Example: 'buy and swap' area

The classic use of an online forum is as a 'buy and swap' area for staff, used for everything from trading second-hand goods to finding share accommodation.

These areas almost always work well, and are often one of the most heavily used areas of the corporate intranet. A return to the two critical success factors shows why this is the case.

First off, there is a clear purpose for using the forum ('I have a fridge to sell!'), and once there is enough traffic to the forum it becomes a very effective way of trading goods.

There is also a natural community that we all belong to when it comes to trading or swapping goods. You only have to look at the popularity of eBay to see that there must be something inherent in our genes that makes us want to buy, sell and swap stuff.

For all these reasons, the 'buy and swap' area is an example of where forums can be made to work well. Of course, they don't deliver direct business benefits, although they can be seen as potentially supporting cultural goals within the organisation.

'Buy and swap' areas can support cultural goals

Example: corporate feedback

In contrast, establishing a 'corporate feedback' page rarely succeeds. Other examples of general corporate discussion areas ('have your say') suffer similar difficulties.

The first problem is that there is no clear purpose for using the forum. Messages posted do not necessarily lead to any concrete action or change, and it is often not clear who (if anyone) is even reading the forum.

In practice, there may be better mechanisms for providing input or comment, such as through the normal chain of command.

There are also few topics that make all the staff within the organisation feel like they are part of the same community. This makes posting items to the corporate feedback forum the classic case of exposing the author to an unknown audience and unknown risks.

Example: moving offices

There are, however, a few topics that bring all staff together. One example is when the whole organisation is moving into a new office.

In one organisation we have worked with, the business was moving out of their offices in the capital city and moving into a regional area. All staff were being consolidated into a single office, which was being fitted out especially for the organisation.

A discussion forum was setup to discuss the design, layout, furniture and colours of the new office. This sparked extremely lively discussion and extensive input on all aspects, especially the colours that the walls would be painted.

The forum was a huge success, and when the organisation settled into their new offices, they hoped to build on this interest by launching a number of new general-interest discussion groups.

These new groups all failed, including the general 'provide feedback on our new website' discussion.

This demonstrates the importance of having both a clear purpose and community. When it came to discussing the new office, there was a strong purpose, as staff had only a single chance to influence the environment they would be working in for coming years.

The move also impacted on every staff member, creating a common community of people who recognised that they had to hammer out a compromise that would be acceptable to most (if not all).

Team-based areas can quickly proliferate

Example: team collaboration

Team-based collaboration is another area where online forums, and other supporting tools, can work very effectively.

The concepts of purpose and community become very simple, as they are defined around the team itself.

The team already work closely together, to deliver a particular service, or to manage a specific project. There are clear goals for the team, and a need to work closely together.

The online forums therefore become a natural extension of the working practices that exist in the real world.

For these reasons, organisations that provide team-based collaboration tools often see them quickly proliferate throughout the business.

Face-to-face interaction is needed to build trust

Example: topic-based discussions

Seeing the success of team-based collaboration, an obvious extension would appear to be establishing discussions around specific topics or activities.

For example, nurses could be provided with an area to discuss approaches for managing elderly patients, or engineers with an interest in braking systems could be given a collaborative space.

The criteria for success in these situations, however, is a little more complex than in some other cases.

There is often a fairly clear purpose, typically around sharing knowledge, and identifying best-practice approaches.

The challenges relate more to the community. If the online forum is established to support an existing community that has already formed (and is working well), then the forum is fairly likely to be used.

Where attempts are made to create a new community via the establishment of an online community, this has a low rate of success. Without sufficient face-to-face interaction, these groups of individuals are unlikely to build up sufficient levels of shared trust needed to foster good communication.

This is where the insights gained from 'communities of practice' are very valuable, as discussed below.

Communities of practice

There has been a lot of research conducted on how to establish and sustain knowledge sharing between staff within common activities or expertise.

Known as 'communities of practice', these groups can be tremendously effective at crossing organisational silos, and delivering

clear benefits in terms of innovation, consistency and collaboration.

In some organisations, communities of practice have become the major component of knowledge management initiatives, recognising the importance of informal networks over more formal structures.

The definitive book on this is *Cultivating Communities of Practice* by Etienne Wenger (ISBN 1578513308).

Beyond just exploring the specifics of communities of practice, this book expands on the general principles outlined in this article, and should be considered required reading for all intranet managers.

Summary

Implementing successful online discussion forums relies on knowing when and where they are appropriate.

If they are to prosper, there needs to be a clear purpose and reason for staff to use them. There must also be an existing community that the forum targets or supports.

Before establishing new discussion forums, the intranet team should evaluate the requests against these two critical success factors.

This will allow the effort required to establish and manage forums to be best targeted at those areas where they are likely to be successful and effective.



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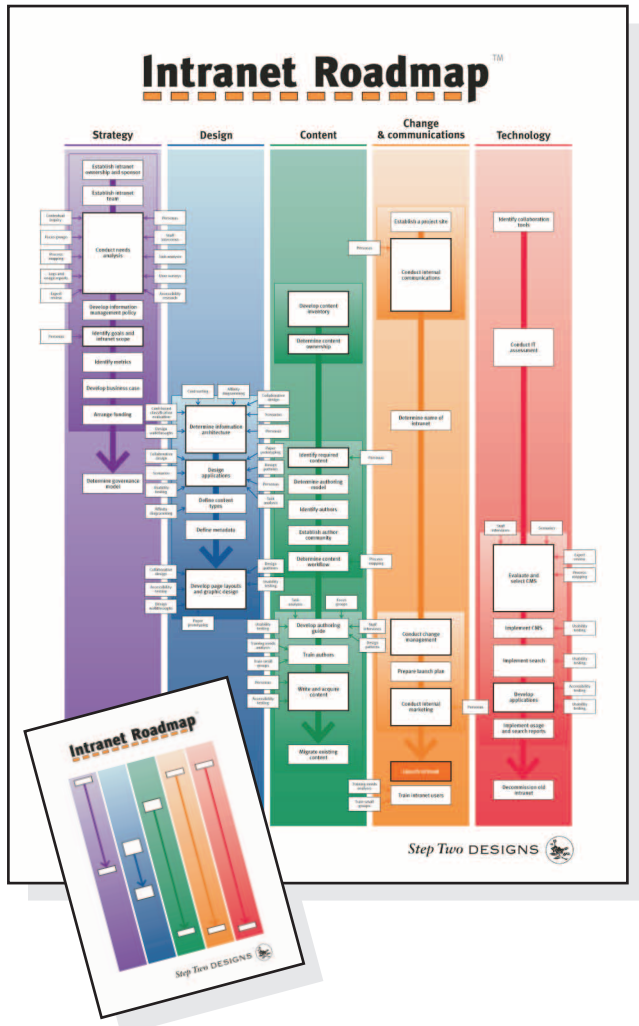
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Intranet Roadmap™



The **Intranet Roadmap™** provides the first truly comprehensive methodology that describes all the activities required to develop (or redevelop) an intranet.

Beyond just implementing software or redesigning the site, the Intranet Roadmap covers activities in five key streams:

- **strategy**
- **design**
- **content**
- **change & communications**
- **technology**

The Intranet Roadmap does more than just indicate what activities need to be conducted, it clearly shows the sequence of activities required, and the techniques that will help at every stage of the project.

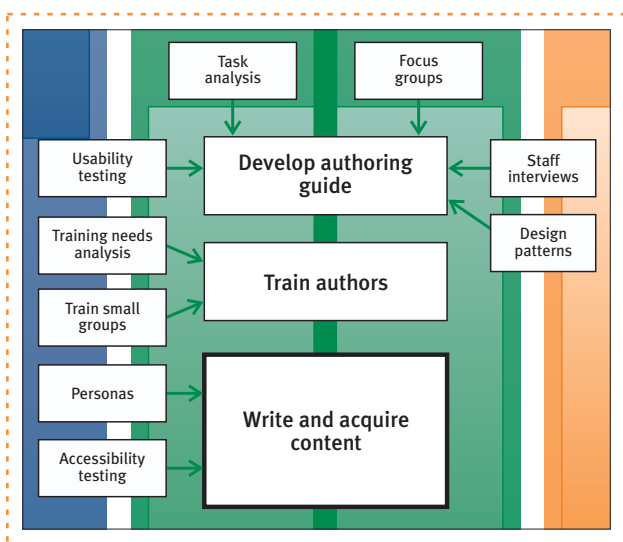
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- **full colour A1 wallchart**
- **supporting 54 page booklet**

The **wallchart** lists the key activities required in each of the project streams. It also highlights which activities (such as usability testing, affinity diagramming, personas and collaborative design) can be used to support individual activities.

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