Traditional Intranets Are Dead — Modern Intranets Are Alive and Well: Part 2

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Initiatives: Digital Workplace Applications

Most traditional intranets use only the “destination site” delivery model, whereas modern intranets offer various delivery options for diverse types of workers. Application leaders must create “composable” intranets that enable “multiexperiences” and form the center of digital workplace strategies.

Overview

Key Challenges

- Traditional intranets employ only a “destination site” delivery model, which makes resources difficult to access and therefore leads to significant employee dissatisfaction.

- Digital workplaces demand modern technology and flexible delivery approaches to create compelling employee experiences (EXs).

Recommendations

Application leaders responsible for digital workplace applications should:

- Architect a modern intranet by designing one as a set of easily consumable and composable services.

- Deploy a modern intranet that delivers structured access to services by employing touchpoints like employee portals, search, conversational interfaces and integrations with business applications. Destination sites can also play a role in a modern intranet, when supported correctly.

Introduction

Leading enterprises recognize the critical role of an intranet, and have evolved theirs into “modern intranets” (see “Traditional Intranets Are Dead — Modern Intranets Are Alive and Well: Part 1”). Modern intranets go beyond traditional destination sites by offering a collection of composable services consumable via multiple deployment touchpoints, including employee portals, business applications, mobile apps, collaboration apps and other destination sites. In other words, a modern intranet both consumes and produces services — it isn’t just a website.
This document is the second part of a two-part series. Part one focused on the technologies and content processes required to turn a stale, outdated intranet into a modern intranet, essentially by addressing the “what” and the “why.” Part two focuses on the various architectures and designs of a modern intranet, essentially addressing the “how.”

Traditional intranets have fallen into disuse in many enterprises. For many, the term “intranet” is something of a dirty word, referring to an outdated mode of employee interaction. Traditional intranets are still delivered only as destination sites by many enterprises. These sites attempt to provide the content, communications, applications, knowledge and collaboration tools that employees need to do their jobs. They are usually designed as “one size fits all” sites, but are generally poorly organized and have a search function that returns a long list of irrelevant results. These traditional intranets cause a high level of dissatisfaction among employees, and reduce the effectiveness and productivity of individuals, teams and entire organizations.

A modern intranet is a composable intranet, one that supports “multiexperiences” in an evolving digital workplace (see “Top 10 Strategic Technology Trends for 2020: Multiexperience”). The demands of the EX parallel those of the customer experience (CX), especially in terms of usability and powerful interfaces, so intranets must evolve to satisfy those demands. If they do, employees will increase their digital dexterity — a key ingredient for future success.

**Analysis**

**Architect Your Intranet as a Set of Easily Consumable and Composable Services**

Intranets are based on web architectures. They inherited their name in the early 1990s from the internet, being essentially internal internets. Because of their web-related capabilities, intranets work in a world of web services, most of which are delivered by RESTful services. Other models have evolved, but REST remains the primary approach to achieving web interoperability.

Modern packaged business applications, collaboration tools, application development (AD) tools, search tools, learning management tools and knowledge management (KM) tools are increasingly architected as services, many with RESTful consumption and production models. These services do not remove the need for the applications that house them. Rather, they allow key aspects of those applications to be consumed and repurposed in other places. They lend themselves well to the modern intranet model, which demands the ability to consume individual intranet services at a granular level. This consumption model is usually facilitated by an API management tool (see “Magic Quadrant for Full Life Cycle API Management”) or similar integration technology (see “Magic Quadrant for Enterprise Integration Platform as a Service”).

“Headless” models of consumption are another example of this approach. Headless content as a service tools (see “Hybrid Headless Content as a Service Is the Future of Digital Experiences”), paired with front-end tools like JavaScript frameworks, are extremely popular. This is especially true for customer-facing use cases, but also increasingly for employee-centric solutions. Headless models also apply to other tools (such as commerce applications), and can be extended to the
level of a full intranet. This could easily lead to intranet service production in a “headless intranet” model.

Application leaders responsible for digital workplace applications should work with their integration specialists to identify the web service capabilities of the on-premises software, hosted software and cloud services that comprise their intranet. Next, they should catalog these services and enable them with API technologies. Finally, they should identify various consumption touchpoints for these services and deliver those touchpoints using the APIs.

One relatively new aspect of these services is “enterprise-composability.” As business needs change, organizations must be able to deliver innovation quickly and adapt applications dynamically by reassembling capabilities from both without and within. To do this, they must understand, and implement, the concept of the “composable enterprise” (see “Future of Applications: Delivering the Composable Enterprise”).

The composable enterprise is an organizational-level concept. It has implications for business strategy, vendor-sourcing, technological and architectural decisions, and for organizational models that redefine the relationship between “the business” and “IT.” This will lead to a new “innovation pipeline” for the creation, development and assembly of applications (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Innovation Pipeline for the Future of Applications**

**Innovation Pipeline for the Future of Applications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SaaS Vendors</td>
<td>SAP*</td>
<td>Business Capability Development Tool</td>
<td>Business User/Role Application Assemblies</td>
<td>Continuous Delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software Vendors</td>
<td>Software Vendors</td>
<td>User Multi-experience Development Tool</td>
<td>Business Users/Roles</td>
<td>Continuous Delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central IT</td>
<td>System Integrators</td>
<td>Composition/Assembly/Integration Tool</td>
<td>Business Users/Roles</td>
<td>Continuous Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners</td>
<td>JD Edwards*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Business Users/Roles</td>
<td>Continuous Assembly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Examples: Intelligent Security, Governance

- Packaged Business Capability
- User Experience
- Vendor/Partner-Built
- Custom-Built
- API

Source: Gartner
A modern intranet is key to enabling a composable enterprise. Architecting an intranet as a set of composable services leads to the ability to adapt and change applications in the portfolio, which is central to a composable enterprise.

To do this, organizations need to move from inflexible, monolithic applications to a portfolio that is more modular and adaptable to business change. Organizations curate and govern a collection of components that Gartner calls “packaged business capabilities” (PBCs). PBCs are assembled using APIs and event streams in order to create application experiences that are intuitive and that can be tailored to individual needs or preferences. The new portfolio should be grounded in a mesh app and service architecture (MASA). It should exploit the concept of microapps, a decomposition of applications into building blocks based on business function, process or workflow (see “Innovation Insight for Microapps”). It should define a new set of application capabilities, which can be combined and recombined as business needs shift.

To achieve a composable enterprise, application leaders should view intranet services as a key set of components for the creation of PBCs. And the only way to achieve this goal is to architect an intranet as a set of consumable services, exposed via APIs.

Whether the goal is a consumable enterprise or a modern intranet, or both, a set of easily consumed, composable intranet services is key to success.

Deploy a Modern Intranet That Offers Structured Access to Services

The most common touchpoint for today's intranets is the destination site — a website that aggregates a variety of other websites or web services for employee interaction. The traditional destination site is intended as a "one size fits all" website, with no personalization and a single site architecture for all employees. Although there may be other services available, for those enterprises using a destination site intranet, it is the primary entryway for employee interaction.

However, modern intranets — similarly to customer journeys in the world of CX — support a variety of entry pathways and touchpoints in the employee journey. For example, you may log in to your destination site intranet every morning to see the day's news and access your core business applications. But you may also have an opportunity to use a business application — Workday, for example — directly, and collaborate with an HR specialist. This is because a modern intranet could allow Workday to consume a messaging service that connects you to an HR specialist, without having to access that service via the destination site. Or your enterprise might offer flexibility in the use of collaboration tools, with a modern intranet that enables access to your individual Slack application alongside company-provisioned Microsoft Teams for team collaboration. Then again, your enterprise may have both office workers who sit in front of a browser on a PC, as well as many field workers who have only mobile devices and no email address — a modern intranet could serve both these types of workers, as well as others.

Modern Intranet Delivery Touchpoints
The primary delivery touchpoints for modern intranets are as follows:

- **Integrated collections of separate applications**: A fast path to deployment is to integrate a set of intranet-centric applications. However, this is only slightly better than what most traditional intranets do, which is simply to collect applications.

- **Destination sites**: Destination sites can still be central to a modern intranet.

- **Employee portals**: These differ from destination sites in being personalized. This personalization may be targeted at a role, an affiliation to a strategic business unit or geographical unit, a language preference, or any other demographic or psychographic attribute that can be obtained from an employee profile or other data source. Employee persona is also a key driver of personalization.

- **Mobile devices**: Most employees are mobile to some degree, but field service and field sales employees are mobile almost all the time. Mobilizing an intranet can be as simple as delivering a responsive design website. However, for a high-fidelity experience, or for features like offline support for field workers, hybrid or native mobile apps may also need to be developed. Alternatively, app aggregation technology like that from Modo Labs may be used to deliver a mobile intranet.

- **Business applications**: Some business applications, like Workday and ServiceNow, support an integration model that enables them to be entry points to an intranet.

- **Collaboration applications**: Some collaboration applications, such as Microsoft Teams, Slack and SAP Work Zone, support an integration model that enables them to be entry points to an intranet.

- **Search mechanisms**: Some enterprises favor having a search mechanism as the entry point for their intranet. An advanced search engine can be configured to contextually search a wide variety of content and application sources, and to present the results in a cohesive fashion.

- **Virtual assistants/agents**: Virtual assistants like Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant and Apple Siri, and virtual agents (chatbots) like those of Workgrid and Citrix, are but a few of the new generation of intelligent, conversational tools that can be used as entry points to an intranet. As with search mechanisms, they must be configured to search a wide variety of content and application sources.

- **Activity hubs**: Another approach is to create an intranet composed of activity hubs, with each hub having its own focus on certain types of work, roles and interactions. Examples of activity hubs include onboarding portals for new hires, collaboration centers and employee communications applications (see “Market Guide for Employee Communications Applications”). These activity hubs may also be interconnected in a lightweight way through a virtual agent or other artificial intelligence (AI) technology.
Table 1 summarizes the pros and cons, and some key attributes, of a modern intranet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Delivery Model</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Completeness of Solution</th>
<th>Completeness of Deployment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrated collection of separate applications</td>
<td>Fastest to deploy</td>
<td>Structured access to intranet is difficult</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination sites</td>
<td>Familiar model; easy to deploy</td>
<td>Hard to find intranet resources; negative connotation; “one size fits all”</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee portals</td>
<td>Personalized toward groups or individuals; aggregates a wide variety of content and services</td>
<td>Personalization approaches are challenging; platforms are expensive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>Addresses mobile needs of field workers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business applications</td>
<td>Improves in-context access to intranet services</td>
<td>Limited scope of services delivered</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration applications</td>
<td>Improves in-context access to intranet services</td>
<td>Limited scope of services delivered</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Easy to use</td>
<td>Search tool must be configured to access a wide variety of content and application services</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Hard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Different types of worker audiences will have different preferences for delivery touchpoints. Application leaders must recognize the attributes of these audiences, and carefully promote the most appropriate touchpoint for each (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Intranet Touchpoints and Audiences**
Considerations Independent of Delivery Touchpoint

No matter which delivery touchpoints are selected, there are several critical considerations to ensure success:

- **Content governance and processes:** One of the biggest complaints about traditional intranets is their stale, outdated content. To address this issue, content governance must be in place. Intranet governance must not be draconian, but must ensure that processes are in place to assure content accuracy and timeliness. Processes for clear content ownership and freshness dating, for example, are fairly easy to implement, and will help ensure the success of a modern intranet.

- **Enhanced search:** Another big complaint about traditional intranets is their search capabilities. Searches regularly return long lists of irrelevant results. Part of the problem is a lack of content governance, but another is the use of basic search tools. Basic search engines are keyword-based. Enhanced search tools, like insight engines (see "Magic Quadrant for Insight Engines"), add context to searches, and help ensure the relevancy of search results. With these advanced search capabilities, strict taxonomies for content are frequently unnecessary. Alternatively, autotagging of content can go a long way to minimizing the effort of employee-driven tagging.

- **Centralized vs. decentralized:** Most intranets are centralized, supporting the full breadth of enterprises, but many also have a decentralized component to support business units, geographical units, product units or brand units.

- **Push vs. pull:** Most intranets are set up for a pull model, whereby the employee logs on and pulls information via a website or portal. Modern intranets also support a push model, to enable proactive notification.

- **Platform:** An intranet should be considered a platform. It is a key aspect of a digital workplace, and may well be the genesis of a new generation of platform-centric technologies. As such, it should be flexible, agile, pluggable, and have consistent data, process and experience frameworks.

- **Tools:** Tools for delivering an intranet via a variety of delivery touchpoints include digital experience platforms (see "Magic Quadrant for Digital Experience Platforms") and combinations of cloud office tools (such as Microsoft 365 and Google G Suite) and packaged intranet solutions (see "Survey of Packaged Intranet Solutions"). Don't look for an all-encompassing suite — rather, look for important core functionality (perhaps delivered in a suite or an integrated collection of components), with the ability to integrate additional functionality as needed. This will enable an intranet to be flexible enough to consume services from a variety of sources and a variety of vendors.
Employee experience: EX is now a major focus area for enterprises. A modern intranet should drive a large part of the digital aspect of the EX. As such, it should receive considerable focus and investment. It is a key delivery tool for the capabilities of what Gartner calls the “new work nucleus” (see “Create a Culture of Digital Dexterity With the ‘New Work Nucleus’”). It is also a key enabler for enhancing the digital EX of the new set of home workers that has arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that there is no one touchpoint for intranets that fits the needs of every organization. As an application leader responsible for digital workplace applications, you should pick the deployment touchpoints that best suit your culture, business requirements and employee needs. Don’t restrict yourself to a destination site intranet. Instead, explore a variety of delivery touchpoints that can together meet the needs of all your employees.

Recommended by the Author

Traditional Intranets Are Dead — Modern Intranets Are Alive and Well: Part 1
Magic Quadrant for Full Life Cycle API Management
Magic Quadrant for Enterprise Integration Platform as a Service
Future of Applications: Delivering the Composable Enterprise
Magic Quadrant for Digital Experience Platforms
Create a Culture of Digital Dexterity With the ‘New Work Nucleus’

Recommended For You

Move Digital Commerce Architecture Toward a Digital Business Technology Platform
Building a Learning Environment That’s Safe: Learning Environment Blog Series (Part 4 of 4)
Intel's Development Opportunity Tool With Ginny Gray
Quick Wins for Brokering Experiences
How the Platform Economy Could Revolutionize L&D
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