

Shiv Singh | December 2005  
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## ***Ecosystem concerns take a back seat to business processes and user needs in seven specific trends.***

In an intranet trends article I wrote last year, I went to great pains to point out how intranets have matured over the years. I discussed how an intranet ecosystem of analysts, vendors, journalists, conference organizers, designers, technologists and gurus has developed around the business customers and their needs. It is paradoxical how much of a difference a year can make. Today, the trends tell a different story.

The intranet ecosystem still does matter, don't get me wrong. However, the focus has moved away from the analyst firms, the consulting companies and the gurus and back to the business customers. In many respects, 2006 looks like a year of business self empowerment. As you read the seven trends below, you'll notice this theme running through many of them. The ecosystem matters but it doesn't drive or influence strategic decision making in the workplace the way it has in the last few years.

The trends are based on experiences with large companies across the country and observations of how the intranet ecosystem is evolving to support corporate America. Some of the trends shouldn't come as a surprise to you, especially if you are an intranet manager in a forward-looking, vibrant company. Other trends, though, will certainly be surprising.

### **1. The Intranet grows up and makes new friends**

As intranets integrate into the organizations that they serve, they are losing their independent identities. Why? Because IT departments are pushing to consolidate the interfaces, applications and data sources that are accessed every day. The argument goes that fewer interfaces will mean less training, a smaller number of usability issues, greater application stability and increased employee efficiency and satisfaction.

This means that moving forward, intranets will broaden beyond communication, information sharing and employee self-service. They will include more process specific business applications and personal information management tools like calendaring. As these intranets morph into Swiss army knife-like systems that solve more employee problems, the lines between enterprise applications, department specific tools and employee intranets will blur considerably. We're already seeing this happen. Expect the pace of this consolidation to quicken, especially as companies standardize their portal infrastructures.

For example, corporate e-mail, telephony, mobile warrior applications, virtual team rooms, executive dashboards and enterprise intranets are distinct tools with independent owners, budgets and business cases behind them today. However, in the not too distant future, you'll have a single, integrated voice and data interface that will combine these tools in a dynamic, natural and adaptive manner. IDC calls this coming consolidation the Enterprise Workplace while

Forrester refers to it as the information workplace. Irrespective of what you may call it, expect the trend to hit you in the next two to three years.

## 2. Intranet ROI will be pushed to the back burner

When was the last time your management team asked you to create an ROI model for corporate e-mail? It was probably quite some time ago. In contrast to e-mail, intranet managers have often been asked to justify investments in their company intranet. Well, there's good news. In the future, senior executives will be less concerned about the tangible ROI of an intranet. It will be an assumed cost of doing business, just as corporate e-mail has become.

Intranet maturity and its successes are driving this trend. Executives have seen how intranets can empower the workforce and increase employee productivity. They've surveyed their employees and understand how the intranets are being used and by whom. They've also discovered that intranets have become indispensable tools to further information sharing, knowledge management and news dissemination.

Furthermore, these executives have recognized that to compete effectively against low cost firms in China and India, they need a more knowledgeable, efficient and trained workforce. Intranets, especially those that incorporate third generation KM tools in the form of blogs and wikis, are a key part of this competitive strategy. When viewed through the lens of a competitive game plan, the ROI justification becomes obvious.

## 3. Expect Intranets to become even more pervasive

We've seen intranets gain momentum in corporate America. Most companies have sizeable intranets today. Many complement these intranets with department specific ones that focus on specific business processes or functional needs. A good example of this is a marketing resource management intranet for the marketing department.

As a testimony to the success of intranets in the workplace, expect to see even more intranets in the future. At one end of the spectrum, intranets for company boards are surfacing. These intranets are designed to share information, collaborate, brainstorm and disseminate news to very small user populations—the board of directors only.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, you have examples of farmers in India accessing a food company's intranet to get commodity prices, weather information, farm management knowledge and also to sell their crops. Two million farmers use the intranet and every day more log on to use it. The food company's competitors are being forced to build similar tools.

Expect to see many more dynamic, innovative intranets in the near future, whether they're servicing the board members of a Fortune 500 company or farmers in a developing country. Also, expect to be challenged to deliver more dynamic and innovative intranet solutions for your employees and business partners.

## 4. The user experience matters at last

Last year I focused on how employees who were being forced to spend so much time on their intranets were demanding more aesthetic experiences. That has certainly been the case through

the year; however, we're seeing another trend surface as well. Employees are demanding simpler, more intuitive and more "Web" like intranet experiences.

We call this the "Google Effect." Time and again, employees repeatedly ask that their intranet user experience be as simple, efficient and satisfying as their Google experience. Employees don't care that integrating information from legacy databases and enterprise systems into a single interface can be challenging and expensive. In their minds, if Google can provide a quality user experience then so should their company intranet.

IDC explains this trend as a new "user experience platform" that is emerging to improve the lives of information workers integrating existing intranets and transactional applications. And as an intranet manager, this is good. A few years ago, employees barely cared about their company intranets. Today, they're using their intranets so much that they expect them to have the simplicity and usability of Google or Yahoo! Furthermore, in many large companies, the intranet serves as the official face of the company. Companies with unusable and complex intranets are doing a huge disservice to their employees.

## 5. The Ajax revolution hits the intranet

There has been a lot of buzz about Ajax in recent months. Ajax is a loose knit of programming technologies that speeds up the Web experience and brings greater interactivity to websites. Google Maps, which allows you to scroll around city maps as if it were a local application on your desktop, is an excellent example of an Ajax implementation.

Now imagine a physical map of your office on your intranet. But also imagine that you could scroll around it, click on a graphic of a desk and get a person's name, designation and contact information right away. And imagine if by clicking on his or her name, you got a listing of all the recent e-mails sent to you by that person. Or imagine an application on your intranet that has built-in calculators that let you quickly calculate your ideal monthly 401k contributions and depict the results in a graph without requiring several pages to load. And imagine if the graph could be manipulated in real time. That's the power of Ajax.

As you can tell, the possibilities are endless with Ajax and other similar technologies and tools like Macromedia flex. Expect to see nifty, task oriented, highly interactive Ajax and flex based applications on your intranet fueling the next wave of user adoption.

## 6. Blogs come and go but RSS will remain

Arguably blogs are the most significant Web phenomena of 2005. Everybody from presidential nominees to the local postman is blogging these days. Companies like Sun Microsystems, Google and Maytag have been caught in the hype and have enthusiastically set up both customer facing blogs and internal facing ones too. But will the employee blogs last? Will there be even more blogs in the next year?

Some employee blogs will last but unfortunately most won't. Many companies that enthusiastically set up employee blogs ignored the two most important ingredients for blogging success. The first is that the blogger needs to have something important and unique to say. According to a recent survey by America Online, the most popular blogs are the most personal and opinionated ones too. Most organizations have cultures that subconsciously encourage information hoarding and group think. These organizations will find that their employees are

reluctant to share their knowledge and personal insights unless they see tangible benefits in doing so. As a result most employee blogs will be superficial and boring unless, of course, they are anonymous.

The other ingredient that drives blogging success is independence. The most successful bloggers are also those who don't feel censored by anyone else around them. Company cultures often force employees to be extremely self aware and reluctant to say or do anything that may put them at odds with the official order. This too will limit the success of blogs in the enterprise workplace. The people who have something really important to say will be the ones most reluctant to say it.

The related technology to continue to keep an eye on is Real Simple Syndication (RSS). Companies that embrace RSS as a content format and use it to publish information to employees will have far greater success than with blogging alone. Enabling employees to subscribe to subject and department specific RSS feeds and then view them via readers will enable more targeted, community focused conversations in the workplace. And the ease with which postings can be viewed in an RSS reader will encourage more employees to participate. For RSS to be adopted however, companies will have to let their employees subscribe to both internal and external RSS feeds. If this happens, then I believe that in some companies blogging combined with wide adoption of RSS readers will become even more relevant than the company intranet.

## 7. Wikis gain prominence and get integrated

Another often talked about Web publishing phenomena is wikis, which enable users to easily edit or update an existing webpage. User created wikis such as the Wiki Encyclopedia (Wikipedia) have been getting a lot of attention. The question is will we see wikis invade the corporate workplace in 2006 as we have seen this year with blogs?

Several smaller companies have used wiki platforms to develop their corporate intranets. The technology is free and it empowers the employees to engage in information sharing more actively. However, not all companies have wanted to empower their employees with the ability to edit the corporate intranet. To many companies, the intranet represents the corporate voice and therefore needs to be controlled tightly.

In a similar fashion to blogs, wikis do have a role in the workplace but only if they're used for the right purpose and if they have the right culture to flourish in. Many smaller, less structured companies have embraced wikis as their intranet technology platform. For these organizations with flatter, less formal hierarchies, the self correcting mechanisms of a wiki create the right balance of empowering the employees to share and preventing things from spinning out of control. After all, each time a contributor edits or adds to a page, his or her name appears in the revisions list.

Larger organizations are taking a more cautious approach to wikis. In these organizations, wikis are being used to support small project teams that need to do extensive collaboration whether it is around a product or a research article. Expect to see a lot more mini-wikis in the workplace in the near future.

## Conclusion

As you look at these seven intranet trends for 2006, from wikis and blogs to the Ajax and User Experience trends, you'll notice that they are focused more sharply on meeting employee needs, responding to employee demands and finding innovative solutions to meet the evolving information sharing, knowledge management and collaboration needs of organizations. The ecosystem certainly matters a little less today.

Remember an intranet is only as good as how it serves its employees and its company. Each organization is unique in its need. So don't worry too much about what the ecosystem says you should be doing and instead focus on understanding your users better and strategizing about how your intranet can more innovatively meet the needs of your business.

## About the Author



**Shiv Singh** is a Director of Enterprise Solutions in the Boston office of Avenue A | Razorfish. In the past eight years, Avenue A | Razorfish has built intranets for clients including Avaya, Genentech, Thomson, Verizon, and Western Union. Shiv's experience spans user research, persona creation, conceptual design, Internet/intranet site architecture, information design, and usability testing. He has been responsible for the overall experience design of strategic online solutions for clients in various industries, including retail/CPG, IT and communications, healthcare and life sciences, and non-profit.

*Please share your insights or thoughts to Shiv Singh at [shiv.singh@aa-rf.com](mailto:shiv.singh@aa-rf.com).*

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Avenue A | Razorfish  
821 2nd Avenue, Suite 1800  
Seattle, WA 98104  
Phone: 206.816.8800  
Fax: 206.816.8808

For more information please visit: [www.avenuea-razorfish.com](http://www.avenuea-razorfish.com).