PLA Tech Note: Intranets

Intranets: the Web Inside

An intranet is the Internet writ small: it uses web technology to create a locally based and locally accessed internet. Put another way, an intranet is an assemblage of online information created by and accessible via web browser technology within a particular library or library system. An intranet connects Local Area Networks (LANs) and works on TCP/IP and HTTP protocols, just like the web does, so all of the bells and whistles available to the web can be used on an intranet. The difference is that most intranets are open only to the staff of their particular institution. While most intranets connect to the Internet, there is usually a firewall to keep users that do not belong to the organization out. Some intranets, particularly library intranets, do have features that are available to outside users and to the general public. These are called "extranets" and a few examples will be noted below.

What's an intranet good for?
Intranets provide an extraordinary opportunity to change the culture of any institution by providing information that everyone needs but not everyone usually gets. By placing policies, procedures, and guidelines on the intranet, staff can access them without looking through their own (or their bosses') files. By putting up drafts of policies, procedures, and guidelines, staff input and comment can be solicited without necessarily pulling everyone together for a face-to-face meeting. An intranet can be set up to contain benefits handbooks, telephone directories, and everyone's vacation schedules. Forms can be included so that scheduling a conference room, ordering office supplies, or changing a staff title or telephone number can be done online. It offers opportunities for collaborative work, and for streamlining the minutiae of regular office folderol. That means, of course, that those who seem wedded to the old ways of lost paper forms, layers of telephone messages, and weeks to get the simplest procedural query answered will have to be moved in other directions.

Training, collaboration, and communication
Beyond even that, staff training can be richly enhanced by use of an intranet. Online tutorials that staff members can manage at their own pace can be put on an intranet. Staff in far-flung branches can participate in brainstorming or meeting sessions without being physically present. Local LANs that support audio and video allow the creation of multimedia presentations for the intranet, too. The possibilities for the fun factor increase: one intranet in California put the *Star Wars* movie trailer on its site (the effect was to increase productivity, since workers then did not have to go on the Web and wait for downloads to view it).

Julie James, the Technology Consultant for the Library of Virginia, decries the "considerable lack of fun" that she finds on many library intranets. She encourages staff use of the intranet to swap recipes, celebrate birthdays, post baby pictures, and make note of personal interests. She sees these as ways to keep staff engaged and to keep them coming back. James' web page for the Kansas City Public Library on Library Web Resources has a number of useful links both on intranets and on web style and structure.

How to start
A good place to start thinking about your library's intranet is with Chef Larry's Intranet Café, created by Larry Neal of the Rochester Hills Public Library, Michigan. This is an outline of a presentation he has given at many library meetings, and offers some very useful information and some good links.

Perhaps his best advice comes in the "Salade Verte - Considerations" section, where he urges those setting up an intranet to modify work patterns, not add to people's work; to link to the library's Web site, not duplicate it; to create style guides, templates, and a clear directory structure so the intranet can grow manageably. Chef Larry also lists the resources necessary to build your intranet: he calls them "hors d'oeuvres" and they include hardware, software, and staff.

The Intranet Café creates a structure for you to think about privacy and policy issues. Guidelines need to be created: can staff have personal home pages on the intranet? Who can add to or change content? How much, if any, of the site should outsiders be able to access? Several of the intranets and extranets listed here make their decisions available for other libraries to examine.

Who can visit?
Intranets by their nature tend not to be available for viewing by the garden-variety librarian who is not local staff; however, there are exceptions. LIBNET, the intranet for the staff of the University of California, San Diego library, has a nicely organized opening page that clearly shows where to go for what.

Its TPOT, Technical Processing Online Tools, is a fine example of how both internal and external documents can be arranged optimally for staff use. For example, the Preservation Departments Disaster Preparedness and Response page, links to all kinds of useful information, from the external American Institute for Conservation's "Tips for the care of water-damaged family heirlooms" to its own local document, "How do I dry wet books?"

The Hennepin County Public Library's extranet offers, for public consumption, the collective wisdom of its staff searches in the "Fugitive Facts File" along with policy listings and access to the staff telephone and email directory. It also connects to the library's public web site, creating an easily navigable path for both staff and outside users.

Good for work

An intranet can be one of the best examples of how technology can actually make the work lives of library staffers easier, better, and - dare we say it? - more enjoyable. It is a concrete way to take buzzwords like communication, collaboration, flattened hierarchy, and provision them for the reality of daily life.

Bibliography

[The Complete Intranet Resource](#)
Everyone who writes about intranets links to this. It includes an amazing array of stuff, including "Ten Intranet Myths," "Ten Intranet Issues to Address," an Intranet cost calculator, a discussion board, and other resources. Not all of it is up to date, and it is aimed at corporations, but much of it is deeply useful.

[Learn the Net - Inside the Intranet](#)
Good, clear intro to what intranets do.

[The Intranet for Libraries](#), by Clement Ho, 1997
This is a University of Alberta SLIS paper that covers the lay of the land; some of its links are now outdated.

The [News Division of the Special Libraries Association](#) maintains a number of links describing how intranets are used in news libraries to serve their agencies. Notable in particular is
Toner, Mark. "[Connecting with Intranets](#)" *Presstime*, December 1998.
about intranets in news organizations, and how they change the way work is done.

Fichter, Darlene. "Intranets: Librarians, Dive In!" *Online*, May/June 1999. p107-108 (not available online)

The special issue on Intranets in *Online*, Jan/Feb 1999 is full of good stuff, including
"[Lessons learned designing a second-generation Intranet](#)" by Kenneth J Varnum. It's a nice discussion of their intranet MyRLIS, which can be customized for users at Ford Motor Company. They identified three groups of users: regular users, occasional users, and library staff; and set up the intranet modeled after personal pages like My Yahoo!
"[Minimal Intranets for librarie](#)s" by Greg R Notess tells how to do it; it provides enough technical information if you want to start very small, without firewalls.

Balas, Janet L. "Learning about Intranets in the Library," *Computers in Libraries*, October 1998, p31-33.
Defines the why, and gives examples of the wherefore.

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The Public Library Association's Tech Notes project grew out of the desire to continue the

work of *Wired for the Future: Developing Your Library Technology Plan*, by Diane Mayo and Sandra Nelson, published for PLA by ALA in 1999. Each of the Tech Notes, written by GraceAnne A. DeCandido, is a Web-published document of 1500-2000 words, providing an introduction and overview to a specific technology topic of interest to public libraries at a particular point in time. Topics were identified by PLA's Technology in Public Libraries Committee. Each Note is marked with the date of its completion and posting, and with the date, approximately one year later, when links and other information were reviewed.

The Technology for Public Libraries Committee is currently evaluating if the Committee should request PLA funding for additional Tech Notes. Readers' comments and suggestions are welcome and should be addressed to pla@ala.org. Please use *Tech Notes* in your subject line.

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