Simple Intranets

by Jonathan Harris

Simple Intranets

by Jonathan Harris
Managing Director, Weblogics

November 2011

The future is looking for simpler, less complex solutions. Already, people demand mobile access to business solutions anywhere anytime from new devices such as smartphones and iPads; Social media is weaving its way into business culture; As enterprises overcome initial scepticism such as security, arguments for moving to the Cloud will become so compelling that take-up will snowball.

That's the clear message from Web 2.0 guru Dion Hinchcliffe in an article that sums up what customers are looking for during the next five years. It is a prediction echoed by similar forecasts from IT trend analysts at companies such as Gartner, McKinsey and Forester Research.

In a nutshell , as Cloud, mobile and social media push new expectations on the enterprise, Intranets will assume a more prominent position within the organisation – if you can remove barriers to their adoption such as complexity and time-to-deploy. Hinchcliffe reports:

> "Managers and executives, albeit mostly on the business side, are typically pushing for 1) service delivery on next-generation mobile devices like the iPad, 2) much easier to use IT solutions, and 3) access to better, more collaborative and useful Intranet capabilities. "Easy", highly mobile, and "social" are the mantras of this new generation of IT. So to is the rapid (read: instant) acquisition and delivery of business solutions. There is a growing realization amongst workers and management that technology, though increasingly complex in itself, can be wielded far more rapidly and efficiently than their currently parochial capabilities are providing." *

In this era of Twitter, Facebook and the Bring Your Own device, people are already moving from the complex to the simple; from fixed to mobile access anywhere; from prolonged projects to rapid acquisition – instant deployment. This forecast is timely as businesses struggle with challenging financial circumstances globally and fickle consumer confidence. Understandably, they want even modest investments in innovation to deliver a rapid return.

Traditionally, businesses have suffered from exactly the opposite. To date, many Intranets were born from a marriage of complex technologies and conflicting specifications that were never delivered. Return on investment was not achieved because innate complexity of the Intranet caused disappointing take-up when it was eventually delivered, inevitably dooming it to decline and failure.

Why? The answer is that complex Intranet solutions are bedevilled by inherent problems.

- Complex solutions require changes to data architectures, which in turn create dependencies upon software programmers and technical gurus to design, manage and change the system,
- Complex projects require long deployments and bespoke coding,
- Complex Intranets require large budgets that extend beyond an achievable RoI horizon.

The solution to these problems is simplicity itself.

Increasingly, organisations are choosing to eschew complex Intranets "with all the bells and whistles" in favour of purposefully-design "simple" Intranets that incorporate:

- An off-the-shelf packaged design that is easily moulded to your requirements,
- Administration modules that let normal people configure and administer the Intranet, and
- An intuitive design that allows for quick deployment without needing technical gurus.

Yet simplicity does not mean lack of functionality. This new generation of Intranets delivers rich functionality including sophisticated document management, customisable workflows and integrated collaborative capabilities that deliver a huge degree of flexibility to enable deployment in different business environments.

Simple Intranets focus on business requirements – and deliver to those requirements, quickly and efficiently. What is an Intranet?

An Intranet is an internal computer network that uses Internet Protocol (IP) technology to securely share information and digital resources within your organisation. The term distinguishes this model from the "Internet", which describes the IP-based network that exists between organisations.

A dynamic business requires dynamic business systems. Your Intranet is one of the most important business systems within your organisation because it is the glue that binds your business together – from business and social communications to the management of the documents and knowledge that underpins everything you do.

When your business changes, your Intranet needs to be an agent for change – not a barrier!

What went wrong with Intranets?

The problem is the plethora of pieces used to put together the Intranet puzzle. Almost every function requires a different product: Buy a social media product, then a document management system, then a workflow solution, add a content management system, supported by a programming environment.

When you purchase these disparate Intranet tools, you need someone with the skills to put them together. That's because Intranet tools are designed to enable skilled technicians to build an Intranet. Although many businesses expect their IT team to perform this function, they generally discover that they need a different type of intellect and skillset that does not automatically reside in the IT department. That means they are forced to hire outsiders to do the job.

Too many businesses followed the recipe of bringing together these disparate software products, Internet tools and platforms and resources. However, instead of solving their problem, this approach frequently laid the foundation for a failed Intranet site and a whole set of fresh problems.

The reason is that each software application is designed by a software development team to meet the needs of a specific marketplace. Vendors live and breathe their areas of expertise, which is reflected in the design and user interface. If the vendor delivers to user requirements, their product performs well in the marketplace: The product survives and thrives; if not, the product will fail. Think of it as the IT product version of Darwin's 'natural selection': The best products thrive, the weak fall away.

That natural selection of the fittest does not occur when a business designs its own Intranet from the ground up. Rather, it is more equivalent to a vendor hiring software developers from off the street to have one shot at developing a critical business solution, based on a single-pass requirement study. It is 'genetically' designed to fail. Because the IT laws of natural selection don't apply, they end up with Mary Shelley's Frankenstein rather than a perfectly adapted creation.

The design, the data architecture, the functionality and, importantly, the user interface are not the results of many years of honing across a large population of users in a competitive environment: They are one-off, bespoke outcomes based on assumptions and suggestions that are frequently wrong. Inevitably, such solutions lack intuitiveness, consistency, error handling, upgradeability and flexibility.

A business proceeding down this track normally lacks the luxury of a team of developers: Usually it's just one person from the IT department. If the product they develop is successful, it's due to luck than purposeful process because "best-of-breed" Lego-like assembly of Intranets is inherently flawed.

Unfortunately, once they recognise their Intranet project is in trouble, most businesses have no option but to find the resources (read: money) to review the situation and try to make improvements. Walking away from the existing investment is not an option. Enter Phase Two and more resources. The well-known phrase 'our three-year Intranet journey' was coined to describe exactly this scenario.

This scenario largely repeats what occurred in the 1990s when the Internet was new and developers embraced HTML-based Intranets. The approach failed because it delivered inflexible Intranets that were unable to change to meet emerging business needs and were so clunky users didn't use them.

Ironically, once they embark on Intranet development journey, many businesses find themselves undertaking a massive development exercise to support a program that, in fact, should be supporting the business. The organisation has moved its focus from its normal line of business to becoming an IT company – and a bad one at that! In an environment where management philosophy typically dictates that businesses need to shed non-core activities, they find themselves doing the opposite.

Even more paradoxically, a business that may justify moving to the 'Cloud' to minimise IT risk and spending is still willing to embark on developing its own bespoke Intranet.

It just doesn't make sense.

Instant acquisition and delivery

The alternative is to purchase an Intranet application, not a set of tools.

For businesses which are tired of paying expensive technical specialists for long-winded software deployments, the "instant Intranet" is available: It requires no complex technical development; it provides popular functions such as document management and business workflows; and it delivers benefits from day one!

The key to this "instant Intranet" is *instant acquisition and delivery*.

Whether deployed in the Cloud or on your own servers, Intranets should be ready to go from day one. All you need to do is define the categories, build business forms & workflows and upload content – all using GUI-based templates and modelling. These fundamental functions should be well supported by a simple to use administration module that requires no IT skills to operate.

The fact is that if you need IT skills to administer your Intranet, you've chosen the wrong Intranet!

Instant Intranets change the way you pay for software by introducing the option of paying for software as you go. As well as eliminating a large upfront capital investment, you can reduce a great deal of business risk: If you discover you've chosen the wrong software, you can replace it with another. That means no more 'sticky' Intranets where a huge investment prevents you from walking away.

Instant acquisition and delivery is the future of Intranets.

A fresh approach to the Intranet dilemma

Without the need of developers, the instant Intranet provides you with a single integrated solution that supplies the requirements of most end users in most businesses: Document management; Process automation; Forms; Knowledge search; security; approvals and notifications; Blogs; Forum; resource manager; Event Planning; Calender; Archive; Notifications and more.

Each fully developed and integrated function uses a consistent user interface, proven by thousands of end users around the world. Each functional area is a highly developed solution within its own space although it fits with intimate consistency within the broader Intranet environment. Electronic Document Management provides high-end document management features such as versioning, approvals, workflows, variable metadata, notifications, rating, tagging, review dates and archiving. As well as a high level of sophistication, each standard module is integrated with other Intranet modules.

Delivering a rich suite of ready-to-go business functions, the "instant Intranet" empowers staff by putting the capabilities they need at their fingertips. Organisations should apply only one caveat to their Intranet project: Intranet deployment *should require no user software development*.

Managing Change.

As your business matures and grows, your business priorities change; your staff change and organisation structure changes; the products you make and sell change; your investment priorities change. Too many companies focus on building an Intranet for today's needs without ever questioning the need for it to quickly evolve to match the changes in your business.

The fact is a successful Intranet should allow business-driven changes to be reflected immediately.

By eliminating customised software code from the Intranet, there is no need to undertake any bespoke programming when changes take place. Quickly and easily, your Intranet can realign to match changes in your organisational structure and business processes.

The bottom line is that your Intranet serves your business – not the other way round!

The answer is Intralogic, power for the common person.

Weblogics' flagship Intranet product, Intralogic, is configured via a simple yet sophisticated Administration module, equipped with an intuitive interface that guides users through creating and modifying all aspects of their Intranet. This includes changes to forms and form design; document security; communities; layouts; menu items; access and security; document approval processes; and blogs. Full control of your Intranet is at your fingertips.

Weblogics has designed the Administration process to make it easy for normal staff to perform. By removing the reliance on IT staff or third party consultants to make things happen, you ensure that your Intranet meets your true business requirements. Results are fast. Nothing is 'lost in translation'. It also frees your IT staff from mundane maintenance to adding value through their roles.

Of equal importance, Intralogic encourages the *delegation of administration*. Weblogics recognises that many organisations suffer because key staff members are sometimes overloaded. As well as making the Intralogic Intranet technology easy to administer, we have encouraged administration to be distributed throughout the organisation, avoiding dependence upon one critical person. Intralogic allows you to delegate administration of Intranet components to other custodial staff. For example, project document administrators can be responsible for document access while your HR team can manage user access, customer and partner security, Blogs, Forums, etc.

By empowering the people who run your business to administer the Intranet instead of depending on the IT department, you encourage your staff to buy-in to its success, generate loyalty and ensure the Intranet remains alive and fresh at all times.

Bibliography

* Hinchcliffe, D. ZDNet (October 2, 2011) The "Big Five" IT trends of the next half decade: Mobile, social, cloud, consumerization, and big data. http://www.zdnet.com/blog/hinchcliffe/the-big-five-it-trends-of-the-next-half-decade-mobile-social-cloud-consumerization-and-big-data/1811

Author details

About Jonathan Harris

Jonathan Harris is the Managing Director of Weblogics. "In this paper, we unashamedly put the case for simple Intranets," he says. "With more than 10 years of Intranet history, the world is now reviewing the past and wants change. We believe that you should analyse what your business is doing today and seek off-the-shelf strategies and solutions that use the integrated simplicity of products such as the Weblogics Intralogic suite".

Jon can be contacted by email at *jon.harris@weblogics.com.au*. Any comments or feedback are valued.

About Weblogics

Weblogics has developed enterprise-wide software solutions since 1991. Our mantra is to 'partner with businesses who regard IT as a critical factor in delivering competitive advantage'. Our team of dedicated engineers, consultants and management thrive on designing and applying advanced web technologies that make businesses work better, that scale from small to large, multiple business unit structures, but importantly that can be easily administered by non-technical people. We are great at making IT easy, and refuse to accept that customers need development tools, programmers or expensive third parties to enable an operational business solution.

Since the late 1990s, Weblogics has developed product suites that were Web solutions from the beginning. Each day, 30,000 users log on to a Weblogics Intranet. Weblogics customers include banks, financial institutions, construction companies, not-for-profits, environmental companies, project managers, and many more.

Weblogics' flagship Intranet software, Intralogic, gives your staff, partners and customers a central point for all their information and access needs and all the tools you need to automate business processes. With Intralogic in place, your people collaborate more effectively, as employees, customers and partners gain immediate and easy access to the information they need. Intralogic Intranet software incorporates extranet/portal capabilities, allowing you to effortlessly share and process information from anywhere in the world, whilst ensuring that information is secured in a single repository, and accessed under strict security rules you decide.

Intralogic is all about staff empowerment, customer and partner collaboration and business process automation. Intralogic is endowed with a rich suite of fully functioning modules that have evolved over many years, in-site tested by thousands of users from a wide range of industries, all ready to run. With each new Intralogic revision, capabilities are increased, enhanced, made more flexible. With such a rich and powerful set of functions, we feel new customers will have all they need. We take the view that very few customers need to have bespoke Intranet requirements most things that you need have been needed by many customers before.

For more information, call Weblogics on +61 2-9929 0777 or visit www.weblogics.com.au