

Intranets in Practice – the Gadens' Application

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An Intranet is a network based on Internet technology that enables users to access information within an organisation using an Internet browser. More importantly, it also provides a means of easily accessing, disseminating and sharing information within a law firm.

The ability to manage the huge quantity of legal, commercial, marketing, and client information available to lawyers efficiently and effectively is crucial to a firm's capacity to meet and exceed the needs of its clients. Gadens Lawyers has recognised that Intranet technology offers an important key to achieving this aim.

INTRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Technical Development

Early ventures into information management at Gadens were limited by the available technology. About five years ago we developed a number of databases to capture and provide access to corporate data such as contact registers, document generation and the library catalogue. To meet our needs many of these databases had to be designed and created within the firm.

As technology advanced, efforts were made to link these databases and provide access to the records using early versions of Netscape. Gadens' first Intranet in the form we now know was launched in 1995. This launch coincided with the installation of dial-up Internet connections on a limited number of computers. Our Internet service was quickly expanded to a permanent 24 hour connection available to all users. This enabled Gadens to begin giving clients secure access to the network for electronic collaboration on files and to share documents on a world scale.

The most recent major upgrade to our Intranet occurred this year when we migrated from an Apple Macintosh to a PC environment. This upgrade greatly improved the speed at which information can be displayed on our screens – an important step in the widespread acceptance and use of the Intranet. If users cannot access information over the Intranet as quickly or faster than they can in paper format they will not embrace the paperless solution.

Today every person in the firm has access to the Intranet and Internet from their desktop computer. The information on the Intranet is updated constantly which ensures users continually receive current information.

The technical development of the Intranet is driven by the Director of Information Technology in conjunction with a legal IT support company. Orli-TECH Pty Ltd specialises in Internet and Intranet services and electronic document delivery services for firms and companies that need technical expertise but do not have the internal technical capacity.

Design

User input and feedback was regularly sought during the development process to ensure the design of the interface was appropriate for the manner in which lawyers wanted to access the information available. The structure and layout of the Intranet interface was driven by a desire for any information sought to be reached within one click of a link. The firm's philosophy was that if more than two buttons needed to be pressed the lawyers would not persist! The Intranet now enables lawyers to easily access information stored in electronic formats without the need for training in the use of databases.

To assist with navigation, the current Intranet is a framed site. A fixed frame across the top of the browser screen contains links to the front page of each major site within the Intranet. This allows users to easily jump from one site to another. Each major Intranet site contains a fixed menu frame to enable easy access to the pages within that site. Although the content and layout of individual pages may vary, this framed structure ensures a consistent overall approach and maintains ease of access.

Training and Acceptance

To encourage the use and acceptance of the Intranet and Internet, Gadens focussed on content and training. As much information and as many applications as possible were added to the Intranet to enable users to access corporate data from one place using a single interface. To help quickly build the quantity of information available on the Intranet, different areas of the firm took responsibility for contributing the information relevant to their area.

Innovative training was conducted in the form of cyber nights. Scavenger hunts, races and competitions on the Internet and Intranet were held at firm-sponsored drinks evenings, complete with dark room, theme soundtracks, flashing lights and smoke machine. Internet and Intranet usage were monitored before and after these events and was found to increase exponentially following the training evenings.

Services available via the Intranet are now shown to all new staff as part of their induction training. Details of new Intranet sites and reminders about the benefits of existing sites are also regularly included on the Intranet bulletin page to encourage ongoing awareness and use amongst existing Gadens staff.

Updating and Maintenance

Active server pages are used to help add and update the information available on the Intranet. The Intranet pages update from information contained in database records. Selected staff enter information in the relevant database and the records are automatically added to the Intranet without IT assistance or a knowledge of HTML. This approach enables groups within the firm to be individually responsible for updating the information on their Intranet sites.

INTRANET APPLICATIONS

Bulletins

When users log on, their computers automatically open at the Intranet news page. This page contains legal, business, marketing, and social news structured in a number of frames:

- links to major newspapers on the Internet provide easy access to daily news;
- highlights of the Internet advertise interesting new Internet sites;
- the GL Bulletin contains staff and firm news such as holidays, birthdays, CLEs and social activities; and
- the Library & Marketing Bulletin includes new purchases, the passage of Acts, electronic legal bulletins, press releases and legal news.

Hypertext links within the bulletins enable users to easily locate further details regarding the information provided. In the past, when the updates were distributed by email, users were required to note the location of further details and navigate their way to the appropriate Word file, database or Internet page. The speed and ease at which users can now find additional information encourages them to do so and enables them to link seamlessly between an internal document and an Internet site. The information on the Bulletins can be accessed by users at their convenience and is centrally located for later reference. This form of information distribution has been more effective than regular broadcast email.

We receive as much material as possible in electronic format for distribution via the Intranet. This has involved negotiations with publishers regarding copyright and licensing restrictions. Although pricing and licensing structures vary greatly amongst the publishers, we found most publishers were willing at least to discuss the options available as they are also still exploring the potential of Intranet technology.

In addition, we are investigating methods to further reduce the circulation of materials received in paper format. Imaging using Adobe Acrobat technology has been used extensively by other areas of the firm for the past four years and the library now has its own scanner. We are also planning to create our own journal abstracts that will be disseminated on the Intranet and enable lawyers to request a copy of the journal with the full text article from the library.

Library Homepage

The Library homepage provides desktop access to the Inmagic DB/TextWorks Library catalogue using DB/Text WebPublisher. The HTML interface enables users to link from records in the Catalogue database to serials updates and borrowing details in the Serials database. Users can also link from a catalogue record to a networked CD-ROM or a relevant Internet site.

DB/Text WebPublisher is also used to access the Library Distribution List. Lawyers are able to enter their name and retrieve a list of all material circulated to them. Alternatively, they can find to whom a particular journal is circulated to help locate the latest issues of journals within the office.

The Library homepage provides access to network CD-ROMs. Each title listed is accompanied by a brief description of the contents of the CD-ROM and links to the CD-

ROMs in the library tower. We experienced some difficulty in obtaining installation instructions and passwords appropriate for an Intranet application despite assurances from the publishers that the CD-ROMs could be accessed in this manner. We particularly sought to avoid the need to install software on the individual computers of all lawyers who may need to access the CD-ROMs.

Archived copies of electronic journals and updates disseminated through the Library and Marketing Bulletin are available from the Library site. They are currently listed by date order within each title, and will shortly be able to be subject searched.

Lawyers can also access search help and user guides from the Library site. Training notes from internal and commercial training sessions can be easily accessed from one place for later reference.

Links to Relevant Internet Sites

The Intranet contains links to relevant Internet sites arranged in broad groups according to the type of links, for example legal links and client links. These links perform the dual role of providing easy access to commonly visited sites and alerting users to the availability of new sites.

The legal links are arranged under subject headings, for example Acts/Cases, Bills, Hansard, Government, Publishers, Universities. The 20-30 sites on the list are intended to be a starting point for legal research, not a comprehensive guide to legal sites on the Internet. They are also used to access commercial online services available through the Internet, such as Butterworths Online.

Lawyers are encouraged to advise the Library of any sites they would like added to the list and we have added some frequently visited international sites following suggestions from lawyers. Lawyers are also encouraged to add individually preferred sites to their own Favourites list. Creating and organising Favourites (Bookmarks) is included in each lawyer's Internet training.

Legal Divisions

Each legal division within the firm has its own Intranet page. The content of the pages varies according to the needs and interests of each division. The pages contain information that is relevant to people within each division, for example, client requirements, details of counsel and legal procedures. They may also contain information about the division which will assist others within the firm, such as who within the division works for which clients.

Administration, Services and Marketing

The Administration pages of the Intranet document the firm's training manuals, procedures and policies such as Human Resources, Quality, Credit Control, and Accounts. These policies and manuals can be easily and quickly updated to ensure that all staff are accessing current and consistent copies of the information. This site also contains Information Technology Frequently Asked Questions and Online Support which enables users to submit questions to the IT department or view answers to others' problems.

The Services Intranet site links to aids to internal communication such as current phone lists and the paging service which enables any member of the firm to type and send a message to a Gadens pager. Aids to client services such as the Client Complaints Register and the Skills Inventory can also be accessed from this site.

The Marketing site contains links to our Internet sites for Gadens Lawyers, Gadens Consulting and Orli-TECH. It also contains our corporate video, and details of our Alert! product which raises firm awareness of our marketing efforts and assists in answering clients' questions about the firm.

THE NEXT STEP

Intranet Spider

We are currently expanding our application of the DB/Text Intranet Spider. The Spider software searches a specified Internet site or file directory and automatically indexes the contents of the site or files. When searching Internet sites the Spider automatically follows any hypertext links included in the site and retrieves information about documents referenced in the original site. This process can be repeated regularly or set to occur automatically at pre-set intervals. The information retrieved and indexed by the Spider can then be searched using DB/TextWorks. Using the Spider, we can subject search our entire precedent bank or specific files of documents, such as Quantum Notes. This will enable us to subject search information contained on the Intranet that will become increasingly important as the content of the Intranet continues to grow.

Customised Delivery

Currently everyone in our office receives the same information via the Intranet. The next challenge for us is customised information delivery.

Information at present is "pushed" to users through internal web pages that automatically update at set intervals. This enables information to be proactively distributed to a user without the user needing to open applications and search to "pull" information onto their computer. Gadens are developing a system to enable a lawyer to nominate the areas in which they are interested and receive updates only in relation to those areas. This will greatly assist the filtering of information and ensure a lawyer receives the information relevant to him or her. This development, together with the continued expansion of the quantity of information available on the Intranet, will enable a lawyer to log on in the morning and immediately view a summary of everything that has occurred or changed in his/her areas of interest in the past twenty-four hours.

CONCLUSION

The Intranet has enabled us to provide timely access to relevant and accurate information throughout the firm, and continues to do so. This in turn has increased our current awareness levels, speed of research, ease of document production, sharing of legal experience, use of our existing skill base, and knowledge of our clients. Gadens Lawyers continues to find new applications for the Intranet and believes we must constantly embrace new developments in technology to ensure we are providing the best client service.