Pros and Cons of an Intranet

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1 Introduction

This document is a work in progress, discussing the pros and cons of intranet technologies within the Asbury community.

Intranet technology has the potential to change things about the Asbury community, and a sober examination of the potential changes is important, so that we are not blind-sided by unexpected developments.

Having said that, the students are more familiar with technology as part of their daily lives than we will ever be. Failing to provide the expected technology will undoubtedly cause them to go elsewhere for that technology. It is my believe that providing it here has an intrinsic community-strenghtening quality, as opposed to students setting up forums on GeoCities.

There are several topics that bear discussing. We'll start with what I consider to be the advantages of, and reasons for, Intranet technologies.

2 Pros

There are so many things that are good about having a functional intranet that it's hard to know where to start. Here are a few that I think are very important.

2.1 Community building

When pay phones were taken off of the halls, phones and cable were put into the rooms, and every student got a cell phone, the impact on community was significant. Combined with network in every dorm room, students are more likely to be talking to family back home, and online friends, than their roommate.

I believe that an interactive intranet site will return some of that focus to on-campus community. Yes, this may seem a little strange to those of us who didn't grow up chatting to people across the room on AIM. But I believe that people will be anxious to participate in on-campus dialog when it is in a format and media that is comfortable to them.

I see the intranet as building up some of the community that other technologies have torn down. And, at its roots, I believe that this is the fundamental purpose of web technologies - to make communication more accessible to people who are innundated by too much data.

2.2 Single information source

There are currently *dozen* of weekly mailings, both via email and via CPO, announcing various events, sales, speakers, causes, and plays. Many of these announcements come multiple times, as they try to keep their particular thing in front of the audience.

All of this leads to information overload and confusion, as well as full trash barrels in the CPO.

Having a single information source will reduce this problem, as people will always know where to look, both to find current information, as well as to post it.

I would really like to see every notice board on campus sporting a sign that says "Consider also posting your message on together.asbury.edu." But this necessitates that we have easy-to-use and easy-to-find places for

every kind of content that appears on those boards. This includes everything from event announcements to "for sale" notices to babysitting requests.

I'm also intrigued by the "where are you going" map in the Grille, and how we can reproduce this functionality on the intrante.

2.3 Instant feedback

We need instant feedback. It's not enough to respond to an article in the Collegian next week. That just doesn't cut it. Thus, the Collegian is doomed to be one-way communication. Only a very small subset of the campus will write letters back, and few of those will make it into print.

By the time sports scores make it into the newspaper, nobody on campus is interested any more. The attention span is way too short.

The Intranet gives us a way to immediately repsond to things on campus, and have a conversation around those things. The Collegian can post stories every day, or even several times a day, and the community can start the conversation immediately.

Also, since it lowers the bar to entry, more people will participate in the conversation, which will make the outcomes more genuine.

3 Challenges and Cons

Now that we've established that, we need to acknowledge that there are numerous potential problems. I say potential, because I don't think that any of these will be serious real problems. But we should be aware that these things will happen, and know what we're going to do about them.

3.1 Anonymous content

An issue that will cause many debates is the issue of anonymous content authoring on the intranet site.

I firmly believe in, and will champion, the notion of anonymous postings on the intranet.

Asbury, and communities like it, tend to be very judgemental towards people that don't hold the traditional and accepted views. This makes it extremely difficult for these people to be able to discuss their ideas in an open and honest way. Either they are ostracized for their views, or they simply pretend to go with the groupthink.

This is detrimental to these "outcasts", but it is also detrimental to the community as a whole. The majority is allowed to go on thinking that all right-thinking people agree with them, and they are never exposed to views that they will encounter when they leave the bubble. The people with these unpopular views are never allowed to discuss these views in a non-hostile, non-threatening environment. And, if they do risk discussing their views, they then find the cafeteria a very hostile place.

Allowing anonymous posting to the intranet will allow discussion of uncomfortable issues in a safe environment. There will be no retribution for holding unpopular views, and the "correct" majority will have an opportunity to be exposed to views that challenge their world view.

However, it would be naive to think that this will not be abused. It will be abused. People will post

unpleasant things without fear of retribution. People will slander and blaspheme, and this will all make it onto the community website like graffiti on a church.

For this reason, many among us will seek to forbid anonymous content of any kind. In fact, it appears that remarks to this effect have already been made. And, I'm sure, efforts will be made to shut down any anonymous posting, both when services like this are launched, as well as when they are abused. And, as I said, they will be abused.

3.2   Off-campus access to content

As soon as the first blog posting goes up on `blogs.asbury.edu`, we will have a student asking how they can let their mother see what they wrote. Count on it.

My position on this is that we should allow read-only off-campus access to this content. It's good advertising, it's good for alumni and parents, and it's great for the students. Also, it's important to remember that if the students don't blog on our server, they will blog on SkyBlogs, LiveJournal, and Blogger, where we can't monitor it, or in any way know what they are saying about us. Providing off-campus access to the blogs website will remove this liability, while creating others.

I realize that most folks will disagree with my position, but I hold out some hope that a few of you will see things my way. It's also important to remember that if their blogs are not visible off campus, many students will simply opt out of the conversation.

The cons to this approach are equally obvious. We give students an opportunity to say negative things about the college, in a forum that the whole world can see, hanging off of the `asbury.edu` domain name. The question here is whether we can stand a little internal criticism without getting all fascist on the perpetrators. Which, in turn, ties back to the question of anonymous content, as do most of these things.

3.3   End-user support and documentation

Every time we add a new technology, no matter how easy it is to use, it will generate helpdesk calls. Fortunately, I think that most of the helpdesk staff will find this stuff pretty easy to use. However, this is more of a question of time, and manpower to answer the calls, than of difficulty of the questions.

3.4   Moderation

If and when objectionable content is posted to the intranet site, someone will have to clean up the mess. Who should that be? I recognized that, at least at first, it will be me, and, possibly, Chris. However, I don't really want to be in the position of deciding what is objectionable.

Since a major advantage of the intranet, which I have discussed at some length above, is the ability to discuss unpopular views, it would be a great shame if we were to allow censorship of the kind that this technology is supposed to solve in the first place.

But, on the other side, it would be a great shame if the people in the majority were able to use their freedom of speech to be just as unkind online as they are "in real life."

I don't know what the climate is here and now, regarding what would be considered objectionable. Perhaps this is not even a problem. Somebody set me straight on this one.

Either way, I don't want to be the thought police.

3.5 Information overload

Some members of our community will find the sheer volume of information on the intranet to be overwhelming. We must arrive at a means of presentation and design that allows people to filter out the noise, and get only the information that they really want.

At the same time, the younger generation seems to need a constant barrage of information, and they'll just love this. It's even possible, and has been known to happen on other campuses, that students will become intranet addicts, spending hours a day reading and commenting on blog postings. It's possible that the counselling office should be warned that this sort of thing is a possibility. (No, I'm not joking in the slightest.)

3.6 Luddite access

I've already been told that if we put a piece of information on the intranet site, it will eliminate certain people from the readership. The most common population cited is the Physical Plant subcommunity.

As the Intranet becomes *The* place for information, there will necessarily be fewer paper flyers produced and circulated to the CPO trash barrels. This, in my opinion, is a very desirable result. However, we must find a way not to exclude the portions of the community who don't have access to computers on a regular basis.

I don't know what the right way to do that is. It seems to me that a kiosk thin-client web browser machine in Phys Plant would be a good solution to this problem, but I don't know how well received that would be. Suggestions are very welcome on this point.

4 Summary and conclusion

Please tell me what you think about this. I realize that writing it in this format makes it a little harder to comment interactively. But it made it easier for me to write.

It would be nice if I could post this content to the intranet site, and we could discuss it there.