

Feature

Intranet consolidation: The power of one

By Paul Chin

INTERNAL WEBSITES have existed long before intranets became part of the common corporate verbiage. They began as small experimental department sites that simply described their roles within the organisation. But as the concept of intranets as a content-management tool evolved and matured, many newly appointed intranet project managers were left to deal with a motley collection of sites containing everything from contact lists to online pictures of Brenda-from-Payroll's Fabergé egg collection.

Building a corporate intranet from scratch is often simpler than consolidating multiple pre-existing sites into a single intranet. When you're working with a blank canvas, all options are available to you. But when you're consolidating numerous pre-existing sites, you need to work within the confines of these sites and their current owners. And the complexity of the consolidation process changes dramatically in relation to the complexity of the sites to be merged. You have to deal with variations in existing designs, content structures, databases, applications and development languages.

Why consolidate?

An intranet must be based upon more than a disjointed assortment of independent departmental websites tied together by a common homepage. In the truest sense, an intranet is not really an intranet unless all the consolidated sites within the organisation share a common purpose and design. It's also important to realise that consolidation should only occur when there's a logical relationship among the sites to be merged.

Intranet consolidation accomplishes some very important things:

Creates a consistency of navigation and design

Since all the various sites within an organisation were probably created by different people, at different times, with different levels of experience, there will likely be no commonalities between the sites. Some may use top-border dropdown menus on an Apache server, while others may use left-border static menus on a MS-IIS server.

Consolidating all appropriate sites into a corporate intranet will create a standard look and feel and navigational structure, giving users a sense of continuity – that they're actually using

intranet search engine must be able to index and search the contents of the entire site. Unconsolidated sites with independent search engines will force users to perform multiple queries at each of the sites just to find the information they're looking for.

Minimises information overlap

All departments within an organisation, while having different roles to play, work in the same industry. And as such, there will be a fair amount of content overlap – information that's applicable to multiple departments and workgroups.

Intranet consolidation helps to minimise the repetition of content and effort by creating a central content-management environment.

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one system rather than a loosely tied collection of mini sites. This also helps to create an easily recognisable intranet brand within the organisation.

Creates a pool of communal resources

While every site has unique features and content types that are only applicable to their discipline, there are common features that exist in almost all websites: a search engine, a site map, a privacy policy and a contacts page, just to name a few.

It's rather redundant to have these resources duplicated at each site – and in the case of a search engine, it's downright inefficient. A centralised

Interlinking individual sites into one will provide content owners with a common platform in which to co-ordinate their efforts with other content owners.

Centralised intranet administration

If an independent site is ever to lose its primary owners – whether through organisational restructuring or changes in business requirements – the site will risk being either abandoned entirely or taken over, sometimes unwillingly, by another party who may be totally unfamiliar with the system. This affects not only the user community but also those left to pick up the pieces.



Consolidation places ownership of all intranet sites under the umbrella of a single governing body – usually IT. Each consolidated site will still have their respective content owners and managers, but the overall intranet will be administered by this governing body. This also eases the process of site and content security by only having to maintain a central access control list rather than one at each site.

Scale of the consolidation process

The time and effort required to consolidate your various sites will depend highly on how far you plan to take the process – and in certain cases, how far you're *able* to take the process. Will it be merely an issue of creating a unified look and feel or will it involve the standardisation of the underlying technology as well?

Intranet consolidation can be undertaken in two ways: virtually or physically.

Virtual consolidation

Virtual intranet consolidations require a lot less effort, involving only the

standardisation of the outward appearance of all sites. Virtual consolidations create a common cosmetic relationship and style standard among all sites, making it appear as though you're navigating one single site. However, the actual location of the sites may be spread out over many departmental servers using different platforms and development languages.

Physical consolidation

Physical intranet consolidations share not only a standard look and feel, but also an underlying technological infrastructure. Depending on the complexity and scale of your organisation's current collection of intranet sites, physical consolidations may be extremely effort intensive, involving the standardisation of server platform, development language and content structure.

All independent departmental sites are either merged into one high-capacity server or grouped into a server cluster, applications may need to be re-written to conform to the

organisation's accepted development platform, and all content will have to be restructured to fall in line with global site taxonomies.

It's an agreement, not a takeover

Intranet consolidation doesn't mean that you should absorb every existing organisational site into one giant portal. You need to go through a review process to ensure that the individual sites to be merged will add value to the overall goal of your intranet, while omitting sites that are incompatible.

But it's crucial to understand that, of those sites that will be merged, the successful consolidation of multiple departmental or workgroup sites can only be accomplished through an amicable agreement between all those involved. You must never approach the consolidation process as a hostile takeover of someone's site.

Forcing site owners to change all their work so that it's in compliance with the organisation's adopted development standards is going to cause resentment – especially if they're not completely sold on the idea yet – and may result in the abandonment of their site altogether. This is counter-productive; while you'll succeed in consolidating the intranet, you'll end up fracturing your intranet team.

Instead, work with site owners to find an agreeable compromise, and make sure that you help them during the migration process - don't simply issue an edict and leave everyone to figure things out on their own. Extending some courtesy will go a long way because consolidation shouldn't only mean the bringing together of sites, it should also mean the bringing together of all those who work on them. ■

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