Intranet Architecture

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Intranet design involves a tension between centralized and decentralized control reminiscent of China's Tienanmen Square incident.

The officially sanctioned corporate intranet committee attempt to control the site by creating style guidelines that specify every detail of design from the size, color, and placement of logos to the application of labeling, navigation, and indexing systems.

Meanwhile, renegade departments live out on the bleeding edge, creating their own content areas and transforming staid corporate logos into winking, blinking, interactive applications. Every time the committee removes an offending page, several more sprout up in its place.

The battle lines have been drawn. Will the central committee succeed in their plans for design domination or will they eventually be worn down by the multitudes of free-spirited rebels?

Good arguments can be made on both sides. An intranet does require a "center" that serves as a starting point, helping people to find the information and tools they need, regardless of departmental ownership. However, attempts to specify guidelines for the design and architecture of intranets frequently go too far in limiting the flexibility and creativity of departments.

One approach that may reduce this inherent tension involves the creation of an intranet architecture that accommodates sub-sites, sub-site records, and value-added guides.

Intranet Information Blueprint
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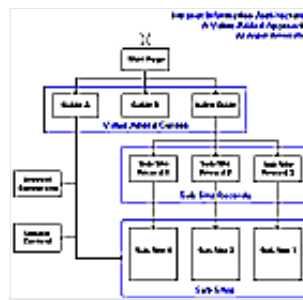
Sub Sites

Jakob Nielsen coined the term **sub-site** to describe "a collection of Web pages within a larger site that have been given a common style and a shared navigation mechanism." In intranets, sub-sites are often content areas created and maintained by individual departments.

The size and scope of these sub-sites is usually defined by the financial and political topography of the organization. For example, the human resources department will draw from their own budget to design and produce the human resources sub-site. Accordingly, human resources will make decisions regarding the design, architecture, and content for this sub-site.

Attempts by the central committee to control the look and feel of these sub-sites are often met with resistance. Rather than attempting to force or cajole these departments into following rigid style guidelines, the value-added strategy accepts and supports the existence of these sub-sites.

Sub-Site Records

At a higher level, a record provides basic information about the sub-site and the department or unit that maintains it. Records include

- contact information for the department,
- a brief description of content in the sub-site,
- keywords indicative of topics and functions,
- definition of the intended audiences for the sub-site, and
- a link to the sub-site

The formal structure of these records allows for flexible browsing and searching of the site. Additionally, sub-site records can serve as placeholders for departments that have yet to create a sub-site.

Value Added Guides

Value-added guides are the heart of this approach to intranet information architecture. These custom-created information packages provide structured access to content within the sub-sites. Value is created through the synthesis and re-organization of content from the sub-sites in new ways that cut across organizational boundaries. Guides can be created with a specific audience, topic, or task in mind. Sample guides may include

- A Guided Tour for New Users
- A Guide to Research in Our Company
- The Guide to Selecting a New Vendor

In addition to creating new ways of accessing information within the sub-sites, guides can provide original narrative content that serve to educate the user about the information resources contained in the sub-sites.

A site index guide can be created to provide fast, direct access to the contents of the intranet for users who know what they're looking for. This index guide may include query interfaces for searching both the directory of sub-site records and the full-texts of the sub-sites themselves. It may also include a table of contents that presents a broad view of the sub-sites and their contents.

A major advantage of this value-added approach is that it reduces the competition for prime real estate on the main page by creating new real estate in the form of guides and by avoiding the trap of pointing directly to departments or units. This allows for a simple, elegant main page that establishes a visual identity for the organization and directs users to the appropriate content areas.

Managing Chaos

For years, we at Argus have been evangelizing the value-added approach to organizing

information in this dynamic, distributed, and heterogeneous information environment known as the Internet. We have little faith that search engines or intelligent agents will solve our growing information retrieval challenges. Rather, we anticipate a tremendous need for people to add value by selecting, describing, organizing, and presenting Internet information resources in audience or subject-specific information packages known as guides.

While the first intranet efforts may have been led and controlled by small groups of early adopters, today's typical intranet landscape involves many people from many departments. As intranets become increasingly dynamic, distributed, and heterogeneous, they're beginning to take on the chaotic look and feel of the greater Internet.

Members of the central intranet committee have a choice. They can try to enforce detailed style guidelines across the entire company in an attempt to combat this chaos. Or, they can accept a certain degree of independence among people and departments and adopt a value-added approach to intranet information architecture. Given that humans have, in recent history, exhibited a willingness to stand before tanks in defense of their independence, I'd advise opting for the value-added approach.