

Using Intranets to Support Distributed Teams and One-Time Projects

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The Junior Achievement of Central Florida Hall of Fame Dinner recognizes distinguished leaders in business and in the community. The annual banquet is one of the organization's most important fundraisers. Responsibility for selling tickets falls on a team of volunteers who work in different businesses throughout the community. This year the volunteer team is using an intranet from Inclusion Technologies to help them reach their sales goals.

The Challenge

The challenge facing this team, just as with any business team, is to enable a distributed group of diverse individuals to collaboratively accomplish a short-term objective. A further consideration is that these are people who are not accustomed to working together, and who are volunteers doing the project in their spare time. They have no shared infrastructure or systems, and none of the usual business incentives, such as concerns about job performance or compensation, tied to the results of this project.

Make It Easy

Because this intranet is a new tool, the interface and the work process must be as easy to use as possible. Users must be able to get to the information they need quickly, and the site should be self-explanatory. As you design an intranet for a one-time project, you must therefore focus only on the specific tasks that you want the users to accomplish, and provide tools for these requirements only. Leave other tools out to avoid confusion.



In this case, the sales team needs easy and quick access the contact information for the leads they are responsible for pursuing. They also need to update their individual progress reports on sales, and they need access to updated information about the event (speakers, logistics, etc.), about overall sales progress (individual and collective), and they need easy access to the shared marketing materials they're using (flyers, brochures, etc.).

Users also find a shared calendar valuable for scheduling meetings. A bulletin board or discussion tree is also a "nice-to-have," since some individuals appreciate being able to discuss the sales progress, or selling techniques. For your project, this tool may add value or be distraction to the user experience, so you'll need to evaluate the tradeoffs. The team will probably have no use for live conferencing, instant messaging, or a shared whiteboard, and providing these tools would add clutter to the site that might detract from the primary goal of "ease of use".

Keep 'Em Coming Back

The second key to making the site successful is to give users reason to visit it on a regular basis. A mandate to visit regularly might be effective with some kinds of teams, but it is far more powerful if the users choose to visit regularly on their own. This is especially important in this case because the team is composed of volunteers, whose motivation and dedication often varies with the pressures of their career jobs.

Because this is a sales effort, we have chosen to appeal to the competitive nature of salespeople to drive traffic to the site. Each team member is responsible for posting their sales progress by Monday at noon. The site administrator then compiles the sales information and posts both the cumulative and individual sales totals to the site. The individual with the top sales of the week, and the individual with the top cumulative sales are then recognized on the site. (You may also want to award a small prize on a weekly basis.) Because everyone will be able to see everyone else's progress, the sales team is encouraged both to make sales and to check the site to compare their progress with others'.

Show, Don't Tell

Because this is a new tool for the sales team, and because the web-



literacy of the team is unknown, it is important to show the users up front what is expected of them in using the site. The best strategy for this instruction is to bring the group together face to face and walk them through a shared presentation. This allows the team members to meet each other, to ask questions, and to make suggestions. If a face to face meeting is not possible, then a carefully crafted experience of using the site should be sent to each user as a presentation or document.

In any case, the key is to simulate for the team how they are expected to use the site. Simply describing what each of the tools does is insufficient, because users will not have a sense of the process for engaging with the site. In your introduction to the site, then, present the components of the site in the form of a narrative. Walk the users through the experience of logging onto the site step by step, reading the news and updates, retrieving their assigned leads, downloading a flyer, posting their sales progress, and seeing the results. Give them an experience of using the tools in the context of the work that they will be asked to do.

Back to Business

The problem related to distributed teams working on projects outside of the normal scope of their jobs is common in business today. Teams often consist of people who are unfamiliar with one another, and who are separated geographically around the country or around the world. They face many different barriers, including different disciplines, different jargon, different interests, or different goals.

An intranet site can be an extremely valuable tool to help such diverse, distributed teams collaborate on one-time projects. The keys to success are understanding the goal of the project, designing the tools and interface to support the process of using the site, and then building in incentives to bring people back to the site on a regular basis. Such a tool can be the difference that makes the difference for them, removing barriers to productivity and facilitating effective work, enabling them to succeed more easily, and to have a lot more fun in the process.