BENEFITS, FAILURES & IMPLEMENTATION OF INTRANETS:

AN INTRANET ACTION PLAN FOR GOEASY LTD.

By:

Irena Dudek

Honours BAA in Media and Communication Studies, University of Guelph Humber, 2015

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Supervisor: Dr. Robert Clapperton

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Abstract

Employee intranets have long served as tools to transfer information and strategic initiatives to corporate employees. However, over the last two decades, intranets have evolved into tools for not only top-to-bottom communication, but empower employees to communicate upward, collaborate, ask questions and participate in the virtual culture of the organization. With a rising popularity and dependency on instant messaging, tech-savvy interactions and prompt access to information, workers expect their employers to inform while providing a vibrant, interactive place to work. Although there's no shortage of available technology to create the ideal portal, developing, implementing, adapting and maintaining an intranet is not an easy task. This applied research project is designed to build a case study for goeasy Ltd., a mid-sized, non-prime lending company, who is scheduled to implement an intranet in Q4, 2021. This MRP draws upon existing scholarly sources and personal observation within the organization to serve as a research foundation for an official procurement plan for the organization's intranet project.

Key words

Acknowledgement

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Introduction

The existence of corporate employee intranets dates back to the mid-1990s and has "evolved from internal method of document organization and dissemination and developed into a more sophisticated and complex organizational tool" (Martini et al., 2009, p. 295). What began as static pages, where employees could access and print information has, since early 2000s, grown into interactive, virtual workplaces we see today (Ardestani et al., 2003, p. 9). Today, employee portals serve as an organizational tool that not only provides employees with access to information, but enables collaboration, knowledge sharing, social interaction, recognition and "in-time relevant information that they need to perform their tasks and to make efficient business decisions" (Mendes et al., 2017, p. 605). In addition, an effective employee portal can help cultivate a positive and inclusive company culture, which can improve employee morale, relationship-building and overall job satisfaction. Employee portal technology has advanced, as has employee expectations of how information is presented and how an organization cultivates culture and diversity. Employers that only focus on the bottom line may miss out on acquiring top talent that values non-tangible employer qualities including culture, diversity and social responsibility (Bannon et al., 2011, p. 62).

Successful implementation of a corporate intranet, however, involves more than just building a website for employees. Leaders must develop an innovative vision for the platform, while focusing on employee change management and structured governance for adaptability and relevance for the years to come (Martini et al., 2009, p. 295). The following major research paper, in an applied research project format, is designed to build a case study for goeasy Ltd., a mid-sized, non-prime lending company, scheduled to implement an intranet in Q4, 2021.

Today, goeasy employees receive their mass communication in three ways: emails, virtual meetings/conference calls and in-person events. Most corporate information is disseminated through email on Mondays and Fridays, where the communication team sends, on average, 25-30 mass messages a week. Although the format of the messages varies (text, video, creative, surveys, training), using email as the primary communication tool poses challenges including: no two-way interaction, lack of readership tracking, employees missing the messages or deleting them and new hires not having access to any previously communicated content. Virtual meetings or conference calls are conducted by business leaders on a frequent basis, where employees can get access to the latest sales goals, best practices and next steps. However, if an employee misses a call or is multitasking, they cannot retrieve the missed information at a later time. Same logic applies to in-person events. It's worth noting that company leaders emphasise the importance of in-person connections and funnel the "work hard, play hard" atmosphere through perks including a newly renovated office equipped with a bar and games room, an annual 500-person National Conference, in-house sales events and incentive trips to exotic destinations. While the company organizes frequent engaging events, with over 2,200 employees dispersed across all provinces, it is impossible to gather and connect all in person. The challenge of large in-person groups became even more significant as the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world. At the start of 2020, the pandemic displaced all office and several retail employees into the safety of their homes as goeasy's vibrant culture faced the ultimate test. Employees also noticed a decrease in efficiency, with increased virtual meetings and wasted time locating the right person to answer basic questions. While the need for an intranet or employee platform has been discussed in previous years, the project was continuously deprioritized due to competing initiatives. With no engaging events and two-way interactions that employees became accustomed to pre-pandemic,

it quickly became evident that employees needed a place to get their information, while connecting to their peers, executives and the company strategy, now more than ever.

The applied research is conducted by me, Irena Dudek, Ryerson's Master of Professional Communication student and an employee at goeasy Ltd. My relations with goeasy began in 2015 where I began my career as an internal communications specialist assisting the organization with weekly newsletter, communications, town halls and events. In 2015, the communication role was not advanced, and the organization did not have strict communicating protocols in place. Over the years, I have watched goeasy grow their employee base and financial portfolio. I have also witnessed several attempts of launching an intranet and as a communicator, I always believed it was an important asset for employees to receive their information and connect with each other, company executives and the corporate strategies. In parallel, it's important for communicators and executives to get insight into what is being read and who is reading it. When the pandemic hit, I began my studies at Ryerson University in Toronto, while still participating in the company's communication efforts. After the approval of the employee portal project was finalized, I was assigned the "subject matter expert" role in the project, as soon as I return to my full-time duties in the Fall 2021. Completing a major research project so close to the start of the project gave me the perfect opportunity to create an applied research paper using existing literature, integrated throughout the paper, and personal observation as the basis of the recommendation. The goal is for this MRP to serve as a research foundation for an official procurement plan for the organization's intranet project.

About goeasy Ltd.

goeasy is a Canadian financial company operating under three brands: easyhome, easyfinancial and LendCare. easyfinancial focuses on non-prime lending to credit-constrained Canadians, easyhome offers lease-to-own household goods at affordable rates, while LendCare offers point-of-sale financing to customers through various retail partners.

goeasy has over 2,200 employees and 300 retail locations across Canada, with a head office and call centre of over 500 employees located in Mississauga, Ontario. Cultivating a very vibrant culture, the Company has been named Canada's Most Admired Corporate Cultures by Waterstone in 2018 and provides employees with an array of benefits and perks including in-office bar, maternity top-up, fitness discounts, bonuses, corporate trips and more. goeasy is a well-established mid-size company, but still operates like a start-up with fast pace, ambitious goals and quick implementations. With high growth potential on the horizon, the organization lacks a consistent and effective employee communication strategy. Today, employees receive all of their information through email, town halls, team meetings and conferences. When asked during focus groups, employees agree that the company communications are clear, concise and easy to understand, however the interviewed employees agreed that the method of their distribution could be improved.

Although detailed intranet objectives are explored later in the paper, through personal observation of employee behaviours and focus groups, I've identified three pain points in goeasy's employee communication strategy:

- *Employee relations:* goeasy places high value on relationship-building for both employees and their customers. The Company believes in building strong customer relationships with a non-judgement mentality and welcoming atmosphere. The same values apply internally, with zero tolerance for discrimination or prejudice. Many employees call their goeasy team their "family" and from experience, I can admit that the comradery is truly felt at the in-person events and parties. However, after the lavish events are over and everyone returns to their home bases, employees don't have a place to continue the conversation and collaborate. As mentioned before, employee relations took a hit as COVID-19 lockdowns further displaced existing employees and left mid-pandemic new hires with no spontaneous interactions and socialization with their peers.

- *Work efficiency:* Without a proper platform to locate work tools or staff assistance (ie. HR forms or updated operation processes), employees find themselves looking for answers through email or SharePoint document library, often giving up on the search. In addition, information sent through email often gets missed or deleted. Using email as the main communication platform also hurts new hires who have no access to any data sent prior to their arrival.

- *Employee morale:* Connecting to other employees is important, however just as important is connecting with the leaders of the organization and feeling heard. With the inability for two-way communication through email, goeasy employees often find themselves with more questions than answers. Although the company's leadership team prioritizes store visits and live Q&A sessions, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a strain on employee engagement and morale. An employee portal would allow the growing group of

employees to feel heard virtually, while giving the leadership team an opportunity to

revisit their strategic goals based on the needs and feedback directly from employees.

Methodology

This applied research project is designed to build a case study for goeasy Ltd., a mid-sized, non-prime lending company, who is scheduled to implement an intranet in Q4, 2021. This MRP draws upon existing scholarly sources and personal observation within the organization to serve as a research foundation for an official procurement plan for the organization's intranet project. The applicable information was gathered using various methods:

- *Scholarly sources:* Using targeted keywords including "intranet", "employee portal", "employee communications", "social intranet" "intranet 2.0" and "communications portal", I've narrowed down the relevant content to 25 scholarly sources published between late 1990s until mid 2000s. The list of keywords expanded from the commonly known "intranet" to the list above to accommodate the evolution of the name over the platform's 25+ years of existence. The sources were found through the Ryerson University library, Google Scholar and reference lists of the most relevant articles. Lastly, the gathered sources were objectively compiled and categorized to connect relative literature with personal observations. The categories included: history, evolution, benefits, failures, success and implementation. Through the writing process, three major themes emerged: benefits, implementation and failures. These themes make up the core of this paper.

- *Personal observation:* Integrated within the literature are personal observations as a goeasy employee. My association with the organization for over six years allowed me to have first-hand understanding of employee needs and behaviours through conversations, experience and focus group observation. Assigned as the lead of the intranet

implementation project, the paper is a combination of personal insights and

recommendations based on scholarly research and field experience.

Intranet; a brief history

To create a comprehensive recommendation, we must first understand and define an *intranet*.

Research shows that the name itself has many synonyms with its origin around 1996, shortly

after the rising use of World Wide Web (internet) by the public in 1995 (p. 81). During this time,

intranets served as "merely an information channel of use in managing unidirectional

communication towards employees or providing them with some services" (Martini et al., 2009,

p. 295). The pages were not pretty, nor particularly functional, but they allowed employees to

access server-based contact lists and "electronically replicated company brochures and catalogs"

(Ardestani et al., 2003, p. 10). Around 2004, intranets began to evolve and focus not only on

company needs, but ways to create digital workspaces where employees felt supported in their

day-to-day tasks, were able to collaborate and access important information (Martini et al., 2009,

p. 296). With static pages (intranet 1.0) left in the dust in the early 2000s, the way intranets were

perceived and named began to change (Ardestani et al., 2003). This includes a popular

replacement of the intranet by *employee portal*, defined as "a single point of access to all

services that an organization provides to its employees" (Feijoo et al., 2015, p. 506). As Mendes

et al. (2017) state, "intranets evolved to becoming portals, which are now much more complex

solutions that provide other organizational objectives" (p. 605).

In 2000s, as intranets took on more social media features and wholistic organizational functions,

definitions including "Social Intranet" (Ward, 2012, p. 3) and "Virtual Workspace" (Martini et

al., 2009, p. 296) took the stage. Urbach et al. (2009) summarize the evolution as:

The ways employees handle information, communicate as well as execute business processes have significantly changed with the emergence of web-based technologies and the subsequent emergence of employee portals. Over the past decade, company intranets transformed from collections of static web pages into highly integrated and interactive information systems (IS). Whereas the first-generation intranets only provided a single interface to information, today's employee portals enable the integrated support of information, communication, application and business processes (pg. 1).

To summarize, it is important to note that intranet features and functions evolved based on technology advances and functions within organization. For example, the age of social media brought access to instant connection to anyone in the world, while 24/7 news channels accustomed employees to gain access to information within minutes. In parallel with everyday life, employees expect companies to offer the same intuitive features in their workplaces (Martini et al., 2009). Employee portals are not only intended for dissemination of information, but "an integrated working space where employees can find what they need to work, to learn, to know and to interact with others (the second era)" (Martini et al., 2009, p. 296). Employee portal evolution is critical to not only keep up with business and economic changes, but also employee needs and the ever-changing environment.

Benefits of an Intranet

While investing in an employee communications portal is deemed essential, many companies still don't see the value-add of connecting their culture, employees and workstreams into one (Mendes et al., 2017). Employee portals are what scholars refer to as an "intangible asset" (Mendes et al., 2017, p. 1), which means a project that promises employee engagement, active culture, information transfer and productivity can lack a visible return on investment (ROI). The authors further state "although Employee Portal benefits are widely studied, it is common sense to conclude that it is difficult to identify the return on investment from Information and

Communication Technology (ICT) projects, especially as most of their benefits are intangible"
(Mendes et al., 2017, p. 2).

At goeasy, competing initiatives with visible ROIs are the major reason why the leadership team
has not yet prioritized an employee portal. The intranet project has been on the list for nearly five
years, however with the organization's competitive spirit and ambitious growth plans, the project
continued to be cut from the strategic initiatives.

The question then lies, why should companies implement intranets at all? According to Martini
et al. (2009), "it is no longer a question of using the Intranet to improve internal communication,
spread company culture or eliminate paper documents" (p. 296). Yen and Chau (2001) identify
the key benefits of an intranet as "[a platform to] reduce cost, save time, collaboration tool,
integrated computing environment and rich format web-page" (p. 81), Urbach et al. (2009)
further add "reduction of information overload, improvement of corporate communication and
enhanced employee productivity" (p. 1) and Denton and Richardson (2006) add that intranets
help implement corporate strategic initiatives (p. 3).

Analyzing relevant literature, I have narrowed down five key benefits for employee portal
implementation:

1. *Information and communication source*

Since its infancy, an intranet was designed to provide employees with access to internal
communications on a static web-based portal. In 2000, Deltor defined an intranet as "a web
browser interface with a single point which is used within organizations to promote the

collection, sharing and dissemination of information through their organization" (p. 92).

Almost a decade later, Urbach et al. (2009) defined it as a "web-based interface to access

personalized information, resources, applications, and e-commerce options for employees"

(p. 2). In their book *Building an ASP .NET* Intranet, Ardestani et al. (2003) state that the

overarching goal (of an intranet) is to improve the "management of an organization's data

and information" (p. 10). All three definitions tie an intranet back to being an information

source for employees.

Currently, goeasy lacks an organized information and communication system. With no

efficient document storage solution, employees waste a lot of time searching for documents

or departments that can address their issues. Through focus group observation, I've learned

that most participants felt frustrated with the amount of work required of them and the

missing solution that would help with job efficiency. Becoming more efficient would allow

them to focus on serving customers and contributing to the bottom line. goeasy employees

receive emails from vendors, customers, their direct supervisors, employee communications,

HR, training and other colleagues. Implementing an information source (away from email)

would eliminate the issue of missed operational emails and clear up employee inboxes from

internal clutter. An employee portal could help them increase productivity and focus on

timely responses to customers and vendors.

In 2005, Knight et al. conducted a survey with 110 working professionals to assess the

benefits of an intranet. The results showed that 85% of the participants felt that a

communications portal provided "faster access to information" (p. 114). Research shows that

having a well-organized and maintained employee portal can help employees cut through

distorted and detached information that sometimes makes its way down from company

leaders (Denton & Richardson, 2006, p. 1).

Looking at the day-to-day life of employees, fast and effective access to information and

communication results in increased productivity and satisfaction, since employees do not

waste time searching for necessary documentation to complete their job. In many

implementation cases, an employee portal largely substitutes email communication which

further cuts down on wasted time. Research shows that many workers spend about 28% of

their time managing email and another 37% in meetings (Eisenhauer, 2015, p. 8). Further, the

author provides research results that employees spend, on average, 17 hours each week

clarifying communications. "For companies with over 100 employees, this translates into an

annual cost of $528, 443 in lost productivity" (Eisenhauer, 2015, p. 9).

In addition, access to properly communicated information can help individuals better

understand their "true purpose" within an organization and where they fit within it (Denton &

Richardson, 2006, p. 1).

2. Strategy and business alignment

Linking to the benefit of information and communication source, another employee portal

benefit is the way executives and business leaders translate and communicate their strategy

and business goals. In their 2006 study titled *Intranets for Implementing Strategic Initiatives,*

Denton and Richardson explain that not many employees understand their place in the

organization's "bigger picture" and exactly how their "efforts, choices and attitudes" contribute to the organization's overall strategic goals and objectives (p. 1). Creating an effective work system entails linking executive strategy to operation objectives, and according to Denton and Richardson (2006), intranets can be that linking tool (p. 1). The authors explain that although company executives spend a lot of time strategizing, the message and explanation for those strategies rarely make their way down to the general population of employees. "Executive direction gets lost in the shuffle of daily activities. Executives must surely get frustrated" (2006, p. 3). An intranet can also help executives connect with their employees and get a better understanding if their overarching company strategies effectively translate into reality. Messages passed on through various levels of management can often get distorted or detached. In parallel, "executives issue directives and form strategies, but those often have little to do with how things are down in the trenches (Denton & Richardson, 2006, p.4). An employee portal can give executives direct access to front-line workers and with the latest social features including likes, comments and replies, can provide employees with "face time" with the leadership team.

The value of building personal relationships is encouraged by the executive level throughout goeasy. While leaders conduct frequent organization-wide live Q&A sessions and cross-Canada store visits, personal observation shows that they are often too busy to follow-up on all of the employee questions or session take-aways. Employees have the chance to ask questions, but with the high volume, some answers are often delayed or missed. During one of the focus group sessions, the moderator asked if employees feel informed about all of the initiatives at goeasy including how their daily work aligns to the broader strategic initiatives.

While several employees agreed, most felt that they do not see the immediate connection between their daily work and how it contributes to the business strategies as a whole. The benefit of active executive engagement with front-line employees would help goeasy align on the common goal and reassure employee value.

3. *Employee engagement and culture*

Employee engagement and culture play a much bigger role within organizations than it has in the past. In 2016, goeasy added an employee engagement branch under the HR department to manage new hire experience, leadership training and corporate awards. One of the application-based leadership training programs "goforum" pools high-potential employees into a year-long project. After completion, participants, especially those in the early years of their career, are evaluated for a promotion and career growth. According to Bannon's et al. (2011) research, "47% of Millennials value company culture and reputation" (p. 62). Therefore, organizations need to place value on maintaining engagement among employees and providing them with a vibrant, well-defined corporate culture and growth opportunities. The benefits of corporate cultures span beyond just making employees happy. As Ramdhani et al. (2017) describe, "corporate culture plays a large part in determining the quality of organizational sustainability in order to increase loyalty, productivity and profitability" (p. 827). Therefore, maintaining and cultivating strong employee bonds through a corporate culture can have bottom line benefits for an organization. The question now is, how does an intranet help with employee engagement and culture? Let's compare two knowledge workers and their day-to-day tasks. One worker communicates only through email, which often results in back-and-forth exchanges, email threads and lost attachments along the way. Email

communication can get the job done, but it does not cultivate engagement or interaction

between employees that are beyond the thread (Eisenhauer, 2015). An intranet, or more

specifically a "Social Intranet" or an "Intranet 2.0", has capabilities resembling a social

media feed (Ward, 2012). When looking at statistics of employee interactive Social Intranet

features for a group of organizations with an Intranet 2.0 tool, Ward (2012) provides statistics

that:

- 60% of companies have user commenting functions (p.19)

- 65% have intranet discussion forums (p. 19)

- 43% have social networking (p.19)

- 63% have instant messaging (p. 19)

While the data above is from 2012, it is likely that since the late 2010s and the increase in

social media consumption, this percentage has increased. Tying these statistics back to our

knowledge worker example, organizations with a social intranet provide employees with

higher levels of engagement with each other and the published content. While organizations

still need to make sure their internal structure, values and goals align with the culture they

wish to cultivate, employee intranets can be an asset in helping spread the unified message

and values. The ability to like, comment or share other employees' thoughts and

contributions allows for connection, engagement, collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

A good way to engage with other employees is by celebrating their achievements. goeasy

understands the value of employee recognition and through observation, I've discovered that

employees love to see their names in the spotlight. Today, they are recognized for their

performance (top performers are displayed in weekly newsletters, at conferences and town halls), tenure (5, 10, 15 and 20-year tenure employees receive a gift and shout out at the monthly town hall) and leadership (peer-nominated leaders are recognized on an annual and quarterly basis). Although recognized, the peer-to-peer celebration is lacking, with no two-way communication or interaction between employees spread across all provinces. The benefit of virtual engagement could help goeasy reach a new level of employee satisfaction and bring staff closer together as they celebrate each other's successes.

4. Collaboration and knowledge-sharing

As Feijoo et al. outline in their 2015 article, "employee portals are an opportunity to develop knowledge management inside organizations" (p. 506). Knight et al. back up this statement with their 2005 findings concluding that an intranet, with a single point of access and information distributed simultaneously to all employees online, allows "knowledge workers to then gather information relevant to the task, organize it, search it, analyze it, synthesize solutions" and then pass them to other workers (p. 118). Organizations that use employee portals as their main form of knowledge-sharing allow employees to share information on one platform, eliminating email chains with limited visibility to the general population. Collaborating features like wikis, discussion boards, forums, tagging and intranet blogs (Ward, 2012), allow employees to collaborate and share common practices on a company-wide scale, which leads to skill alignment and better cross-training.

5. Cost-saver

Although considered an intangible asset, an employee portal can "provide a very cost-effective means of publishing and distributing internal documents" (Duckworth, 2000, p.119). As organizations move towards a more digitized and web-based workplace, Duckworth's statement confirms virtual collaboration, knowledge-sharing and distribution of information can prove to be cost-effective. In his 2015 guide titled *How to Know if Your Company Needs an Intranet*, Eisenhauer states "research shows that social intranet software can significantly improve employee engagement, productivity and communication. When this happens, businesses save money and thrive culturally" (p. 3).

While this research paper only focused on five key intranet benefits, review of relevant literature showcased additional benefits including employee productivity and satisfaction. To summarize the benefits, Urbah et al. (2009) quote "ideally, employee portals yield different benefits for both organizations and employees, such as reducing information overload, reducing organizational cost, improving corporate communication, and enhancing employee productivity" (p. 2).

Intranet Implementation

As Parsons (2004) explains, the most important points to focus on [when implementing an intranet], is planning, securing, maintaining and engaging (p. 57). The author further states that "when developing intranets, organizations often overlook the fundamentals of planning" (Parsons, 2004, p. 57).

1. Intranet objectives

The first step of planning an intranet project is determining its objectives and the big picture. A good first question to ask is, "what is the organization trying to solve with this new tool?". From there, the project leaders should ask "what is the goal of the employee portal?", "what is the company trying to achieve?" and "how will the company know if the project was successful?" (Parsons, 2004). An objective should not only focus on the immediate needs of the organization, but how the intranet can evolve with the organization, employee needs, environmental changes and latest technology. The goal is to narrow down a clear business case as to why the project should be approved and allocated the necessary resources to proceed.

1.1 Intranet objectives: goeasy Ltd.

goeasy aims to solve for the issue of overcommunicating through email and implement a better way for employees to get access to important company information, collaborate and connect to each other. A suggested high-level scope is:

- *Look:* Sleek, modern look and feel (video, photo, text)

- *Engagement:* public kudos, badges, recognition

- *Integration:* with goeasy platforms (SharePoint etc.)

- *Mobile:* app or mobile friendly

- *Tracking/reporting:* opportunity to "sign off" and back-end tracking for viewership

- *Smart search:* ability to search the platform using keywords (titles, in-text)

- *Personalization:* ability to personalize content for specific audiences (by region, province), instant translation into French

- *Easy customization:* goeasy look and feel with easy implementation (widgets)

- *Organization chart:* ability to find other employees based on role, responsibilities, location or hierarchy

- *Easy admin usage:* uploading content, editing and publishing

- *Support:* Ongoing intranet team support for changes/issues

- Streamline communications and move away from solely email

To summarize in one sentence, the objective is: to create a go-to platform where 2,200+ employees can efficiently access all company information, strengthen goeasy's culture through connection and collaboration and become more productive in their jobs.

2. Budget & executive support

Before any vendor selection or design consultations, project leaders must first present an intranet project proposal to business leaders for approval and budget allocation. The budget should not only include the initial implementation cost of the platform (design, set-up, license, support team) and ongoing costs (annual licences or fees) but consider the internal cost of resources for the initiative and those that will be tasked to maintain the platform.

As mentioned before, there is no clear path to determining a ROI for an employee portal, however according to Ward (2012), "business cases need not always have a hard ROI and other dollar-drive targets, but a clear need be established" (p. 10). It is important to make a strong business case when presenting the project to the executives since, according to Ward (2012), 18% of the barriers to an intranet success is the lack of executive support and an

additional 18% due to other, bigger priorities (p. 10). Communicators must make the leaders

understand the importance of cohesive employee communications and the efficiencies a

unified platform can bring to the organization.

2.1 Budget & executive support: goeasy Ltd.

Since this project has already been approved by goeasy executives, the following section

outlines a couple of tactics the project team used to help push the decision forward. To start,

the team used the COVID-19 pandemic as the biggest driver of the intranet project in 2021.

More than ever, employees need a virtual platform to connect and cultivate the vibrant

culture goeasy has built. Feeling disconnected and isolated throughout the pandemic, the

organization needs to focus on employees and their connection to their job and each other.

Employee morale has taken a hit, as observations of focus groups showed, employees miss

in-person conferences, trips and perks that they are accustomed to. For the first time in five

years, the intranet project took the front line and became the 2021 strategic priority at

goeasy. To convince the data-driven executives, the team took the following steps (initiate

and define):

Initiate	• First, the team brought the project to the executive table and initiated the approval process, introduced the key stakeholders and gathered information to lay the foundations of the project success.
Define	• Once approved, the team established a list of objectives that would help solve some of the current problems at goeasy. • They selected a list of vendors and attended demos of each platform. • Using a custom metric, the team rated the vendors against project objectives, cost, IT adaptability, appearance and functionality of the platform. • Lastly, the team came up with an ROI benchmark that can measure the project's success and determine how this investment will indirectly impact the bottom line. • The ROI benchmark: goeasy Ltd. will measure the success of the project by conducting a company-wide survey at the start of the project

	and 6 months after the intranet launch. The survey will ask questions like "how many hours a week do you spend searching for company information?". The hypothesis is that employees will spend, on average, 4 less hours a week searching for content needed to complete their jobs, therefore increasing their sale-focus time by 16 hours a month.

While the survey will provide feedback from employees, I recommend that performance-based ROI is also considered to measure the success of the project long-term. An example of long-term measurement of project success is to add an "intranet" metric to goeasy's monthly performance tracking. goeasy releases a monthly performance balanced scorecard where employees are ranked based on all sales and collection metrics. Top performers receive a bonus. Recently, a newly added metric was Google Reviews that ranked locations based on positive reviews. To rank higher and earn a bigger monthly bonus, employees came up with creative ways to ask customers for reviews and paid more attention to their online presence. A similar tactic can be implemented with the intranet. Using the viewership tracking function on the intranet, locations can be ranked based on monthly readership %, participation on the platform or number of visits.

3. Vendor selection

Once the budget is approved and executives are on board, the team can begin finalizing the vendor. As mentioned before, the vendor platform functions should hit most (if not all) objectives determined in step 1. This also includes making sure that the vendor shows promising scalability with the business and intranet technology in the years to come. For example, with a millennial employee-base, a modern social media newsfeed may be more enticing, for employees located in different countries, instant translation may be a benefit,

while for an organization with many interest groups, an option for private groups may increase member engagement and participation.

Keeping employees in mind, it is also important to select a platform that can be easy to use and intuitive for all age groups and technology comfort levels. During my participation in goeasy's focus groups, a quarter of the individuals identified as being in their early to mid-30s, a quarter in mid to late 50s and half in mid to late 20s. According to BCB Business, by 2020, Millennials held 50% of jobs in the United States. (McKenzie). That means, however, that 50% of those in the workplace are older and will need to be taken into consideration when choosing a modern, social media driven platform.

Lastly, it is important to consider the cosmetic and functional components of the intranet, but also how they integrate within the broader ecosystem and environment of the organization. To be successful, companies need to involve the necessary project stakeholders and not rely solely on the opinions of the communications and/or HR teams. An important stakeholder is the IT team, who can help navigate through the content and system security and integration with existing company systems. In parallel, "it's important to look at the intranet project as an organizational change rather than just an IT implementation" (Martinin et al., 2009, p. 3).

3.1 Vendor selection: goeasy Ltd.

goeasy Ltd. operates on many systems that employees navigate throughout the day. This includes various platforms that employees communicate to each other, including Teams, email, Salesforce Chatter and phone calls. When choosing a vendor, it's recommended that

the organization maps out current systems to understand how an employee portal platform can assist in a seamless employee experience, while keeping the company's data safe. Some of the identified platforms that goeasy currently uses include:

- Teams (collaboration, meetings, calls, chatting)

- Salesforce (sales, Chatter)

- SharePoint (library, team pages)

- Email (reports, communication)

While the goal of the intranet is not to replace all of the existing systems, goeasy must consider how the whole ecosystem will intertwine and coexist. Seamless employee experience is key to adaptability, so I recommend that the team maps how these systems are used on a daily basis. In addition, goeasy should create a concise list of vendor must-haves that ties back to the project objectives. Based on initial company research through internal focus groups, a suggested list is:

- Site-wide search

- Instant translation

- Social sharing, likes, comments

- Easy video, photo and text sharing

- Private groups and chats

- OKTA integration with company systems

- A social feed home page with static and rotating content and modern look

- Mobile friendly

4. Content framework & governance

An employee portal is not just an IT initiative, but a change management process that requires ongoing maintenance. It's very important to have a proper mission, framework and governance in place for the platform to be successful (Martini et al., 2009). "Lack of governance or proper planning can lead to no adaptation, failure of the platform or user dissatisfaction" (Martinin et al., 2009, p. 3).

Admin governance

First, the organization needs to set a clear outline of who is the owner of the platform, who is responsible for updating its content (Colby et al., 2003, p.11) and ensure that those posting information have guiding principles on length, format and frequency. Ward (2012) reinforces the importance of effective governance by stating:

> Effective governance is a mission-critical necessity: define how the ownership structure, including the executive sponsor, committee structures, staffing model, roles and responsibilities of publishers, site owners, etc., and the reporting and approval structure (p. 11).

If no governance is set in place, companies run into what Parsons (2004) describes as the "warehousing effect", where content is either not updated regularly, or becomes a dumping ground for photos and documents with no order, soon becoming irrelevant and outdated to its users (p. 58).

User governance

Guidelines should also be provided for the everyday user of the portal. With the popularity of Intranets 2.0 and their social media-like abilities to comment and like posts, there's a risk

that employees may not always behave appropriately. "To mitigate that risk, you need to plan accordingly and support the tools with the proper governance, standards and policies before rolling out these tools and giving employees full access" (Ward, 2012, p. 7).

4.1 Content framework & governance: goeasy Ltd.

Research indicates that many organizations fail to implement proper guidelines and governance before implementing the platform. A poor governance example comes from goeasy. In early 2010s, the organization began using Salesforce libraries as their document storage. That solution was not ideal and due to the lack of proper clean up and governance, it quickly became a dumping ground for all files and poor labelling practices. Since no employee or department was instructed to own the platform, the documents quickly became outdated as employee frustration grew. For this project, I recommend that goeasy sets clear guidelines on "who owns the intranet, and the roles & responsibilities for all" (Ward, 2012, p. 15) to avoid making the same mistake twice.

goeasy governance team example:

- *Senior Communications Manager:* overarching owner of the platform, responsible to oversee the posted content, flag inconsistencies or stale information from various departments, actively engaged in social feeds.
- *Communications Specialist:* responsible to train department representatives on proper posting, proof-read content, feature announcements on home screen, spot check content for consistency and accuracy across all pages, pull tracking reports as needed.

- *HR Coordinator:* responsible to review employee comments for appropriate behaviour, ensure latest policies and forms are available, collect any employee questions from the portal and bring forward to HR leadership team.

- *IT Coordinator:* work with vendor on scheduled portal maintenance and outages, ensure latest technology is implemented and stakeholders are trained to use it, maintenance of distribution lists, employee profiles and data security.

- *Department reps:* a representative from each department should be in charge of their individual department pages and keep the content fresh, relevant and consistent with brand guidelines (for language, grammar or spelling help, communications team can assist.

- *Executive team:* executives can become a barrier to the success of an intranet, as Ward (2012) explains "executives aren't quite pulling their weight when it comes to contributing regularly to the intranet" (p. 7). Only 28% of executives contribute, while 58% of other employees do (Ward 2012, p. 7). Therefore, employee portal managers need to ensure that executives actively engage in liking, posting and interacting with employees. A suggestion is to create an executive-led blog or frequently updated Q&A page.

As part of the ongoing governance of the site, this team would be responsible for keeping the content not only correct, but fresh. Otherwise, employees will be less likely to return to the portal. "Without relevant, current and useful information, employees do not have a reason to use the intranet" (Parsons, 2004, p.60).

Keeping users in mind, goeasy's communications team should prepare a user guide for employees that outlines the posting etiquette (when to post, what to avoid, forbidden language). This guide should be available to employees during the initial training phase to help them integrate proper intranet usage and participation from the start.

5. *Assembling the project team*

It is no surprise that employees are at the core of successful intranet implementation and its ongoing success. However, many companies do not engage employees in key project decisions, not considering the fact that end-user involvement and satisfaction are key to the employee portal success (Parsons, 2004). As Colby et al. (2003) state "an intranet, by definition, tends to work over the whole of an organization, setting it up is going to require the cooperation of a number of departments, and their managers" (p. 10). Therefore, "the project leader needs to consider expanding the team to include people with different roles and skills as well as representatives from departments throughout the organization" (Parsons, 2004, p. 59). Parsons (2004) further outlines that creating a well-rounded team, with representatives from across the organization, helps with "ideas for content, flow, layout, naming conventions, system obstacles, programming solutions and timing are generated that otherwise could be overlooked" (p. 59). It is important to account for the time commitment of the focus group and ensure their respective managers are aware of the extra work. Colby et al. (2003) summarize the involving end-users by stating:

> The goal of IT projects is to make existing processes work more efficiently. Who do you think knows more about those processes: management? A $250 an hour external analyst? No, it's the people who carry them out 8 hours a day, 5 days a week. It's these people who will be using the system you are creating and it is these people who will determine the success of your project in the long run. (p. 12)

5.1 Assembling the project team: goeasy Ltd.

Since goeasy is made up of many employee groups, assembling a team from each business unit and job title will help address the needs of the overarching employee group. Each of the goeasy sub-brands works in a different setting:

- *head office:* work in-office or remotely. Nearly all work is completed on company-provided laptops.

- *easyhome:* work in a retail setting assisting customers. Store has one to two computers per location.

- *easyfinancial:* works both on the floor assisting customers and laptop/phone booking loans and collecting money.

- *call centre:* completes most tasks on the phone and desktop computers. Rarely leave their station and are not permitted personal devices at their desks.

Geographical differentiation is also important to consider. goeasy has store and branch locations across the country. Different provinces require different communications, languages and content (for example: most marketing contests are not permitted in Manitoba). In addition, with a growing population in Quebec, goeasy's intranet solution should have access to instant translation in order to save time and money on third party vendors. Understanding the needs of each of these core groups will allow communicators to better reach them and design the intranet based on their preferences.

6. Design

How an intranet is designed can have a significant impact on the portal usability. As Ward (2012) reinforces "Intranet 2.0 tools can't be used if they can't be found. An effective, business-driven design and underlying structure must be developed to better facilitate navigation and usability" (p. 11). The project team must ask the necessary questions in the design phase to ensure they cover all grounds and understand the audience of the future intranet. This is also a good stage to involve the end users, or a task force, that can help determine functionality. Parsons (2004, p. 59) outlines a few key questions that should be asked in the design stage:

- What should the intranet be able to do?

- What are the critical needs?

- Is the information currently available in another format?

- Should personalized information be included?

- Should it be interactive?

- Who will use this site?

- What will it look like?

As Duckworth (2000) quotes: "intranets, by their nature, are likely to be dynamic and constantly evolving" (p. 37). Today, employee portals mimic social media "socializing" features that allow employees to seamlessly integrate their personal and work life (Eisenhauer, 2015). According to Eisenhauer's (2015) *How to Know if Your Company Needs an Intranet* guide, since 2008, "many businesses began to widely adopt so-called Web 2.0 technologies such as social media" (p. 16). Defining a social intranet, Ward (2012) quotes:

> An intranet that features multiple social media tools for most or all employees to use as collaboration vehicles for sharing knowledge with other employees. A

social intranet may feature blogs, wikis, discussion forums, social networking, or a
combination of these or any other Web 2.0 (intranet 2.0) tools with at least some
or limited exposure (optional) from the main intranet or portal home page. (p. 3)

The benefit of the Intranet 2.0 is its resemblance to social media pages. Portal designs that

closely mimic our daily social media pages closely relate to the Millennials and Generation

X in the workplace (Bannon et al., 2011). In the early 2010s, many studies have pointed to a

change in the workplace era, as Baby Boomers were looking to retire, and Generation Y,

otherwise known as Millennials, were entering the workplace with their own work standard

demands (Bannon et al., 2011, p. 61). Millennials can be defined as the group of individuals

born between 1980 and 1992, but the birth year fluctuates based on the source (Bannon et

al., 2011, p. 61). As mentioned before, by 2020, Millennials held 50% of jobs in the United

States. (McKenzie). As that number rises and more Baby Boomers exit the economy into

swift retirement, evolution of employee portals, and other IS systems alike, will continue to

be critical to meet the needs of this internet-raised generation and the ones to follow.
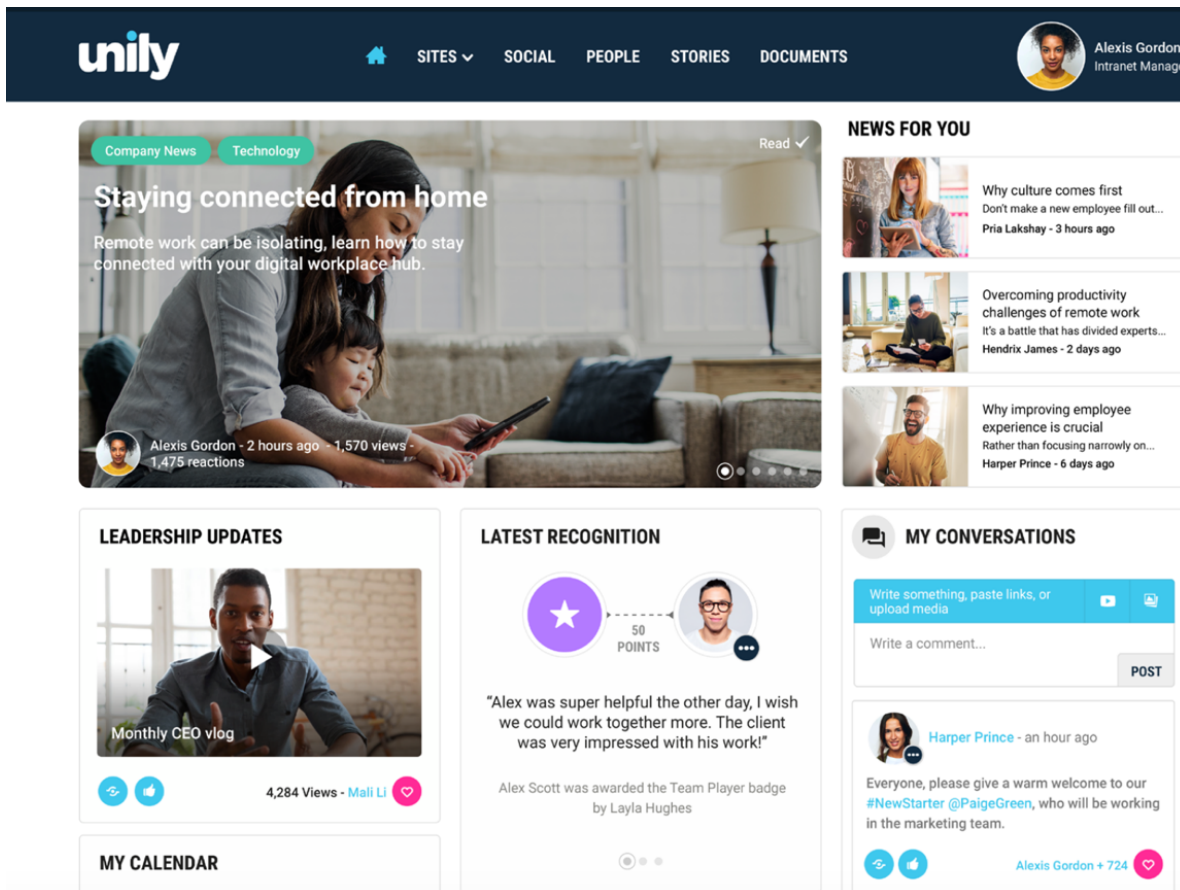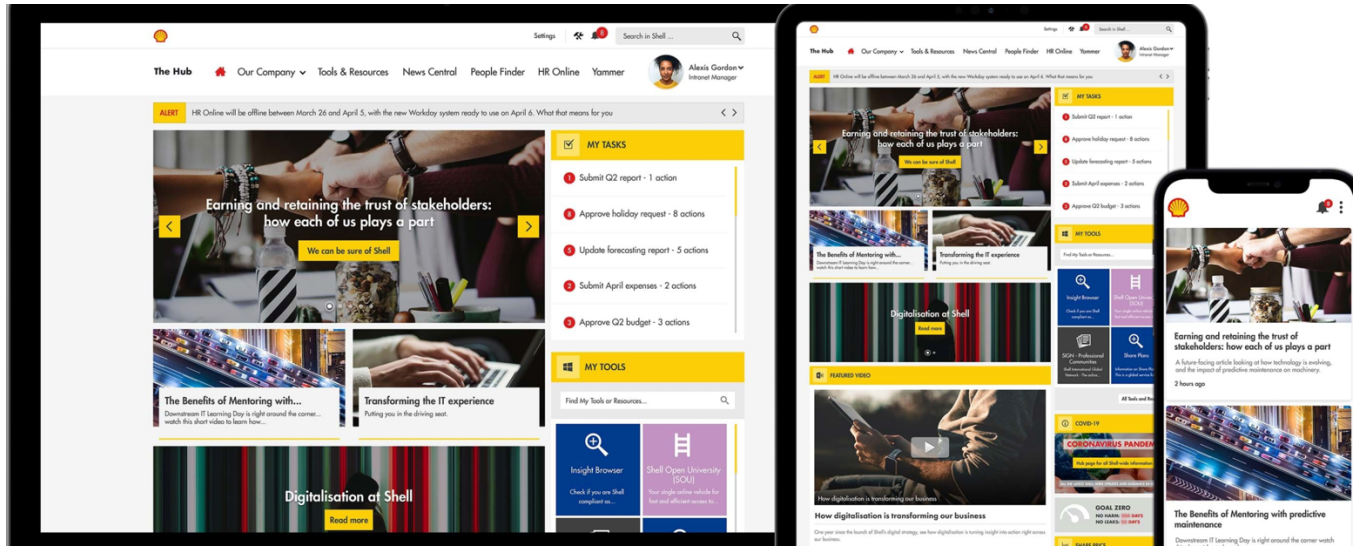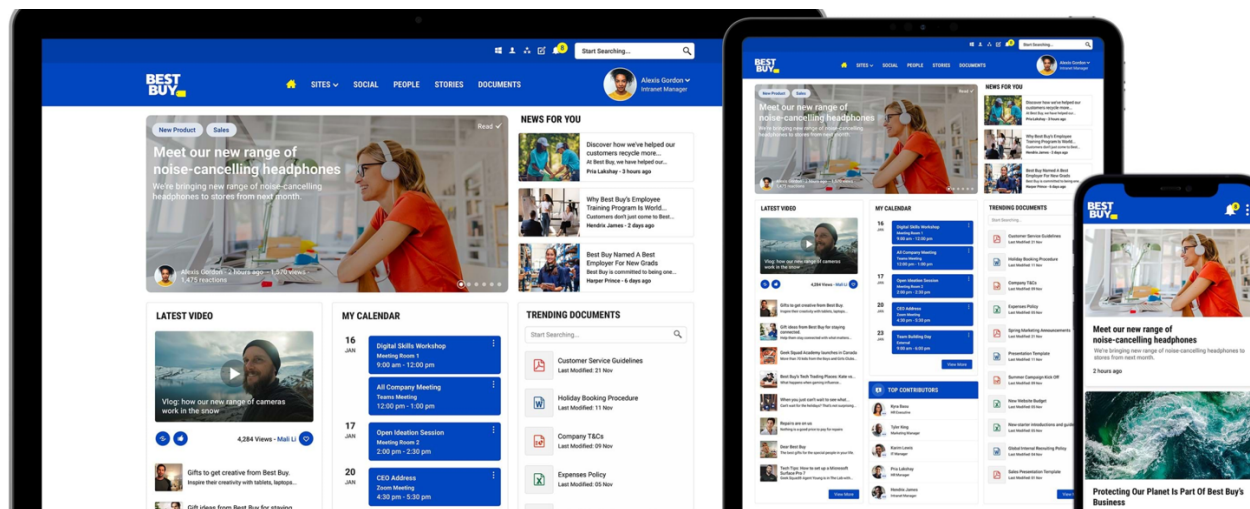
About Unily

Unily is the preferred vendor for the goeasy Ltd. intranet project. The platform provides an

array of features that closely reflect goeasy's objectives.

goeasy Objectives	Unily Features

Look: Sleek, modern look and feel (video, photo, text)	Modern look with instant photo and video sharing (examples provided below)
Engagement: public kudos, badges, recognition	Reward and recognition function with custom badges, kudos, leadership boards and peer-to-peer recognition.
Integration: with goeasy platforms (OKTA, UltiPro, SharePoint)	Integrates will all of goeasy's existing systems.
Mobile: app or mobile friendly	Native, customizable mobile app
Tracking/reporting: opportunity to "sign off" and back-end tracking for viewership	Unily offers real-time data to show what employees look at and for how long. It can track viewership and engagement across all users.
Smart search: ability to search the platform using keywords (titles, in-text)	Search options allow employees to search across the platform and other storage systems (ie. SharePoint).
Personalization: ability to personalize content for specific audiences (by region, province), instant translation into French	The published content can be specified by select distribution lists and audiences. That way, employees only see what is applicable to them. Instant French translation is available.
Easy customization: goeasy look and feel with easy implementation (widgets)	Easy customization is available per user and companywide. The vendor works closely with the project team and test users to customize the layout, look and feel. (examples provided below)
Organization chart: ability to find other employees based on role, responsibilities, location or hierarchy	The smart search allows to find employees by searching key words (ie. HR). The results show everything that contains HR in it, including employee profiles with HR in their title. The platform also offers personalized profiles for all employees.
Easy admin usage: uploading content, editing and publishing	Content publishing is intuitive and does not require any coding.
Support: Ongoing intranet team support for changes/issues	For a fee, ongoing support and updates are available.
Streamline communications and move away from solely email	Separate platform integrated with employee day-to-day work. Supports sending out newsletters through email that leads users back to the platform.

Examples of Unily designs:

Illustrations: Unily website (Unily.com)

As Millennials make up most of today's workforce, accommodating their familiarity with

social media pages can benefit the ease of use and engagement on the platform. The

illustration of the Unily website (an employee portal vendor) shows the many vibrant and

interactive functions of the Intranet 2.0 platform. Nonetheless, project managers should take

the design phase seriously and per Parsons' (2004) recommendation, create a visual map of

the intranet or wireframing to visualize the functionalities of the pages (p. 59). In addition, as technology evolves, communicators and IT teams need to update their systems with new features and ensure that employees feel informed and trained based on their comfort level with technology.

6.1 Design: goeasy Ltd.

goeasy should work closely with the vendor and project team when designing the intranet. Based on personal observation and research, I recommend that goeasy completes several steps in the design process:

- *"A day in the life" workshop:* that would help identify how an everyday employee would use and navigate through the portal to complete their daily tasks. It is worth noting that the participants should be made up of different age groups and roles in order to accommodate those that are less tech-savvy and may not find the technology as intuitive.

- *Design insight sessions*: for employees to play around on the prototype of the intranet and design it based on their individual needs. The different versions could then be customized for each audience group or compiled into a generic template for the organization. One of the features offered by the vendor of choice for goeasy, Unily, offers specific customization based on location (store/branch/province), job title or an assigned task. Part of the design insight session should be identifying what each group/location of employees should receive to eliminate irrelevant information.

- *Design rating metrics:* would force employees to prioritize the importance of the design features they'd like to see on the home page of the portal. This would help identify the "need" from the "want".

7. Change management

As Duckworth (2000) states, "you can lead a horse to water, but can't make it drink", "you can design and build an intranet, but you can't make people use it" (p. 33). It is important for organizations to consider how to "sell" the new platform to its employees (Ward, 2012). Ward (2012) also outlines that intranet initiatives often fail due to lack of user adoption, which can be a result of poor change management and governance. As part of the change management strategy, organizations need to work towards adoption of the platform, which includes making it intuitive, relevant and engaging. It is also important to be sensitive to those that are not tech savvy (Duckworth, 2000, p. 4) and may find a social intranet page intimidating or confusing. Adequate training prior to launch and ongoing support will allow employees to feel more comfortable with the change.

7.1 Change management: goeasy Ltd.

With 300 retail locations across Canada, goeasy's portal users will be the 2,200+ employees in store, branch, call centre and head office settings. Based on personal observation of the organization, I recommend the following four tactics to help with change management and launch of the employee portal:

- *Change Champions:* goeasy is naturally a very welcoming place to work, with many employees that stand behind the brand and its vision. In previous initiatives, project teams select a group of "change champions", a group of dedicated, enthusiastic employees that will help spread the good news, get others excited, train them and pave the way to use the platform. For the intranet project, change champions can be

members of the project team who will have insight into the process throughout the project.

- *Training:* as mentioned before, it's important that the employee portal is very intuitive and user-friendly, however this also means that employees must feel well trained on all the components. The goal is to have all generations feel comfortable with the portal.

- *Executive Engagement:* although this point has been mentioned before, it's important that the goeasy executive team is visible on the portal from day one. This will help reinforce the authenticity of the platform and gain posting traction. During goeasy's annual conferences, managers use a mobile app to share photos, comment and spread excitement. Executive engagement received the most likes and comments, which resulted in more curious employees visiting the app.

- *Friendly Competition:* goeasy is a naturally competitive environment. Teams often engage in fundraising, sales and even eating competitions. Adding a competitive flare onto the portal will help increase the number of visitors and make employees feel the familiar taste of friendly competition. This could involve scavenger hunts across the platform at launch or ad-hoc polls, surveys or posts that will need to be completed for points.

Intranet Failures

Although there's no shortage of available technology to create the ideal portal, developing, implementing, adapting and maintaining an intranet is not an easy task. Employee portal vendors, as well as end-users need to constantly evolve and analyze key factors like employee needs, environmental changes and technology. Plus, as Parsons (2004) notes in the article

Building a Successful Intranet, "launching an intranet does not mean employees will use it" (p. 57).

Before we identify possible reasons for the project failure, it is important to define what is considered an intranet failure. Like most systems implemented within a workplace, a point of failure is lack of employee usage and no benefit to business productivity or bottom line. In some cases, failure can be defined by negative ROI results, however in the case of an intranet, an "intangible asset" (Mendes et al., 2017, p. 2), employers have to define their own metrics for portal success. Others define intranet failure as strictly the failure of technology and not intranet policies, but according to Stenmark (2003), "intranet policies are separated from and should not be confused with the technology" (p. 213). Therefore, based on literature review, intranet project failure can be summarized as four points:

- Lack of employee usage or system adaptation
- Lack of engagement from employees, admins or executives
- Technology failures
- Negative or non-defined ROI

The last point, however, does not solely define failure, as an intranet can thrive and yield employee productivity without an established monetary return. The next section will identify some of the reasons why an intranet implementation and usability fail.

Lack of Proper Planning

In Duckworth's (2000) *What 'sells' an Intranet?* the author outlines that the success of many projects depends on how well they are planned (p. 33). If the purpose and end user of the employee portal is not clearly outlined and determined at the start of the project, there's a high possibility that the system will not be effectively adapted. The issue may be that "companies merely introduce tools and technologies without any substantial organizational or managerial measures" (Martini et al. 2009, p. 297). According to Ward (2012), "without a proper plan and business case, many organizations will fail to properly acquire and implement social intranet technologies" (p. 10).

The other two factors that can play a role in an intranet project failure is *lack of proper system integration* and *lack of post-launch governance*. If project managers do not consider how the intranet will fit into the organizational ecosystem and how it integrates with existing programs, it can result in poor employee experience and lack of portal usability. Not setting clear guidelines of who is responsible for updating the content on the employee portal can also result in project failure. "Lack of governance or proper planning can lead to no adaptation, failure of the platform or user dissatisfaction" (Martini et al., 2009, p.296).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this major research paper in the form of an applied research project draws upon existing scholarly sources and personal observation within the organization to serve as a research foundation for an official procurement plan for the organization's intranet project. However, many of the findings can be applied in the planning and implementation of employee portals in other organizations.

First, we explored the history of intranets and their feature advancements in parallel with technology, social media and employee expectations. Based on personal observation at goeasy, and being an employee and student myself, a modern employee expects to have the same ease of information transfer, collaboration and social media-like features in the workplace. Second, we looked at how an intranet can benefit an organization by serving as the organization's information and communication source, improving strategy and business alignment, strengthening employee engagement and culture, improving collaboration and knowledge-sharing within the workplace and save money.

The following section formed an intranet implementation plan that included general recommendations and goeasy specific content. The plan included the following steps:

Step 1 - Intranet objectives: Intranet objectives and the importance of determining what the intranet is trying to solve for within an organization. As mentioned before, the goal is to narrow down a clear business case as to why the project should be approved and allocated the necessary resources to proceed.

Step 2 - Budget & executive support: The project cannot move forward without an approved budget and executive support. Research shows that 18% of the barriers to an intranet success is the lack of executive support (Ward, 2012, p. 10). Building a strong case for the project is key to gaining support and funds to move forward.

Step 3 - Vendor selection: It's important to carefully select a vendor that will align to the project objectives and allotted budget. The selection committee should also include the organization's IT team to ensure that system security and integration are considered. Keeping employees in mind, the chosen platform should be accessible to employees at all ages and with various technology knowledge and comfort.

Step 4 - Content framework & governance: In order for the platform to remain relevant, appropriate and scalable, organizations must have user and admin governance in place prior to launch. Establishing ground rules on what is posted, when, in what format and how employees should interact with the content will help with adaptability and sustainability of the portal. No one will visit a platform that is outdated, abandoned or contains inappropriate content posted by employees. In addition, those contributing to the platform need to follow specific distribution lists available through the platform to ensure that employees get content relevant to them (ie. Manitoba employees don't need to know about policy restrictions in Ontario). The vendor allows for specific distribution lists by employee name, region, geographical location or job title. Tracking and readership capabilities are available to monitor who has and has not read the released information.

Step 5 – Assembling the project team: This is an important step that must consider both the admin of the intranet and the user. An intranet should be for employees and therefore it should be created by employees. Creating focus groups from different teams and getting input from future

users is crucial to the platform's success. Employees from different departments, age groups and geographic locations should be included in the decision-making process.

Step 6 – Design: Once a project team is in place, the team can start designing the platform. The design phase includes the visual and functional planning of the intranet and its pages. The project should closely follow the established framework and continuously reference key objectives to stay on track. A helpful tip is to consult the vendor on previous project successes and conduct workshops with a variety of different layout options. The better the initial design, the more successful the platform can be.

Step 7 – Change management: This is a very important step in the project as selling the platform to employees can foreshadow it future success. Employees must feel the need and want to visit the new communication portal and be comfortable with the change. Good tips for effective change management are turning the focus groups into change champions that can talk up the platform and serve as trainers, executive involvement, proper training and a creative launch plan.

Lastly, this research paper touches on why intranet projects fail and the importance of proper planning. Following the steps above, along with the understanding that implementing an employee-wide communication platform is an ongoing project that needs to be planned, governed and sustained, can help organization improve their internal communications and all the benefits that come with it.

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