

Social media - dynamic employee communication tool

 By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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TORONTO, CANADA: There's no doubt in anyone's mind that every company must have a website to communicate with its external audiences. Why, then, is there still uncertainty about intranets for internal audiences? This was the question tackled by William Amurgis, manager of internal communication at American Electric Power (AEP), one of the largest US electric utilities, when he spoke last week at the 2010 IABC World Conference in Toronto.

American Electric Power's corporate intranet was recognised back in 2007 as one of the world's top 10 sites in its class, based on the Nielsen Norman Group. Its design was even featured in the *Wall Street Journal*. Amurgis says the implementation of the intranet provided the company's 22 000 employees with the opportunity to interact with one another and to engage leaders through a multidimensional communication approach.

AEP services over 5.2 million customers and operates across a geographically widespread area. While the implementation of the company's intranet has not been without its challenges, Amurgis says the benefits can be summed up into four broad purposes: to enhance employee productivity; reinforce corporate messages; provide a place for all to meet; and have a unique personality.

With the implementation of an intranet, the first thing that needs to be done is to align the site with company values and culture (not climate), and drive those messages across the website through its inherent design, which is in turn based on reputation priorities.

Start at the beginning

Amurgis says the element of design is critical, and argues that intranets should never be bought as a stock standard, but should be built to push the boundaries and align all elements to the values of the organisation - starting with respect.

To reach this stage, AEP undertook a two-pronged research approach - first benchmarking other world-class intranet sites, and secondly conducting intimate audience research within the organisation. "How many companies can say the intranet truly belongs to the staff?" he asks.

By structuring the website correctly, something done in consultation with experts in the field, the aims were to provide an intranet where people could praise and encourage each other; provide advice and assistance; share humorous stories; and hold host debates. The idea was to create a platform where employees could openly both horizontally and vertically, and where postings were balanced between social information and business intelligence that employees need to know to improve productivity.

Engage - don't just communicate

An interactive element was designed to ensure staff could create profiles, where other staff members could engage and 'add them as colleagues'. The principle is that of social networking, but done in a secure, internal, environment. Many organisations are still wary of using social media - so AEP adopted an internal approach and used it anyway.

The business results started manifesting themselves almost immediately! Colleagues began talking to one another across the country and raising concerns they had, along with professional suggestions to take corrective action; they also raised their voices when they were unsure of a business change, such as with HCM activity.

Amurgis notes that many communicators shy away from the intranets because of the ages-old argument that employee cannot be trusted and would waste time talking about issues on the site. "All of these can be measured and have proven untrue," he said.

The challenge, however, is to explain the logical steps and growth of the intranet structures to disbelievers. The best way to do that is through strategic insight, proving of a business case, and showing transparent units of measure from the beginning.

A significant challenge, however, is pushback - by those who believe it to be a nice-to-have. These pockets of resistance can be easily addressed with the right approach and attitude: Be very clear about your activities and remain focused at all times; be sure to stay clear of distractions; input that is not helpful in achieving your goals; know your motivation and use it - do not allow pushback to derail your core objectives; and 'just start' - get the job done and get going - make a decision and stick to it.

It is impossible to always consider everyone's views and there comes a time that the work must start - do it, and let others come on board later.

The way forward

The AEP website is now three-years-old and long overdue on its overhaul... not a problem for Amurgis, which announced the website is being revamped currently and will be relaunched on 1 October 2010.

The key to the redesign - technological change. The majority of intranets today require staff to have computer access. When you have 22 000 staff across America, this is not always going to happen. With this in mind, Amurgis' vision is to have a mobile intranet, which is fully accessible on a range of phones. The pilot has been done and coding is underway.

Further, the redesign is aimed at delivering more information, quicker, and with alert systems built in. Design will be simplistic, as "there's nothing worse than a website that is so busy you cannot find what you are looking for," and will ensure access is easier.

The checklist

From the process AEP followed, one can start their own intranet process by asking some of these key questions:

- Do you have an intranet? If not, why? Have you got the in-house expertise to do it?
- If so, when was it last redesigned to take into account latest trends and technologies? If not, why?
- Do you have a documented strategy to outline the nature of content to be posted on the site? If so, does it include all four areas of engagement or just corporate news?
- Does your intranet cater for different geographic audiences by allowing them to access regional, as well as corporate, information? Does it provide access to the people in a structured two-way communication environment?
- Do you measure the activity on your intranet? If so, do you measure engagement or just page impressions?
- Do you have buy-in and collaboration from all departments involved in the intranet development process? Have you

measured this?

- Have you got documented a social media strategy in place and a roadmap of the process to follow for handling postings?

Now the challenge is to proceed with the plans to build, maintain and measure your achievements with an innovative and engaging tool.

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ABOUT DANIEL MUNSLOW

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