How To Build A Social Intranet That
Boosts Workplace Collaboration
And Employee Engagement
Today’s organizations are always looking for ways to drive creativity and productivity while promoting knowledge sharing, use and discovery.

As the amount of internal and external content you produce grows, it’s more important than ever to have platforms and processes in place to facilitate collaboration, capture institutional knowledge and help people to quickly find the content and answers they need to do their work.

A social intranet offers a variety of benefits, from improving transparency and content findability to supporting collaboration and increasing efficiency. Many organizations also find them useful in controlling costs, especially in regard to travel expenses.

Before the recession, companies often spent a lot of money on travel expenses to get people together in the same room for face-to-face communication and collaboration. While that in-person environment is often highly productive, the travel costs became prohibitive in the wake of the recession.

Virtual collaboration has since become the norm. But while it’s relatively inexpensive, virtual collaboration has often suffered from a variety of organizational and technical challenges.

Enterprise social tools evolved as an attempt to provide a virtual meeting place that gives teams the structure they need to work together across distances, helping them collaborate effectively without the expense of sending people around the world.

The latest evolution in this virtual collaboration is the social intranet. It combines the traditional functions of a corporate intranet with enterprise social capabilities to create a seamless collaboration environment.
This new platform is ideal for any organization that has knowledge workers collaborating across geographical distances, such as project-based or knowledge-based firms. That includes everything from professional services firms to non-profits as well as life science corporations to manufacturing research and development.

Before we explore the benefits of a social intranet, let's dig deeper into how this technology platform works.

**What Is A Social Intranet?**

What people think of as a “standard” intranet became the norm about 10 years ago. These intranets were essentially internal websites, primarily used to present information to the employee base in a read-only format. The problem with this older type of intranet is that the employees lack the means of responding; it’s one-way communication.

Many companies wanted to open up that platform for two-way communication, enabling employees to talk to the organization and with each other. They wanted to bring in capabilities from discussion boards and blogs with commenting. Earlier intranet technology usually wasn’t able to facilitate this sort of dialogue — at least not in ways that increased employee engagement.

A social intranet bridges the gap by integrating familiar concepts from popular social media platforms into a collaborative digital workplace. It includes technology constructs that allow individual members to post their own content and respond to posts from the larger organization. This type of two-way communication isn’t new, but integrating micro-blogging features and the ability to “like” or favorite a document within an intranet is making it easier and more intuitive to participate.

The most common feature of a social intranet is a micro-blog newsfeed, similar to such found in tools like Microsoft Yammer. This newsfeed allows individuals to contribute to conversations, share content and links, post quick updates, and ask and answer questions. Other popular social intranet capabilities include instant messaging (IM) or chat, as well as social media features, such as the ability to “like,” favorite or bookmark a file, conversation or resource.
5 Benefits Of A Social Intranet

1) Improving knowledge management

One of the main benefits of enterprise social tools is that they allow you to capture your company’s knowledge. When people are collaborating over the phone, having email conversations or meeting in person to create a work product, much of the information going into that process won’t be documented in a way that allows others to reuse it. Taking notes is one thing, but that information isn’t particularly useful unless it’s accessible to the entire organization and associated with a piece of content or other artifact.

A social intranet helps to capture that knowledge in ways that facilitate current and future collaborative tasks. For example, let’s say one of your sales representatives has a question about a certain sales opportunity. The rep could email the sales manager and get an answer, but that conversation would always be contained within their two isolated mailboxes. They could have a quick meeting, but what they discuss would also be limited to two people.

With a social intranet, the representative could post the question in a collaboration micro-blog, directed to the sales manager. This ensures the manager sees the message, while also making it visible to others who have interacted with that customer or prospect and may wish to chime in. The conversation is recorded in a searchable thread, which increases transparency and provides an efficient means of drawing on the experience of the larger team.

2) Supporting collaboration

Social capabilities are helpful in project and team collaboration, where you have smaller groups of people working toward a common goal, often for a relatively short period of time. A social intranet helps team members share ideas and communicate in a transparent, streamlined fashion.

This type of social interaction is important to move projects forward, and it’s usually missing from more structured, formal workflows. In a structured workflow, tasks follow each other in a linear fashion, without much opportunity for multipoint discussion. A social intranet helps you tap into ideas from people who wouldn’t have input in the structured process, for example. But social collaboration isn’t a replacement for formal workflows — it should augment them.

3) Maximizing efficiency

One of the main ways a social intranet helps to reduce costs is by reclaiming employee time. When employees are working on projects, a social intranet helps them get feedback more quickly, which
improves efficiency and maintains momentum. They don't have to stop what they're doing and wait for a meeting to align everyone working on the project. That efficiency and time savings results in faster turnaround for projects and project development.

A good example of time savings through a social intranet would be a help desk or troubleshooting scenario. By posting questions and updates in searchable threads, support staff is able to reach a larger audience and benefit from their experience and knowledge. You could ask your own community a question and get a response from trusted colleagues in seconds or minutes, instead of wasting time combing the Internet for answers that might be valid.

Another aspect of efficiency is improving knowledge discovery, giving employees access to valuable information they might not otherwise find. Facebook popularized this concept: As you connect with people, Facebook “learns” to suggest content and updates that are relevant to you. A similar process takes place in a social intranet: As you have conversations, it creates connections between people and uses that connection to suggest relevant content.

4) Controlling costs

A social intranet offers a variety of cost-saving opportunities, in addition to reclaiming employee time and the reduction in travel expenses mentioned earlier. Bringing conversations out of email and into searchable threads greatly simplifies the e-discovery process in the event of an audit, thus reducing the costs of maintaining compliance.

If email overload is an issue for your company, moving conversations and documents to a social intranet would also reduce the amount you currently spend to store email and attachments.

5) Reducing risk

In any organization, you tend to have some people who resist change and new technology, and another group that does embrace it. The group that doesn’t embrace change tends to rely heavily on email for collaboration. But the forward-looking group knows there are better ways to work and seeks them out — with or without the organization’s blessing.
Tech-savvy users may request that the IT department provide tools for document sharing, IM and micro-blogging. If IT doesn’t provide the tools, those users may find with their own solutions, such as Google Drive or Dropbox. The problem with these unauthorized third-party solutions is that IT doesn’t have control over those systems, which could expose the company to risks. If your company’s intellectual property or sensitive data is being held in a consumer application with a weak password, that’s a huge risk.

The question is, if you’re not providing a social intranet, what other tools are people using to accomplish some of those functions? Even if IT has some control, it’s costly to have every department using its own tools and processes. In addition to the cost of maintaining all of those systems and the risk of a department or team “going rogue” with its own solution, the result doesn’t necessarily support knowledge management and transparency.

Is A Social Intranet Right For You?

When you decide to introduce social capabilities with your company intranet, it doesn’t mean you have to roll out all of the available features. To get the greatest value from a social intranet, figure out what tools make sense to your users and for your business goals.

Generally speaking, implementing a social intranet shouldn’t present major challenges for most IT departments. But you may face some lesser obstacles, depending on your situation. For example, if your IT team is less familiar with cloud-based platforms, they may have a greater learning curve when implementing a social intranet, since social capabilities derive almost exclusively from cloud-based platforms, like Microsoft Yammer. Another potential challenge could be to seamlessly merge the social capabilities with traditional intranet features, such as document libraries and team workplaces. To be effective, the solution must be easy to use and intuitive for users.

Moving to a social intranet would also require adapting your existing information governance and policies to protect sensitive data and any information that’s subject to compliance or regulation in your industry. Create a policy for sharing and discussing certain records in social and collaborative channels, and provide commonsense guidance for what’s appropriate for a business setting.

If you’re looking into implementing a social intranet, a ready-to-go intranet solution should be the first option you consider. These solutions are pre-configured for faster, easier deployment and optimized for ease of use. Microsoft has recently rolled out these ready-to-go solutions, in addition to platforms you may already have, such as Office 365 and SharePoint Online.
While a social intranet shouldn’t present major technical challenges, user adoption is an obstacle for some organizations. Often, when you roll out a new collaboration platform, such as a social intranet, a lot of people start using it at first, but gradually drop off. Without ongoing user adoption, the implementation eventually dies.

Sustaining adoption is essential for a successful social intranet. Even though the social features are intuitive for anyone who uses personal social media sites, you can’t take a “build it and they will come” attitude.

It’s important to define your business goals and use cases with a social intranet. One organization might focus on using social technology to enhance the culture and identity of an organization, with a Facebook-type interface that helps people to network and collaborate across the organization. Another organization might be more concerned about using a social intranet to capture the knowledge and context of work conversations that happen offline and via email.

Figuring out your use case and how it applies to your business is an important first step to creating meaningful user adoption. In addition, make sure you follow sound change management principles to get employees on board with the new platform and not slide back into old habits. Change management activities include training, soliciting user feedback and creating internal champions who help to drive the project and maintain momentum.

To get the best return on your technology investment, people have to want to use the new intranet. When employees are eager to use a platform that improves efficiency and knowledge management while reducing costs and risk, you’re on your way to achieving a variety of business goals, from better customer service to faster product turnaround and greater creativity to reduced time to market.

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Ready to discover how a social intranet could help your organization become more efficient and productive? Sign up today for your free demo of OneWindow Workplace, our ready-to-go intranet solution built on Office 365’s cutting-edge collaboration platform.