Chapter III

Creating Intranets for Management and Collaboration in Federal Agencies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter briefly examines government interest in intranets, describes the experiences of six federal government agencies in developing agency-wide intranets, and identifies and analyzes trends in intranet use, sources of growth, and impediments to further development. The six agencies are: the Department of Transportation, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Environmental Protection Agency, the General Services Administration, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of Justice. The case studies reveal six overall trends in intranet use and development including the importance of upper management support in planning and launching and the importance of marketing in ensuring staff use. The authors conclude that intranets offer more potential for enhancing communication and management and that further development of intranets is likely.
INTRODUCTION

While e-government initiatives have focused on effective linkages between government agencies and their citizens or government agencies and businesses, there is growing interest in intranets connecting government with its employees. Intranets are typically newer applications than Internet Web sites, emerging in the early to mid 1990s in the private sector and, based on our respondents’ accounts, mainly after 1997 among federal government agencies. Intranets are Web sites within government agencies that connect the agency administration to its employees and the employees to each other. In large multi-agency departments such as the Department of Transportation, intranets may be nested so that department-wide intranets and program-specific Web sites operate simultaneously.

These intranets make it possible for agency managers to enhance information resources for employees, make opportunities for employees to communicate more freely, and create online work groups through intranet collaboration. Information in bulky and expensive directories and manuals of policies and procedures can be provided in a more convenient, easy-to-find, and timely way in an internal Web network. Intranets make it possible for employers to communicate quickly and efficiently, and to save time and money in the dissemination of news and policy changes. Intranets may principally be portals linking employees to static information resources or they may include interactive elements that provide human resources services, such as the Employee Express payroll contract service. Some offer chat rooms or group works where employees can communicate outside of formal channels, air grievances, and seek solutions.

While the promise of intranets is great, little data has been collected to determine the state of intranet development. The purpose of our research is to describe intranet development in the federal government and to identify and analyze trends in use, sources of growth, and impediments to development. This research was funded by PriceWaterhouseCoopers and further elaboration and discussion of these findings can be found in Federal Intranet Work Sites: An Interim Assessment (Mahler & Regan, 2002).

The growing interest in intranets is spurred by their usefulness as management tools to foster productive communication and coordination, manage information, and encourage self-organizing work teams. Business-to-employee (B2E) intranets are developing rapidly because of their advantages in optimizing strategic communications. Allcorn (1997) identifies the “parallel virtual organization” composed of an intranet and organizational databases as the information and knowledge management model for the future. Curry and Stancich (2000) describe the advantages of the intranet for strategic decision-making. Southwest Airlines is cited by GAO as an exemplar of the uses of intranets for informal communication among employees.
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