

## Industry News – I S T C

*(Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators)*

### What's hot in intranet design?

By Kathryn Valdal Fourie MISTC

In the past, companies focused more on their external websites rather than their internal intranets. Intranets were often piecemeal and homegrown. A growing number of companies now understand the true value of their intranet, and that there are more effective intranets out there. This means that communicators are being asked to work on copy and design elements for the intranet more often than before. We chat to two industry experts who tell us what you need to know about how intranets are changing and how to create and implement intranets and intranet content that work.

Intranets used to have a bad name when controlled by IT departments. "They were highly technical and disjointed. They did not grow strategically and often failed companies," explains **David Scotney**, managing director, at StyleTech, a company that has won several awards for intranet creation, notably for Ideal Standard ([www.idealstandard.com](http://www.idealstandard.com)).

"Companies are now going back to basics, putting controls in place to ensure accurate and up-to-date content. They are looking to inform their staff in a more efficient and effective manner through digital media, such as an intranet and they are trying to find new ways to help staff collaborate more effectively." A good intranet "transforms the culture of an organisation and builds a sense of belonging with all staff."

The Intranet Benchmarking Forum (IBF) has also identified collaboration and community as something we will see more of in intranets in 2008. The IBF says, "user-generated content will help build connections and encourage better information flow around the organisation. SharePoint will continue to be in the vanguard – more than half of IBF members are now using the system as the basis of, or in tandem with, their intranets."

David points out that, "SharePoint is a large undertaking for any size of company and requires significant investment and ongoing support to ensure success. Ideal Standard previously had a well-known intranet package. However, the amount of investment required to keep content current proved to be a time consuming and costly exercise."

When you are designing or writing for an intranet, Lee Larkin, solutions architect at StyleTech says, "remember that staff have their own jobs to do, so simplicity of use is imperative." To achieve this, designers are simplifying and standardising searches to work in a similar way to Google. And intranet searches are expanding to encompass internal company applications and databases.

But it's not only about being able to find specific content quickly through search and navigation. Content must be "up-to-date, relevant, informative, enjoyable and graphical—human interest stories work well. Adding graphical and video content says far more than words," David points out. "Out-of-date content equates to lack of confidence and reduced use of the intranet." An important goal is to make everyone aware of the intranet so that "it becomes part of the business culture and grows organically." Increased use of the intranet also relieves the pressure on internal e-mail systems.

When creating content, you need to know that "a heavy focus on news" on intranets is appealing less to users, according to the IBF. In its seven trends in Intranet design for 2008, the IBF says, "staff do not have an insatiable appetite for top-down news and announcements about the company," even though most communicators working on earlier generation intranets might think so. So to create up-to-date and relevant content that keeps users coming back, you need to be innovative.

Lee explains that "one person can't maintain all content effectively" and recommends you "allow for organic growth by providing the staff with the ability to add and maintain content themselves." Create an "intuitive interface" that all staff can use regardless of their technical knowledge. Not only does this create an enjoyable experience for users, but it also minimises the need for training, which cuts costs.

A successful intranet is "not necessarily about graphical design, it's about the content. It must, however, still look good and enforce company branding," says David. "Pages that become overloaded become visually off-putting to the staff that use them over a period of time as it becomes more difficult to see updates to content." A design can be striking, but it should not be overpowering, he says.

“Traditional, internet style magazine design formats do not promote organic growth and are difficult to maintain. That’s why we recommend a clean magazine style with simple and functional graphics and colours.” Less is often more from a usability perspective. For instance, in StyleTech’s award-winning intranet for Ideal Standard, users can add content themselves directly from Microsoft Office at the touch of a button.

“Communication officers can add stories within minutes of events happening” without having to go through a HTML and intranet design team first. This “empowers staff to be part of the content maintenance rather than deploying complicated content management systems (CMS) that are controlled by faceless individuals”. For Ideal Standard, this approach has given individual departments the ability to grow their own home pages and content, making the intranet “the community hub for the UK organisation.”

An intranet can only become the information hub for an organisation, if all staff have access to it. This year we can expect to see more universal access as more staff work remotely and from home, predicts the IBF. “Universal access is becoming a key feature of an effective intranet” says Lee. When users log on to the intranet and find they can’t access all the content that they want, they feel frustrated and are less motivated to return.

They start to rely on and trust other forms of communication instead. “When everyone has the same access to all the content,” says Lee, “trust and confidence in the intranet and the company itself strengthen.”

While trends and design elements are useful, David says you should approach the intranet from the company’s business needs and from the users’ perspective. In some instances, this might include public sector requirements and standards. Don’t base your design on what other intranet providers are doing. That might not be right for your client and users. “Rather let user and business needs, drive intranet creation in new and more effective directions.”

April 2008