

The Social Intranet: Insights on Managing and Sharing Knowledge Internally

By Ines Mergel

This research report introduces the concept of the social intranet—the use of in-house social networking technologies for employees of a government organization only—and how these technologies are designed and used in the public sector. As opposed to social media tools used to engage external audiences for educational and informational purposes, social intranets are slowly spreading in government to support internal knowledge creation, sourcing, and sharing activities.

Components of a Social Intranet Site

Social intranet sites either use open source tools or proprietary systems developed specifically for use in one organization. They are hosted on the organization's own servers and are not accessible to outsiders. They allow employees to import external information from the Internet and share it on the intranet. Some of the most common components include:

- Wikis
- Blogs
- Microblogging
- Tagging and bookmarking tools
- Social networking
- Other components
 - Social analytics technologies for reports on how content was accessed
 - File sharing
 - Collaborative workspaces for geographically-dispersed employees to interact with each other on a joint project

Benefits of Using Social Intranets

Social intranets lead to information benefits that go beyond face-to-face interactions, information e-mailed to a limited number of recipients, or actively searching in shared hard drives. As opposed to an organization's traditional knowledge-sharing systems, social intranets go beyond file-sharing activities in shared hard drives or network drives. Benefits of social intranets include:

- **Visibility.** Social intranets make communication patterns, networks, and the location of an organization's knowledge sources highly visible, even across organizational boundaries.
- **Persistence.** Social intranets help to trace communication streams and knowledge-creation activities (recorded and archived for future access).
- **Discoverability of knowledge.** Even though employees might not be part of their colleagues' ongoing discussions about issues in other parts of the organization, knowledge is now discoverable across artificial organizational boundaries; it can be tagged with the names of employees considered the original knowledge experts, whom others can then contact.
- **Speed of search and read activities.** Knowledge created in communications streams, newsfeeds, documents, or other types of content files such as videos or pictures is available in real time to the whole organization and not limited to pre-defined audiences.
- **Lowering geographic distance and communication barriers.** As Sproull and Kiesler have shown, computer-mediated communication often leads to the loss of social cues.
- **Strengthening social ties, creating social capital, and social capitalization.** Previous studies of internal social networking and collaboration sites in the private sector have shown that employees are creating new connections

Dr. Ines Mergel is Associate Professor of Public Administration at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.

with employees located in other parts of the organization, especially when they are not co-located or part of the same work teams.

- **Open communication.** Employees who use external social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, are more likely to be willing to update and share on internal social sites as well.

The report includes four cases of social intranets in North American government organizations.

- **Case Study One.** *Corridor* at the Department of State
- **Case Study Two.** NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center's *Spacebook*
- **Case Study Three.** Intelligence Community's *i-Space* (intelligence space)
- **Case Study Four.** Government of Canada's *GCconnex*

The first two social intranets (*Corridor* and *Spacebook*) were designed to serve one department or agency. The second two intranets (*i-Space* and *GCconnex*) serve many different departments and agencies, and in the case of the Canadian

government, a single intranet platform provides tools for collaboration across the entire federal government.

Traditional knowledge transfer is limited to memos, the sharing of documents with a limited contact list, or administrative cables. Rarely is knowledge created in the open and observable to the whole organization. Social intranets are aiming to open opportunities for knowledge sharing with wider audiences who might all be working on similar issues, or who might be able to contribute to problems and tasks that are replicated in different parts of the organization.

The report outlines how a range of technologies is used to support core knowledge management activities, including:

- Organizational knowledge creation
- Socialization of knowledge
- Technological support of knowledge management activities

For each case study, the report highlights the goals, rollout and implementation phases, organizational locations, components, and specific collaboration features of each social intranet.

Summary of Social Intranet Case Studies

| Case Study | <i>Corridor</i> U.S. Department of State | <i>Spacebook</i> U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration | <i>i-Space</i> U.S. Intelligence Community | <i>GCconnex</i> Government of Canada |
|------------|--|---|--|---|
| Goals | Tacit knowledge sharing across geographically disconnected units | Knowledge sharing online across knowledge silos | Discovery and sharing across knowledge silos | Collaboration across all federal government departments and agencies in both official languages |
| Components | Enterprise search, wiki, blogs, social networking, ideation (Secretary's sounding board), forming groups, creating polls | Social networking, social bookmarking, collaboration, equipment sharing | Wikis, blogs, social networking | Social networking, shared workspaces, groups, instant messaging, chats, file sharing, wiki |
| Main use | Social connections based on shared interest leading to professional conversations | Search for collaboration opportunities, sharing/reuse of equipment (discontinued) | (Short-term) fast collaboration and knowledge aggregation, quickly moving knowledge to decisions | Connecting over 250,000 employees with people and information across 138 federal department and agencies inside and outside of Canada |

The report is based on interviews with project managers and selected users, publicly available documents, and news coverage about social intranets. The goal of this report is to highlight current projects, implementation challenges, and broader insights that might be transferrable to other government agencies interested in implementing similar approaches. Insights for the successful implementation of a social intranet include the role of leadership support, technological considerations, and successful implementation steps.

Insights: Successfully Implementing Social Intranets in Government

The following insights are derived from interviews with public managers in charge of designing and implementing in-house social networking platforms in three U.S. federal government agencies and the Government of Canada.

Insight One: Active Leadership Participation Is Essential

Two levels within the organization need to be models for social networking adoption:

- Top leadership
- An agency champion

Insight Two: Three Technological Considerations Are Key

Based on our interviews, we found the following technological considerations to be key in the design of a social intranet:

- Radical transparency in design and change is needed
- Allow deliberative knowledge discovery
- Allow external and internal knowledge sources

Insight Three: Successful Implementation Requires Key Management Involvement

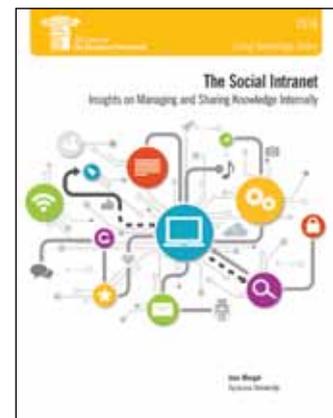
Based on our interviews, we found the following set of actions essential to the successful implementation of social intranet:

- Investing in training, education, and outreach
- Moving from siloed to open communication
- Demonstrating innovativeness, effectiveness, and ease of use
- Making the social intranet the new standard operating procedure
- Phasing in implementation, but considering a wider spread of testers

Overall, social intranets will only work if there is a need for collaboration within a department or across departmental boundaries. That means employees need to fulfill tasks requiring innovative solutions that are locally not available, or they need expertise that is already available in other parts of the organization. ■

TO LEARN MORE

**The Social Intranet:
Insights on Managing
and Sharing Knowledge
Internally**
By Ines Mergel



The report can be obtained:

- In .pdf (Acrobat) format at the Center website, www.businessofgovernment.org
- By e-mailing the Center at businessofgovernment@us.ibm.com
- By calling the Center at (202) 551-9342