First of all, Martin, thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to find out more about your new book. What exactly was it that drove you to write The Intranet Management Handbook?

You will see that it is not called the Intranet Manager’s Handbook, because although in the UK alone there are probably well over 70,000 intranets only in larger organisations is there a full-time intranet manager. Even where there is a full-time manager they will often have to learn about how to manage an intranet as they go along. There is no professional association they can join and very few training courses on intranet management. In this book I have tried to give them a tool-kit of the approaches I have used in developing intranet strategies, covering everything from writing a business plan to marketing the intranet.

Martin White
Intranet Guru
Interview

Introduction

Martin White is Managing Director of Intranet Focus Ltd. He is an information scientist with over 30 years experience in information management, publishing and consulting roles. Prior to setting up Intranet Focus Ltd. in 1999 he held senior management positions in Reed Publishing, International Data Corporation and Logica. Martin consults on the design and management of intranets and extranets, and the specification, selection and implementation of content management software and search software. Over the last ten years he has undertaken around 100 projects in the UK, Europe, the USA and the Middle East. Since 2002 he has been a Visiting Professor at the iSchool at the University of Sheffield.

To allow others to benefit from his wealth of professional experience, Martin has written The Intranet Management Handbook; due for release in January 2011, the book is a true A-Z for intranet managers, providing advice and guidance on everything from intranet requirements gathering, business case development and content strategy, through selecting the right software and technology, all the way to project management, implementation, strategy and governance.

The Intranet Management Handbook looks set to be a genuinely authoritative knowledge resource for anyone involved with intranet management, hitting on emerging issues such as social media use in addition to dealing with more traditional principles of intranet project management. We have been lucky enough to see a sneak preview, and any intranet manager looking for guidance or advice on either a strategic or a practical level would be well advised to pick up a copy, and see what ten years of distilled intranet experience can bring to their organisation.

We managed to get a few minutes with Martin himself for an exclusive interview, and we asked him what The Intranet Management Handbook will bring to the wider intranet community; read on to find out what he said...
You have taken an entirely holistic approach to intranet management in this handbook, covering roles and responsibilities as well as real-world practical advice. Having worked on almost a hundred intranet projects during the last decade, was it your aim to create an indispensable ‘intranet bible’?

Certainly not. For example I have not included anything about intranet design because James Robertson, MD of Step Two Designs (http://www.steptwo.com.au) published a very comprehensive book on this topic in late 2010. What I hope I have achieved is a book that others can take and build on, especially in the many intranet communities of practice that are now being established.

In the first part of the book, Foundations, you have a dedicated section on Life as an Intranet Manager. In this section, you state that based on ONS statistics for the UK alone, “there are least 50,000 intranet managers, though few will have that title or have the intranet as their only responsibility.” Do you feel that the role of ‘Intranet Manager’ should be more well-defined in many companies, or is having the flexibility to take on a variety of different roles an essential part of being a good Intranet Manager?

Far too many intranet managers have no job descriptions or clear personal and organisational objectives. They are often undertaking other roles, especially in smaller organisations. It is essential that they have a job description that enables them to discuss and resolve prioritisation issues with their manager but in addition have a career development plan. I find that many HR departments think that the skill sets of the intranet manager are the same as those of a web manager, and only realise their error when trying to find a replacement intranet manager!

The book is divided into four parts: Foundations; Technology; Operational Planning; and Governance and Strategy. Are these, in your view, the four key parts of an intranet manager’s job?

In the book I use a triangle to illustrate the need to keep information, technology and governance in balance. That is the role of the information manager. Intranets should not be technology led (“We have SharePoint and you should use this for the intranet”) or information-led (“Putting the corporate policies up on the intranet is the way to get people to use it every day”). Governance is mainly about senior management support. Without it little will happen.

Building an initial business case, and achieving buy-in from the start, is something that intranet managers and project leaders can struggle with. What should intranet managers focus on to help them obtain backing for their project from top-level management?

Intranets fail when the organisation does not understand the need to manage information as an asset. Intranet managers have to be sales people to get across the message that an intranet should be seen as a decision-support application, helping people to make more informed decisions that reduce business risk and support business development.

On the other hand, following on from the above, drawing on your ten years of intranet experience, what would you identify as the success factors for an intranet?

Good intranets are based on a very clear understanding of how people use information, an understanding that may well have to be teased out of them! Then it is all about ensuring that the right content is available (and less is usually more in intranets) and ensuring people can find it through a combination of the intranet architecture, search and hyperlinks, together with some form of alerting feature to relevant new content. This all takes staff and technology resources to achieve and that
translates to adequate financial resources. Lots of news stories on the home page is not an indicator of success, but a lack of focus on the value of an intranet.

In the section ‘Content review and the role of content protocols’, you favour the use of protocols and peer review over top-down, management-focused workflows as a way to ensure consistently high-quality content across the intranet. Do you think that putting the responsibility on the end user helps to create a shared sense of responsibility for intranet standards?

I dislike the idea of ‘standards and guidelines’ in content management, and prefer to use the more neutral term ‘protocol’. A protocol is about the way in which something is done, such as writing a news story or updating a profile on the staff directory. A protocol should be owned by someone, and kept under review in the light of feedback from content authors. The content also needs to be owned by an individual employee, who takes responsibility for ensuring it is accurate and that others can trust it. All too often adding content to an intranet is a hobby. If the organisation valued information then it would ensure that content contributors were trained, and that the work involved in content contribution is included in job evaluations.

You include a chapter entitled ‘The value of collaboration’ – what, in your opinion, is the value of collaboration to a typical intranet installation?

Collaboration is the end of a process that starts with employees being able to find others with relevant experience, starting conversations to explore options, sharing information they have with the team, and only then, when all the team members trust each other and have a clear common purpose can effective collaboration take place. At each stage the intranet can be of value, offering an excellent staff directory, supporting conversations through blogs and wikis, managing the sharing of documents, providing collaboration spaces, and finally providing a home for the new information that has been created through the act of collaboration.

Section 9 of the book is entitled ‘Establishing the intranet team’. Is there such a thing as an ideal intranet team, or does it necessarily vary by organisation?

There is now good evidence to suggest that there needs to be one full-time intranet manager for 3000 employees. This is because intranet management is not just about making sure content is added on a timely basis, but also about undertaking user research to enhance functionality, training content contributors, liaising with IT over the CMS and search applications and many more tasks. This requires a wide range of skills, including being a good communicator and an even better negotiator! The team should certainly be very familiar with the business of the organisation and the main business processes.

Project management is at the heart of any intranet manager’s role, and your section on ‘Managing intranet projects’ provides solid practical advice on this front. What advice can project managers find in this section of the book?

Project management is not something you can read from a book. What I have tried to show in the book that there are many approaches to project management. Many organisations use PRINCE2 as a project management methodology but using any methodology is not a guarantee of success. One of the messages in the book is that there could be substantial benefits from focusing on just one section of the intranet at a time, perhaps an HR self-service area, rather than undertaking a regular redesign of the total site in order to gain higher levels of use. All that happens is that users are now confused by the redesign and use it less, the beginning of a slide into intranet apathy.

You advocate a risk management-focused approach in several different chapters of the book. What would you say are the benefits of this method?

Organisations are very risk averse, and the directors will have a duty to the shareholders (or trustees in a not-for-profit organisation) to minimise business risks. Many of the risks will arise from a
lack of quality information, and this is where an intranet can have a very direct and quantifiable impact on the organisation. At an intranet level risks also need to be managed. What actions will you take if your sponsor (or your intranet manager!) leaves the organisation?

Marketing the intranet is an essential part of user adoption; what would your top tips be for anyone wanting to create a ‘wow’ factor around their intranet?

Employees need to feel that the intranet is pro-actively supporting business processes. When you start up a new project the intranet asks whether the project is shorter or longer than three months, because in your organisation projects lasting longer than three months need a more comprehensive business case, and when you click on the link there is the form ready to be completed and sent to your manager for review. Something along these lines will have a high Wow factor. Collect all the Wows together and publish them on the intranet. Then employees and managers will see the immediate practical value of the intranet.

User satisfaction is an essential part of any intranet review, and helps to drive home the value of any intranet. How should intranet managers go about measuring value?

Based on some excellent work carried out by Jane McConnell for her annual Global Intranet Trends reports (http://www.global-intranet-trends.com) there are six areas where an intranet can add value. These are by acting as a front door to as many other systems as possible, through supporting tasks, making sure people can find others with relevant networks and experience, making sure that reliable information is available to all who need it (which means that a good search application is essential), is available on a location independent basis (e.g. a supplier, customer or airport lounge) and supports team working.

Governance, as you mention in your book, has been perhaps overused in the past decade as a buzzword, but it has genuine value for intranet management. How can intranet managers create an effective governance model in their organisation?

I like triangles! My governance triangle has an intranet steering group to take strategic decisions, an intranet operations group to manage day-by-day tasks, and an intranet user group to help define and monitor user requirements. One of the suggestions I make in the book is that the membership of the steering group and the user group should be reviewed each year to make sure they reflect the business direction and priorities of the organisation. One year the HR Manager might be a valuable member of the steering group, but the following year maybe the R&D Director might usefully take that seat at the table.

What is the benefit of a structured intranet strategy, and how does this help information management?

I know of one major UK organisation that has a policy that staff reverse park their cars for safety reasons but does not have an intranet strategy. An intranet is a high-touch application, with most employees using it every day. They need to be able to trust the information they find, and the easiest way to break that trust is not to put an appropriate level of investment into the intranet. The level of investment can only be set through a strategic plan which sets out user requirements, objectives, organisational impacts and how they will be measured, and the resources required. In my experience probably only one in five organisations has such a strategy.

We’d like to thank Martin for taking time out of his busy publication schedule to talk to us. You can pre-order The Intranet Management Handbook from Facet Publishing’s website at http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/title.php?id=734-0 or you can contact Martin directly via email at martin.white@intranetfocus.com.