

In most organisations authors are vital to the effectiveness of the intranet. Despite this, authors are often given the task of updating content with little or no thought to their skills, suitability or desire.

Intranet teams generally have little influence over who becomes an author. As intranets mature and become better understood as a business tool, it is to be hoped that this will change.

This article focuses on what intranet teams can do to empower authors by providing effective and targeted tools and resources. In the context of this article the term authors broadly includes staff who, write and publish content, publish content written by others, write content only.

Any tools or resources that the intranet team develops for authors need to take into account the:

- turnover of authors, that is the average length of time staff are responsible for authoring
- geographical location of authors, and whether they are all in one main office or spread around the country or the world
- cultural drivers for the organisation and the specific factors that influence management, change and peer groups in the workplace
- capacity of the intranet team to deliver support, tools and resources

In many cases the intranet team has an untapped resource in the number of authors in an organisation. Providing the right tools and resources can help harness this power.



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Tap into the potential of authors for the intranet to be successful

The key factors

There are 3 key factors that are crucial to empowering authors:

- the big picture – authors need a clear understanding of where their content fits within the intranet
- technical skills – authors must be confident they know how to write and / or publish content
- sense of ownership – the motivation to contribute, including clearly defined responsibilities

One solution alone will not achieve this. Often intranet teams run one-off 'Writing for the Web' workshops and expect this to solve any issues with authors. While writing skills are definitely one part of the equation they are not sufficient to empower authors and offer an ongoing solution.

The intranet team needs to offer a combination of skill building and leadership.

Authors will have different roles within organisations. Some may be in administration roles, whilst others undertake more specialist roles with different pressures, experience and attitudes. The most effective way to empower authors is to provide an overriding framework and run an active community of practice.

Community of practice

A community of practice is a proven technique used in many organisations. A community of practice creates awareness and builds knowledge between people with a common interest who do not work in the same team.

Communities of practice can be formed using face-to-face sessions, backed up with

other opportunities to interact, including online solutions and one-to-one sessions.

Leading a community of practice for authors will help build common understanding between the intranet team and authors. This provides an opportunity for the team to engage, lead and inform authors, as well as an opportunity for authors to learn, discuss and raise issues.

As a general guide a community of practice should involve regular sessions that include:

- presentations by authors of their latest work (to create buy in and demonstrate expertise)
- updates from the intranet team (to inform and engage)
- expert sessions on techniques (to learn)
- problem solving (to engage and achieve).

Running a community of practice can be lots of fun

The frequency of sessions depends on the number of authors and their locations. Sessions should be held regularly, perhaps monthly or quarterly depending on the organisation, and made a priority by the intranet team.

One federal government agency in Australia, has an author community that is based around the country. Each year they host an annual community of practice session in a nice location to reward authors, continue to build the community and allow everyone to explore some new techniques and thinking.

Some hints on running a community of practice

- The community does not have to be called a community of practice. Substitute forum, authors' group or whatever is best for the organisation.
- Do not call them meetings, as the term meetings can imply work for them and direction from the intranet team.
- Getting people to attend sessions in the first place can be difficult in some organisations. Use incentives that work in the organisation, whether it is chocolate biscuits or the opportunity to talk to an expert in the field.

- Let the community decide how the community works, with the intranet team providing the framework and expertise.
- Be smart, start small and build. Don't go big and fail.

For more information read the ground breaking book on building this kind of community: *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* by Etienne Wenger.

Effective tools and solutions

In addition to a community of practice the intranet team needs to provide targeted tools and resources to empower authors.

The following methods have proven effective in many organisations.

Induction process

Authors can participate in an induction process to learn the basics of publishing content. For example at a large banking institution each new author completes online training that covers the key areas for publishing, such as using the content management system and writing skills. Authors must complete this training before they are given access to publish content.

Most staff receive some training, why should it be different for the intranet?

Other organisations run scheduled face to face training sessions. Some provide one-on-one training with a member of the intranet team.

Either way the new author is exposed to some form of training before being let loose on the intranet.

Buddies for new authors

A buddy is someone who has experience with authoring and can assist a new author. The key advantage to implementing a buddy system is that new authors can learn more quickly from close and frequent contact with someone who is experienced, that they can working alone.

It's most effective to pair a buddy system with an induction program if possible, to

build quickly on the information given in training, but this is not always practical.

When implementing buddy systems:

- ensure the buddy works close by to the new author, and preferably is in the same business unit
- identify suitable buddies and arrange the initial introduction
- provide useful ground rules on what the new authors and buddies should expect from each other
- recognise the contribution of experienced authors, who often enjoy sharing their knowledge and experience with others
- remember a buddy system will not work for all personalities, and it pays to be mindful of the individuals learning style
- impose a time limit on the buddy system, as often 3 months is sufficient.

Buddy systems are proven to be effective from juniors to CEOs

Business unit leaders

Another successful model is to have a key person within each major business area with responsibility for the intranet, this can include:

- overall content strategy
- supporting authors
- liaising with senior management in their business area

In very large organisations this can be a full time role, however in most cases the role falls to someone passionate about the intranet. They are often influential people within their business area. Supporting these leaders will create a direct channel into the business area and actually expands the overall resources of the intranet team.

Strong relationships with these leaders are crucial. Consider them a de facto resource of the intranet team and involve them as appropriate. Each leader will have a different motivation and getting to know them and understanding their motivations will be very helpful. For example some may be very loyal to their business area, others may be keen to learn new skills.

Simplifying the publishing process

Some authors will publish content every day and be very familiar with the content management interface. Others may only publish once a month. However, very few content management systems are intuitive and they are generally cumbersome to use. Content management systems can involve many steps to even find the content before it can be updated.

Any effort expended on simplifying the publishing process will generate big rewards for both authors and the intranet team. The intranet team needs to focus on ease of use for authors.

Replacing or modifying the existing content management system may not be feasible. One worthwhile solution is to provide clear and concise step-by-step instructions on how to publish content.

Writing good training material is a skill in itself. There may be a team within the organisation that can add a professional touch to authoring instructions.

Keep in mind that a one-page cheat sheet, or a 2-3 minute video may be more effective than a 200-page manual.

Aim to keep the process tasks as simple as possible

All intranet teams need to consider this as one of the key tools in empowering authors.

Writing skills

Authors come from all walks of life, some may have specific business skills, while others will have very limited skills. Many good writers are poor at structuring information for online use. It is essential that the intent of each page is communicated within seconds to the person reading it.

Writing for the Web courses abound many intranet teams run these for authors. These are very effective when authors attend and participate. Online training courses can be easier for authors to fit around their work schedules. Course can be found on the web, at sites such as Rachel McAlpines connected.com.

Another effective solution is to have clear examples to share with authors. One that might show a standard page of content, and

another might be an excellent example following the best principals for online content. Examples should include clear models for headlines, summaries, link text, tables and other elements.

Regular updates

Timely and relevant information is an excellent way to empower authors.

Keeping all authors updated with best practice and what is going on with the intranet is essential. One factor to consider when delivering updates is the turnover. Staff who will be authors for 6 months have simpler needs than long-term authors. Ensure that each update includes information that is relevant for both new and established authors.

Typical methods are a face-to-face communication, a newsletter or an internal blog. Regular updates are the key and teams should ensure communication is at least monthly.

Include a mix of topics such as:

- handy hints for using the CMS
- good examples of newly published content
- updates on new initiatives like an improved search engine
- profiles of authors
- links to pages of interest at websites.

Relevant examples are more powerful than techniques

It is also essential to test the effectiveness of these updates. Get feedback from authors regularly.

Web techniques toolkit

It is unrealistic to expect authors to have an understanding of technical matters such as, accessibility, usability and information architecture. Many intranet teams do not even have all these skills and it can take many years to build up this type of expertise. Providing a toolkit with standard templates, good examples of layout and page design and other techniques can be very useful for authors.

However teams should remember that they need to maintain their position as the ex-

perts in design/IA, to invite inviting differences of opinion.

The toolkit alone will not solve all these problems. However, building a toolkit over time and sharing these solutions with authors via an online site or at community of practice sessions can build common understanding.

Sitting at your desk and pulling your hair out over the unbelievable stupid menu labels that the XYZ team have created is not productive. Lead by examples.

Adhoc support

There is a balance between providing support to authors and spending all of the intranet team's time answering questions. We often hear intranet team's lamenting that the same person can ring up with the same question each month as they only publish that piece of content once a month.

Aim to decrease support and increase effectiveness of authors

Whatever is developed to support authors needs to be based on issues that occur. We recommend keeping a log of what questions are answered and evaluating how they can best be addressed by other tools and resources.

At one regional council authors must publish content at least once a month to continue to have access to the content management system. This was put in place to reduce the number of phone calls for people who do not publish often enough and can not remember what to do.

Effective governance models

Ensuring governance models for home page(s), landing pages and content exist and are understood can remove major points of pain for both the intranet team and authors.

Governance models clearly define roles and accountability and assist with managing expectations. For example a home page governance policy may cover:

- primary purpose of the homepage
- secondary purpose of the homepage

- various roles and responsibilities of homepage stakeholders and manager
- resolution of disputes

For more information see the earlier article *The intranet homepage, protect it with a policy*.

The most effective policies are short and simple. Annotated screenshots are ideal. The policy can explain the reasons behind its elements, or simply state them -- this is a decision best made before starting to write.

When creating new policies, the only sure way to generate author support is to write them in conjunction with authors. It is not necessary to involve all authors in an organisation, but a good subset will ensure policies work. Call for volunteers or select authors who are interested in processes.

Recognition of authoring work

Authors need to be recognised for their contributions. If their manager does not value the work, the intranet will be put to the bottom of the pile.

Most organisations have job descriptions and some kind of performance management system. Make life easier for your authors by providing standard wordings that can be used in these documents.

For example a performance indicator for an author might say "All content published is accurate, timely and follows intranet standards."

Many intranet teams resist formalising authors' roles because it seems too difficult. This is not true, and most authors and managers are keen to be formalise their contribution.

Recognition of authors is essential

Online resource centre

Depending on the number of tools and resources that exist for authors, an online resource centre can be useful. The resource centre could include:

- instructions for using the CMS
- online content style guide
- resources on writing good content
- examples of excellent content

- progress updates on the intranet
- a discussion forum
- information about web elements such as usability and information architecture,
- a section for authors to share their own tips and tricks
- lists of authors in each business area

Ideally the resource centre should be part of the intranet and freely accessible by all. However in some instances a separate solution may be needed. Investigate online community solutions such as Ning, Social Go or Wack Wall.

Using personas

Personas are archetypal users of an intranet or website who represent the needs of larger groups of users, in terms of goals and personal characteristics. They act as 'stand-ins' for real users and help guide decisions about functionality and design.

Updating content is often a thankless task

The creation of personas can also be very effective method to educate authors about how staff work and interact with other teams in an organisation. Often authors have desk based administration roles and don't know that a linesmen is out in the field all day or a mechanic only has access to the intranet in the lunch room.

For more information see the earlier article *An introduction to personas and how to create them*.

Reward and recognition

Most organisations have reward and recognition programmes. Take advantage of these and reward authors' contributions.

Also consider running a specific intranet reward and recognition program for authors, for example:

- give movie tickets for the best content each month
- send a small chocolate with a hand written note providing specific feedback on what the author has done well
- print a certificate with the relevant page and a gold star (where culturally appropriate)

- provide morning teas for selected authors to mix and mingle

Acknowledgement from others provides motivation for authors, and the cost of the reward program may be very low.

It's important to be consistent with reward schemes, though. Do not give recognition once and then let it drop, as this will alienate those authors who are motivated, only to find rewards are no longer given.

Senior managers can lend a bit of their influence

Senior management power

Arranging for senior management to address authors can be an incredibly powerful motivator and such a talk can be ideal for a community of practice session.

For example, at a large financial institution, the number three executive in the organisation addressed all authors at a community of practice session. The team was looking for someone senior to speak about the links between the organisational strategy and the intranet. The senior manager's executive assistant was passionate about the intranet and volunteered him.

This manager made a magnificent speech about the intranet, how it related to organisational goals and the need to work together. The 80 authors in the room were amazed and pleased that someone so senior cared about what they did. The manager also gave some structured feedback on things that he had difficulty finding. Having someone so senior speak so highly about the importance of the intranet was extremely powerful.

Many authors still remember his passionate words about the intranet, empowering staff and achieving personal goals.

Generally senior managers are eloquent speakers and they can have that little bit of

'star quality' about them. It's a good idea to use a little bit for the intranet.

Summary

The intranet team will never have all the resources they need, and success lies in empowering others within the organisation.

Intranet teams need to put away the big stick and stop attempting to direct authors. Instead devote time and energy to empowering authors. First start with an effective community of practice, suited to the environment and culture.

Then alongside the community of practice the intranet team needs to develop a mixture of targeted tools and resources to support authors.

Continue to evolve by developing more resources

The tools and resources developed need to be based on authors' needs. Identify the 'pain points' for authors in the organisation. Just remember don't put all your eggs in the one basket and focus on skills alone, have a mix of skill building and engagement to lead to long term empowerment.

Empowering authors is a never ending task, and this is not a project the team can run, and then forget about. Starting with simple guidelines and cheat sheets, and moving onto motivation and community building will make a good start. Senior management involvement and organisational recognition will make a huge difference.

Empowered authors will improve and refine the intranet's content, and join the team in a commitment to excellence, relevance and usefulness. What's more, the intranet team will generate friends and supporters across the organisation, which can only be good for the intranet.



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