Dumping Grounds vs. Knowledge Repositories – content management on legal firm's intranet

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1. A Few Definitions

Daly defines content management (also known sometimes as document management) as "the way in which a business creates, revises, publishes, retains, and purges electronic information assets" (Daly, 2001) In her definition, information assets include "information assets to include any type of document that contains business critical information". In my opinion the main difference between the two terms "document management" and "content management" is that the first applies to pre-electronic materials, mostly in print format, while the latter applies to content of electronic documents, most of which will reside on some form of electronic storage medium: be it a desktop's hard drive, an intranet server, or an extranet spanning a number of geographically dispersed servers.

An intranet is an internal, proprietary knowledge network or web -- collections of intertwined electronic files and associated functionalities. Embedded or automatically generated hyperlinks hold everything together. Conceptually, they work like the World Wide Web does and use the same web browser software. Although a complete intranet can be set up on a single computer, the true power comes in easily sharing knowledge with others in the firm. The existing networking structure and file server arrangements can be used, with web server software and web-enabling protocols added to form a basic intranet (Pritchard, 1997).

An Intranet which is properly specified, constructed and managed can transform the way a business is run. It can be the central repository of the corporate memory, the vehicle for delivering news, precedents and information. They grow readily into Extranets - dedicated parts of the firm's own site for clients or industry sectors.

Intranets also raise unique issues. They are claimed (or disowned) equally by information staff and IT staff. There is greater scope for subjectivity (and therefore debate) about their scope, function, appearance and almost every other aspect. They can range from simple sets of pages linked together to sophisticated and heavily automated database applications.

2. Why an Intranet?

With the advent of intranet technology, collaborative law practices and law departments are able to share critical knowledge resources and practice more efficiently (Pritchard, 1997). The goal of a good legal intranet is to provide the knowledge you need, when you need it, to practice law most effectively.

Currently, in most legal firms, documents are stored in a number of different places: individual PC hard drives, public and private network drives, disks, web servers, zip drives, paper documents in file cabinets, and more. This typical paradigm results in documents being stored in multiple places and islands of unorganized information that is difficult to manage. The result is being unable to find information, potentially using out of date or inaccurate information, and limiting the ability to leverage existing information. In addition, access control on regular file servers is typically administered only by an information technology department or help desk, thus resulting in an additional layer someone must go through in order to access the information they need in order to do their job.

Moreover, since we can now connect work groups and entire organizations, the goal is also to create a *truly useful* collective knowledge resource and alter lawyers' methods of delivering legal services to their clients. An organization's members can use such a resource in two interrelated capacities: first, as contributors of their own knowledge and, second, as consumers -- not only of the knowledge they have recorded earlier but also of the knowledge that others have recorded for them. The whole of a collaborative, knowledge-sharing organization will inevitably exceed the sum of the knowledge capabilities of its parts. Simply put, knowledge sharing and reuse throughout a knowledge-intensive organization leads to dramatic improvements in efficiency and effectiveness (Hokkannen, 1996).

Legal organizations that take advantage of better ways to manage and reuse knowledge they need to practice law will tangibly demonstrate that they provide enhanced value to their clients. They will attract and keep clients who value and understand their commitment to excellence, efficiency, and innovation. They will work faster, using leaner teams, to accomplish higher quality work with less effort than before. They will improve responsiveness. When clients call for information about their matters, a lawyer with a good intranet will often be able to give them immediate, authoritative answers rather than having to get back to them later.

Intranet-powered legal organizations will delegate more effectively. They will better control business risk and lower administrative costs. They will maximize the efficiency of hours their lawyers devote to practice building and practice management. They will assimilate new lawyers and staff more quickly and train personnel more efficiently. When a lawyer or key staff member departs, the organization will experience less disruption and loss of institutional capability. They will conduct litigation more efficiently. Most of the cost of litigation today is not in the courtroom but in knowledge acquisition, organization, retrieval, analysis, and disclosure.

Litigation lawyers using intranets will know their cases better. Case-specific intranets, loaded with information about witnesses, documents, discovery, timetables, legal issues, and team strategies, represent a powerful new ally for litigation teams. While a litigation intranet cannot eliminate inherent litigation complexity, if it has been properly designed and is properly utilized, it can enable lawyers to manage their work and the litigation itself much more efficiently.

Intranets are forcing law firms to rethink the way information is distributed. The traditional methods of disseminating information usually depend upon numerous resources involved in time-consuming and costly processes. For example, a firm's phone directory is constantly changing as new hires are added and terminated employees are removed. Distributing a directory to each employee office and conference room in every location can take days and the cost of photocopying and resource time can become extensive. If the firm had an Intranet, the directory would be changed on-line and the changes would be immediately available to everyone within the firm from their desktop web browser. The same can be done for a firm's policies and procedures manual, benefits information, attorney biographical profiles, frequently asked questions (FAQs) about human resource issues or technology issues, and the many administrative forms used on a daily basis. Firms are using Intranets to organize the many on-line research materials available today, including those from Lexis, Westlaw, CD-Rom and Internet resources. The legal research section of an Intranet can be designed to group like resources together, making them available through one common interface. This decreases attorney time locating the various resources and training time learning how to navigate each resource (Don, 1998).

Overall, the potential for legal intranets is the leverage effect of giving already smart professionals much better tools than they have ever had. The key is to link Intranet applications to cost savings, increased productivity and gaining a competitive advantage. The ability to disseminate information once, in a timely, more accurate and cost effective manner across an organization can reduce administrative time and reproduction costs. Analysts estimate that 18% of a firm's printed

materials become outdated within 30 days and it costs in excess of $10,000 per month to update those materials depending upon the firm's size.

A well-designed Intranet has the potential to improve workflow processes and reduce the time spent in processing routine transactions. If using an Intranet saves every employee in a 50-person law firm 10 minutes per day, the cumulative cost savings is enormous.

In summary, an intranet should deliver the following functions:

- Improve **Service** to your internal customers
- Increase **Accuracy** of the information
- Increase **Speed** with which people can access the information
- Reduce **Cost** and **Effort** of providing/publishing this information (Daly, 2001[2])

An example of a simple legal intranet can be viewed at http://www.cyber-lawyer.co.uk/front.asp.

3. Content Management: Whose Responsibility?

In the rush to add documents to an intranet, and to make sure that they are published at the earliest possible opportunity, little attention may be paid to what happens to documents that are now out-of-date. This can be of particular importance with staff policy manuals. For the sake of an illustration take the hypothetical case of a laboratory safety manual that had been converted to intranet delivery. A laboratory technician is injured, and claims that there were no guidelines in the safety manual about what they should have done in that particular situation. The current version does have clear guidelines, but the accident happened a few months ago. If this case comes to a tribunal are you in a position to show what the content of the manual was on the day in question, whether or not the technician had access to it, and had in fact read it. The situation can become more complicated when the virtual handbook is updated in sections, and considerable care needs to be taken to ensure that all the individual sections cross-reference to each other correctly, and that all users are aware of what sections are new or revised (White, 2001).

Some of the features a good Web Content Management System might provide:

- **Site Inventory, Indexing, Search** -- The ability to catalogue all the content on the firm's web, organize it intuitively and provide users with the means to easily find and retrieve the information they need.

- **Centralized Development** -- One and only one development platform available to all authors and developers.

- **Version Control and Change Management** -- Avoiding version conflicts and overwrites with a system of code check-out/in. Older versions archived and retrievable.

- **Content Aging Control** -- The means to identify and update old and obsolete content.

- **Workflow Management** -- Tools to manage the approval process.

- **Non-expert Authoring** -- Providing non-technical authors the ability to publish web content directly.

- **Standards Enforcement** -- Providing consistency of look, feel and navigation.

- **Small Applications** -- Easy development and management of simple forms-based applications, such as news releases, events calendars, RFPs and jobs listings, etc. (Blood, 2000)

For a basic site (non-application type pages), an internal or an external vendor can build the site. Updating information is crucial and maintenance of sites will be the responsibility of the department who "owns" the information (IT training must be provided to the person responsible for maintaining the website).

After determining who is the audience for the information and considering what they will be able to accomplish by using the site, contact should be established with the Webmaster(s) to determine if there is no duplication of effort and to discuss the best ways to accomplish the site's objectives.

In many firms, the misguided impression is that the whole responsibility for the intranet – including content management – rests with the technical staff. With technology racing beyond the static HTML pages, many administrators and content providers are feeling it "is just too much for them". Quite a number of firms would rather outsource the management of it content rather than give their employees time off to learn the basics. There are many applications that render the process quite simple, but there seems to be a mental block among the managing principals against technically upgrading their administrative or legal staff.

In my consulting I have also found that quite a number of legal firms are open to the idea of having a technically savvy librarian to manage the intranet content, as well as providing legal research to the firm.

It is my opinion that placing the responsibility for content management squarely in the hands of its owners empowers employees and adds to their value for the firm.

4. Killer Applications!

A document management system can coordinate the changes, access, and availability of business critical information on a global scale. People can share and leverage each other's work (permissions determine access). The most current version of any document is always the one that is presented so they know they are using the "right" document. In addition, a version history is available to provide access to previous versions from any point in time during the document life cycle as well provide for an audit trail. At any step of the process you can find out:

- Who made changes

- What changes were made and why

- When the changes were made

Also, it prevents two people from editing the same document simultaneously by "locking" the current document whenever someone has it checked out for editing. It even lists which user locked the document. With this type of system, a company can manage documents through the entire lifecycle from creation through disposal (and even use automated retention schedules to purge stuff no longer needed).

Searching for information you need when you need it can be a real challenge. A document management system can improve this as well. Every document has an associated document type. These types are standard and centrally managed in the corporation. Each type has a predefined set of attributes. These different types and attributes can then be used in search scenarios to refine your search to any combination of folders, document types, attributes and keywords.

Besides the benefits of regular document management, this type of system can make publishing to and maintaining an Intranet much easier. The technical web staff creates web pages that use code to query the document management system and publish the latest and greatest information. You can create programmatic links to specific documents, all documents in specific folders, all documents of a particular document type, or all documents with a particular attribute and value (for example, publish all documents where the attribute publish to the website equals True). This creates a more "hands-off" publishing scheme for the Intranet, as the technical staff does not need to be involved on a day-to-day basis. If users can be convinced (or coerced) to use the document

management system in this way, it can create Intranet content that is much more dynamic, accurate, and up to date.

Among the firms that I have consulted with, the perception is that one needs some maverick software that does everything at the click of the button, while costing the business an arm and a leg (see, for example, Hokkanen, 1997). They are pleasantly surprised when I suggest they start by upgrading themselves to MS Office 2000, install NT Server on one computer, and learn how to use their Outlook to the best of its productivity. Although hundreds of companies are marketing their peer-to-peer, groupware and content management applications, the fact is that you don't really need all this in a firm run by a principal solicitor with 25 to 50 staff.

5. Dragging the Horse to the River

One of the best ways of driving traffic to your site is putting something employees absolutely need on the site and making that the only way they can get it.

A few techniques to guarantee repeat Intranet users:

- **Publish a monthly newsletter**

A great way of keeping in touch with your Intranet users, a monthly newsletter will keep repeat traffic coming to your Intranet. Newsletters are ideal for keeping in touch with users and informing them about additions and changes to the Intranet. The newsletter has to be of REAL value to the users, otherwise they will perceive it as more spam.

- **Add a Quick Poll**

These polls attract users and enable them to provide input on issues relevant to your Intranet. Users will check back on a regular basis to view the poll results. Depending on the Intranet traffic, change the poll on a regular basis and post the results of the previous polls on your Intranet for public viewing. An additional feature would be to allow users to signup using their email address to receive the results of the poll.

- **Ask them to Bookmark**

This is the simplest techniques of getting repeat users. An action message like "Bookmark this page NOW for great content" will help. Many users simply forget that they don't have to see your entire Intranet in one visit. Remind them to use the bookmark feature in their browser.

- **Produce Regular Content**

Several Intranet owners make the mistake of publishing a lot of content when going live and not updating it for months. Do not fall into this trap. Make sure you update your content on a regular basis. Make a schedule and stick to it. Let you users know this schedule so they know when to come back.

- **Add a Discussion Board**

Add a moderated discussion board to your Intranet. This will provide users a forum for expressing their opinion and networking with other users to your Intranet. Imagine a common area where your users can share ideas, exchange tips, and post questions and find other people with similar interests. This will surely make them come back to check for postings and responses to their postings. Great reason for repeat visits.

It is often the scenario that after the company has implemented an intranet, the staff does not use it, or uses it to dump documents and files onto it. No one wants to claim responsibility for

updating or owning the site. A solution we suggest to the firms we consult is to provide incentives for the best site on the intranet, measured by the number of hits generated over a certain period of time.

Another problem with intranets is the unwillingness of people to share what they want. Any intranet venture should not be limited solely to IT, but also to changing cultural perceptions. Knowledge is power, and people are afraid that by sharing it they may lose their competitive advantage over other staff. This is especially true in legal firms, where associates get paid on commission basis. Our suggestion is to change the perception of knowledge sharing from losing competitive edge to being seen as an expert.

6. References

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