



A History of Intranets

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This report is based on a chapter that I wrote for [Intranets – a handbook for intranet managers](#) which was published by Intranätverk in 2017. I wish to thank Kristian Norling for inviting me to contribute the chapter to the book and for allowing me to publish it as a report under the Intranet Focus Ltd imprint.

Martin White, Intranet Focus Ltd

In the beginning

In my view the history of intranets can be traced back to Plato, or more correctly [PLATO](#). PLATO stood for Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations, a computer-based assisted learning system developed by the University of Illinois in the 1960s. Many modern concepts in multi-user computing were developed on PLATO, including forums, message boards, online testing, e-mail, chat rooms, picture languages, instant messaging, remote screen sharing, and multiplayer games. The commercial rights to PLATO were acquired by Control Data Corporation in the mid-1970s but after early success the company found that it was very difficult to market and the operation was closed down in 2002.

One of the members of the PLATO development team was Ray Ozzie. In 1984 he set up [Iris Associates](#) in Littleton, Massachusetts, with the aim of developing PLATO Notes, created by David R. Woolley in 1973, as one of the first online message board applications. This work was funded by Lotus Development Corporation, which had been founded in 1982 with the intention of developing the Lotus 1-2-3 spreadsheet application. Lotus Notes was launched in 1985 as a groupware application, which was then enriched in 1991 when Lotus acquired cc.Mail and bundled it into Lotus Notes.

The concept of [collaborative computing](#) was first considered by Doug Engelbart in 1951, the inventor of the mouse and of remote database access amongst many other applications. The term 'groupware' for collaborative computing came into prominence through an [article](#) written by Louis Richman and Julianne Slovak in Fortune magazine in 1987.

Linked desktop terminals running the new software will coordinate schedules and route messages. Novel products will emerge as networks of computer work stations guide teams of workers through large shared databases; a pharmaceutical company, for example, might search a database of organic chemicals for possible new drugs. Managers will confer with colleagues, suppliers, and customers via wall-size video screens as cameras connected to computers record and store their conversations. And -- hold on to your space helmets -- even meetings will become more effective as today's low-tech conference rooms turn into multimedia "war rooms" controlled by software that helps keep everything on course. Software that supports group work may not be as far out as it sounds. Advanced prototypes are already in use at a handful of research labs around the country; the first commercial products are beginning to reach the market. Says Jerry Wagner, a professor of management information systems at the University of Texas Business School in Austin: "This technology could be one of the most important contributions to management effectiveness in business history."

The late 1980s was a time of significant development of groupware products but Lotus Notes was the dominant player. The era of shared access to computer resources and information was a core theme of Tom Peters' book *Liberation Management*, published in 1992, and many of the case histories in the book indicate the widespread use of groupware applications. It is important to appreciate that web-technology intranets were not an evolution of public websites but of corporate groupware applications.

There were two more technical developments in the late 1980s and early 1990s which also stimulated intranet development. The first of these was the Ethernet local area network protocol developed by Xerox PARC in 1973–1974. In parallel IBM developed the Token Ring technology but the ease of installation and development of Ethernet won out in the end. It became an international standard and by the end of the 1980s PCs were increasingly being shipped with Ethernet ports as standard.

Ethernet provided a local area network solution but there remained an issue about managing shared computer resources in an efficient manner. In addition, groupware applications were expensive, with per-user licenses for \$200 or more. This was such good business for Lotus that in 1996 IBM acquired Lotus Notes for \$3.5 billion in cash, a huge amount of money for the time. Notes, along with other products such as Collabra Share and Microsoft Exchange, were also proprietary systems designed to lock in customers to a particular vendor – one reason for the price that IBM paid for Lotus.

Then along came Netscape with the Navigator web browser. [Netscape Navigator](#) was based on the Mosaic web browser, co-written by Marc Andreessen, a part-time employee of the National Center for Supercomputing Applications and a student at the University of Illinois (the home of PLATO!). After Andreessen graduated in 1993, he moved to California and there met Jim Clark, the recently departed founder of Silicon Graphics. Clark believed that the Mosaic browser had great commercial possibilities and provided the seed money. Soon Mosaic Communications Corporation was set up by Andreessen with support from Jim Clark. Andreessen set about developing what was to become the Navigator browser. Under pressure from the University of Illinois the company changed its name to Netscape Communications.

One of the important features of Navigator was the on-the-fly loading of text and graphics screen as the web page downloaded. Earlier web browsers would not display a page until all graphics on it had been loaded over the network connection. With the low-speed networks then available this often made a user stare at a blank page for as long as several minutes. With Netscape, even users with dial-up connections could begin reading the text of a web page within seconds of entering a web address.

The benefits of Navigator as a corporate browser for internal web services was quickly recognised, especially by large IT companies.

1994

Steve Tellen is credited with coining the term 'intranet' when at Amdahl in 1993, and the term was in fact trademarked by Amdahl.

According to [Steve Tellen](#)

In April 1993, a few of the technical experts in Amdahl's Open Enterprise Systems (OES) organization acquired a copy of the Mosaic beta release and began playing with it. They hooked-up with the open systems competitive analyst, who had a volume problem making information available to our field sales organization. This resulted in a skunkworks pilot project focused on a problem inside our firewall.

When I coined the term "IntraNet" at Amdahl Corp. in the summer of 1994, it did have the connotation of an internal Web rather than just an internal Internet. In fact, the term we used internally before this was the too-cumbersome "Enterprise-Wide Web." So, while the ambiguity of "intranet" was apparent even back then, for lack of a better alternative, it caught on.

In the early days, I defined an intranet as "An infrastructure based on Internet standards and technologies that supports sharing of content within a limited and well-defined group." The "infrastructure" referred to the organizational and management infrastructure that created, managed, and shared the content. The only technical constraint was that the physical network be based on the Internetworking Protocol (IP)."

In mid-1994, we began looking at how Amdahl might integrate the skunkworks pilot into our business. The most striking feature of web technology was how easy it was for non-technical people to use. And the development trend in that direction was picking up a velocity that was hard to miss. From this observation, we concluded that the technology was not going to be the difficult challenge; the challenge for both us and our customers was going to be how to manage the result.

We developed the basic models and management architecture, then set out to implement the infrastructure inside Amdahl. We convinced the CIO to sponsor the project and used the formation of a management-based Web Council as the core of our roll-out. Over the next several months we learned a lot about what did and didn't work, and what was critical. We also learned something about the stages an intranet goes through during its development. The results were refined into our IntraNet Methodology.

The first World Wide Web conference was held in Geneva in May 1994 and a number of the papers were about internal, rather than public, use of web technology. One of these papers was given by Russ Jones about the embryonic web server application in Digital Equipment, arguably the first ever paper on applied intranet technology. Other early adopters were Ford, Sun Microsystems and Boeing, though this level of early commitment was not apparent until 1995 and 1996 when articles started to appear in the technical press.

1995

In late 1994 and early 1995 Netscape vacillated about whether to charge for Navigator licences, but in the end decided to do so. The result was a very significant growth in revenues from the sale of intranet licences. On August 9 1995, Netscape made an extremely successful IPO. The stock was set to be offered at US\$14 per share, but a last-minute decision doubled the initial offering to US\$28 per share. The stock's value soared to US\$75 during the first day of trading, nearly a record for first-day gain. The stock closed at US\$58.25, which gave Netscape a market value of US\$2.9 billion. While it was unusual for a company to go public prior to becoming profitable, Netscape's revenues had, in fact, doubled every quarter in 1995. In 1994 Netscape revenues were just \$700k, rising to \$80M in 1995 and \$346M in 1996, all largely on the back of corporate intranet licence sales.

This growth did not escape the notice of Microsoft even though Netscape's total revenue never exceeded the interest income generated by Microsoft's cash on hand. The battle between the two companies was ferocious. In essence Microsoft realised that its future depended on undermining the Netscape revenue stream. The company had been developing Windows NT as a processor-independent multi-user operating system. This was released in mid-1993. At around the same time the Lightweight Directory Access Protocol (LDAP) was emerging which would provide a way in which user access privileges could be easily (in principle!) managed. This is a core requirement of intranet management.

The Microsoft strategy was to offer Internet Explorer and Internet Information Server for free when bundled into Windows NT server licences. In 1995 the impact was limited and by mid-1996 over 70% of Netscape sales were from corporate intranet revenues. Research from the Forrester Group in early 1995 indicated that intranets had been installed in 64% of Fortune 1000 companies and 32% of the remaining companies were planning to build them during 1995. One of the early adopters, not surprisingly, was Microsoft, with an intranet of over 200,000 pages by the end of the year.

1996

As a result 1996 is probably the year when intranets became mainstream corporate applications and a significant number of books, reports and technical articles were published. It is not possible to provide a complete bibliography in this report so I have been selective in the references I am including. Probably the first survey of intranet adoption was published in late 1995. Carried out by the Business Research Group (BRG) among 170 medium and large firms in the USA the situation is not as positive as the Forrester study. BRG found that 57% had not implemented an intranet, 11% had, 12% were in the process of doing so and 20% were still building a business case.

Among the books on intranet management published in 1996 were:

- *Intranet Working*, George Eckel and William Steen, New Riders Publishing.
- *The Corporate Intranet*, Ryan Bernard, John Wiley & Sons.
- *Running the Perfect Intranet*, David Baker et al, Que Publishing.
- *Internet et l'entreprise*, Olivier Andrieu, Eyrolles, Paris.
- *L'avantage Internet pour l'entreprise*, Jane McConnell and David Ward-Perkins Dunod, Paris.
- *Building an Intranet*, Tom Evans Sams.net Publishing.
- *How Intranets Work*, Paul Gralla, Ziff-Davis Press.

- *Intranets as Groupware*, Mellanie Hills, John Wiley & Sons.
- *The Human Side of Intranets*, Jerry W. Koehler, Thom Dupper, Marvin D. Scaff, Fred Reitberger and Patti Paxson CRC Press.

It is interesting to note that John Wiley & Sons, one of the leading global publishers, had two intranet books on its list, both of which were probably commissioned in 1995. It was Business Week that set everyone talking about intranets in early 1996. In a feature article by Amy Cortese in February 1996 the benefits of intranets were clearly set out with a number of case studies.

For now, most intranet Web sites are used for basic information sharing: publishing job listings, benefits information, and phone directories, for example. Some of these simple information-sharing setups already provide strategic advantage, though. Cap Gemini's Knowledge Galaxy is a giant repository of technical information that helps the consulting firm respond more quickly to customers, for example.

More sophisticated intranets are coming. They will let employees fill out electronic forms, query corporate databases, or hold virtual conferences over private Webs. Corporate information systems managers are "just now seeing [the Web] as the next step in application development and distribution," says Greg Sherwood, National Semiconductor's Web coordinator and chairman of the chipmaker's World Wide Web council.

For a taste of the future, check out Silicon Graphics. Using its intranet, dubbed Silicon Junction, the company today accomplishes such feats as making accessible more than two dozen corporate databases that employees can traverse by clicking on bright-blue hyperlinks. Previously, to get the same information, an employee had to submit a request to a staff of specially trained experts who then would extract the requested data from the company's databases--a process that could take several days.

The impact of this article was quite significant given the readership of Business Week at the time was around six million. The reputation of Business Week was probably at its peak and undoubtedly many managers read the article and started to plan for an intranet future. Of course at the same time IT managers were walking up to the C-suite with the Gartner report mentioned above.

To understand what happened next requires a knowledge of what had taken place at the University of Chicago. Marc Andreessen had set up Netscape to develop a web browser that was not so band-width intensive as Mosaic, and a number of the Mosaic developers joined the company. However the University of Chicago owned the code for Mosaic. The rights were transferred to Spyglass, which was a company set up to develop commercial opportunities from University research. Spyglass cleaned up the various versions of Mosaic and in 1995 the company was approached by Microsoft, who subsequently licensed the Spyglass Mosaic code to form the basis of Internet Explorer. The full story of Netscape can be found in a very good book by Joshua Quittner and Michelle Slatalla entitled [Speeding the Net](#) (although the book is now out of print).

Andriessen soon became aware of this deal and that Microsoft was due to announce Internet Explorer on 14 June. He therefore rushed out a briefing on Netscape on 13 June. A couple of weeks later IBM made a commitment to intranet technology, with Amdahl and Oracle following up in August 1996.

The Gartner Group was also taking the intranet seriously. In September 1996, the company published a 50-page report entitled 'Creating an Enterprise Internet and Intranet Policy'. Although there is a heavy emphasis on security management it is clear from the text of the report that the Gartner Group recognised the potential of intranets but was also pushing hard for companies to take an overall perspective on web and intranet policies. Twenty years later that remains uncommon.

David Strom was a Silicon Valley journalist who followed the intranet story very closely in 1996 and 1997. He wrote an article in the August issue of [Forbes magazine](#) in which he said.

If you are about to begin your first Intranet project, you need to gather together people of diverse skills: computer geeks, artists, diplomats, and negotiators. It seems like a motley crew, but you'll need these diverse talents, along with some careful choices in hardware and software, if you will be successful.

1997

In 1997 the first academic papers were published on intranet management issues. The year started with a survey on intranet use published by Web Week (7 January). A third of respondents said that there was only one full time employee assigned to the intranet and another third said that they had between two and five full time equivalents. A number of very good papers came out of Aalborg University in the period from 1997 to 2001, under the leadership of Jan Damsgard. Apart from the quality of the analysis what is of note about these papers is that there were enough intranets around to be able to undertake comparative studies across industry sectors and company categories.

There was also a shift in the focus of the books being published, notably *The Human Side of Intranets – content, style and politics* by Jerry Koehler and his colleagues which was probably the first book to examine what would now be referred to as intranet governance. This book still retains its relevance today. Another important book was *Intranet Business Strategies*, a second book from Mellanie Hills in the course of two years. There were profiles of Amgen, AT&T, Bell Atlantic, Booz Allen & Hamilton, EDS, J.C.Penney, Rockwell International, SAS Institute, Silicon Graphics, Texas Instruments, Turner Broadcasting and United Parcel Service. The book was translated into Japanese and Chinese. In many ways this book was a precursor to the first Nielsen Norman Group Intranet Design Annual published in 2001. However probably the most influential book published in 1997 was *The Twenty-First Century Intranet* by Dr. Jennifer Stone Gonzales, who gained a PhD in communication studies and then took a work placement in a telecommunications company to explore the role of intranets inside organisations. The paperback version appeared in 1998. Shel Holtz was another intranet pioneer in the USA. However, it would be incorrect to see the USA as the sole source of intranet experience. In 1997 Henrik Lyngsie was writing the first book in Danish on intranets and Mats Bark and Mats Heide were among the pioneers in Sweden.

Microsoft continued to invest in its MSWeb intranet. Mary Cronin was a professor of management at Boston College and was hired in 1997 by Mainstream Communications, a Boston consulting company specialising in intranet and corporate internet strategies, to build up a database of case studies. Many of these formed the basis for a series of articles, many published by Fortune magazine. These articles significantly raised the profile of intranets to senior management. Her profile of the Microsoft MSWeb intranet is typical of her work and is representative of the transition that was taking place in 1997 and 1998 to build a 'second generation' intranet. It is based on an interview with Paulyn Heinmiller, Director of Information Services at Microsoft.

Heinmiller and her team found themselves forced to question basic assumptions. "Almost every Microsoft employee is an intranet user, and MSWeb had become essential for them to get their jobs done," she explains. "When we heard complaints that an overdose of choices made finding things more complex, we had to rethink the tradeoffs between being at the cutting edge of technology and being as efficient a service as possible." With the internal web now consisting of over 400 separate servers and more than 690,000 documents serving some 20,000 employees, back to basics was clearly the way to go, she says. "MSWeb has to be as hassle-free as possible."

Version four was released in April 1997. The introductory page of MSWeb is straightforward, with users able to choose between the good-looking, graphics-heavy version and a quick-and-easy text alternative. It turns out that the most technically minded employees tend to make a beeline for straight text interfaces. Another popular feature is a "shortcuts" section that groups resources by common tasks like "benefits information," "training sessions," and "need to order something?" To help users navigate, a detailed tree structure, or site map, lays out all the major intranet resource categories in a hierarchical pattern.

Seeking the moral in Microsoft's intranet experience, Heinmiller concludes it might read something like this: "Be prepared to weed and prune your intranet--but be sure you have a good understanding of user patterns, satisfaction, and future requirements before you pick up the clippers. Remember that redesign is an opportunity to rethink structure and intellectual-access issues, not a quick face-lift. Don't expect it to happen automatically, because it won't. New publishing tools and complicated interfaces may cause as many problems as they solve. Above all, remember that the goal is to help users get their jobs done more effectively.

1998

It has always been very difficult to get any sense of the level of adoption of intranets. The early evidence from the USA about the level of adoption in large companies, especially those in the IT sector, almost certainly does not form a basis for understanding the wider use of intranets. From 1998 the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) did attempt to collect intranet installed base information as part of its e-business survey across all UK businesses. However, this by definition omitted the public sector, charities

and other non-commercial organisations. The ONS view was that by 2001 around 10% of all UK businesses had an intranet, but this has to be questionable. Certainly, the early development was in the US and it took some time for there to be any significant level of interest in the UK. However in 1998 the momentum started to gather. At that time I was working at TFPL in London, a consulting firm with strong interests in information and knowledge management. In mid-1998 the level of inquiries from clients about intranets resulted in TFPL publishing a report 'Intranet Management – A TFPL Guide to Best Practice' written by me, Peter Kibby, Ann Howells and Angela Abell. This proved to be a very popular publication. Most of the advice given was collated from a substantial library of intranet books and reports we had created, along with advice from Howard McQueen, a US-based consultant who had just been appointed as the founding editor of Intranets Professional for Information Today.

Slightly paraphrased the advice given included:

- Intranets will not on their own change business culture
- Staff resources to maintain an intranet will always exceed expectation
- Intranets need a different approach to design and navigation to websites
- Intranets need to be owned by the business
- Intranets need to be user-led
- Intranets should support core business processes
- An intranet cannot be built without good IT support

This list is included not as a demonstration of how clever the team was but that by 1998 good practice had been well established. All of this advice is as applicable today as it was in 1998.

One of the landmark papers published in 1998 was "Organizational knowledge and the Intranet" by Judy E. Scott (Decision Support Systems 23 1998 3–17). It was among the first research papers to examine the potential link between intranet use and knowledge management, and with over 100 references, it provided a comprehensive bibliography of intranet research from 1995 onwards. Interest in intranets was also going global. One of the more remarkable case studies published in 1998 was a thesis on the implementation of an intranet for the Republic of China (Taiwanese) Navy. One of the more entertaining contributions to intranet best practice in 1998 came from Dr. Lloyd Brodsky who was the intranet manager for the ACM SIGGROUP (Special Interest Group in Groupware) who wrote an inverse list of good practice.

- Don't provide any support
- Talk up the security and data integrity risk
- Make it hard for people to add content
- Require an extensive approval process for content
- Don't reward or acknowledge people who contribute
- Allow existing publishing methods to remain incompatible

He concludes with saying "The economics of intranets are too powerful to ignore and the applications that use Web technology are too appealing. But there are forces working against their adoption. Assuming them away will misstate the value of any project and it is generally better to meet lowered expectations than to disappoint high expectations - especially if you get the same result."

Although not directly about intranets one of the major reports in 1998 was the publication by Merrill Lynch of a market report on Enterprise Information Portals. Surprisingly there is no mention of intranets in the report but the concept was very attractive to IT software, networking and services companies because of the market forecast for a portal market worth \$14.8 billion by 2002. Intranets had not been attractive to the IT industry as they were basically flat-file HTML pages on a Windows server, but enterprise information portals were altogether more attractive. Over the next few years, portal software companies were being formed almost every week and by 2002 there were around 150 in business. However the market never really emerged and by 2005 onwards very few of the portal vendors were still in business. The report did start the discussion of the differences and similarities of intranets and portals which continues to this day. Meanwhile in France, Jane McConnell started her work on intranet development projects.

1999

It is unclear when the first conference about intranets took place. There was certainly a conference on intranets and knowledge management in New York in March 1998 organised by First Conferences, followed by a similar conference in Amsterdam in September 1998 and then a further conference in San Francisco in November 1998. I am highlighting the Intranets 1999 conference, organised by Online Inc. in San Francisco in April 1999 because it quickly evolved into an annual event for the US intranet community. For many years it took place in the Bay Area but when Online Inc. was acquired by Information Today the conference eventually moved to the East Coast and became an element of KM World. It may not have been the first conference but it can certainly lay claim to being the longest running event.

1999 was also the year that I started up Intranet Focus Ltd. A well-meaning friend warned me against doing so as everyone now knew what a good intranet should be and should do, so there would be no work as an intranet consultant. Fortunately, they were wrong, but it did take a while to begin to bring in enough work to justify going into business on my own. In Sydney, James Robertson, who set up Step Two Designs as a web agency in 1996 was also turning his attention to intranets.

One of the trends that started to emerge in 1999 was the move towards using a content management system to manage intranet content. Until the late 1990s intranets were either hard-coded into HTML or used Cold Fusion, a web development application that came onto the market in 1995. About that time Rasmus Lerdorf began work on what would become PHP. PHP 3.0 was released in 1998, developed by Lerdorf together with Andi Gutmans and Zeev Suraski, with PHP 4.0 following in 2000. A few years later (to slip out of chronology for a moment) open source applications, notably Mambo and Drupal, became available. 1999 was therefore a tipping point between what might be regarded as first generation intranets that were largely HTML 3 code. From 1999 onwards intranets increasingly used HTML 4.0 and content management applications to create more manageable applications even if the usability still left much to be desired.

2000 - 2002

The period 2000–2002 was a good time to be in the intranet business. Several initiatives started off in 2000 but did not become visible for a while. As an example, in 2000 Paul Miller was running an internal communications consulting company called The Em-

powerment Group. It was supporting some clients with their early stage intranets, covering content, structure and usability. However clients and other large organisations such as Astra Zeneca, BUPA, Alliance & Leicester and Bank of England were beginning to ask some intriguing questions. Is our intranet any good? How does it compare to others? What do other intranets look like? To address this need for independent assessments and insights into how others tackled intranets, Paul suggested forming a confidential ‘club’ of large companies to do two things – to benchmark the usability of their intranets through expert reviews and user-testing and to arrange visits for demos of each other’s intranets. It was not until June 2002 at the British Library in London that the Intranet Benchmarking Forum (IBF) had its first member-only gathering with eight founder members including Astra Zeneca, Allen & Overy and BUPA but it is interesting to see that by 2000 organisations were beginning to appreciate the value of a good intranet.

Meanwhile in California the Nielsen Norman Group was starting to plan the first of its [Intranet Design Award reports](#). In the words of Kara Pernice, Managing Director

Jakob and I were discussing how we would like to study intranets, and the idea that intranet designers don’t have the option to look at designs the same way web designers do. So we wanted to get some case studies and examples of great intranet designs. At the same time, I was a big fan of the magazine “Communication Arts” <http://www.commarts.com/>. I loved how they produced a photography annual, an illustration annual, an advertising annual, etc. I thought a contest would be cool to try, and we could follow the model of [Communication Arts](#), and do this every year and call it the Intranet Design Annual. I recall Jakob and I thinking it was, though, unnerving to call it an “annual” right out of the box, not knowing at all if this was going to be a success.

The invitation to participate was sent out in 2001 and the report was released at the end of the year. It is worth quoting from the Executive Summary of the [2001 report](#)

In the 1990s, corporate intranets were severely underfunded and viewed more as a playground than as a serious business tool that could drive employee productivity. As a result, intranets were an utter mess in most companies lacking interface design standards, unified information architecture, and task support for collaboration and other activities and employees wasted hours every time they tried to find something. Employees did not gain the intranet’s potential benefits of improved communication, collaboration, and awareness, because they were not very motivated to locate information on poorly designed and confusing intranet pages.

In 2001, intranets are generally not much better. But, we have seen a greater emphasis on increasing productivity and on making technology pay for itself. Most marketing-oriented websites have now abandoned cool design and embraced simplicity as a goal (though they don’t always achieve it in practice). By comparison, intranets have been slower to improve. The main reasons are that intranets continue to be poorly managed and lack the budgets required for a redesign that would let them reach the entire company and properly accommodate its applications and mass of online content.

We expect 2002 to be the year that most companies start taking their intranets seriously, improving their usability to boost employee productivity. To expedite this trend, we are publishing 10 case studies of intranets that were done well in 2001.

Another important development was the availability of productised intranet software. In the UK the earliest example was Orchid Software in 1994, joined by Claromentis in 1998, Sorce in 1999 and Intranet Interact in 2000, with others starting up in Canada, the USA and Australia. As well as providing a low-tech entry into intranet deployment these companies also offered intranet managers the opportunity to be a member of a community, continuing to do so ever since.

Other intranet communities were being established around this time. Denmark seemed to be the centre of these communities with IntraTeam starting up in 2000 (though the first IntraTeam event was in 2006) and JBoye in 2003. Both were vendor-neutral and again have continued to support intranet managers in Europe, with JBoye extending to the USA. Prescient Digital Media was founded in the USA by Toby Ward in 2001. In Australia Step Two was founded in 1996, initially as a solutions development business (programming with a focus on XML). The first few client projects were intranet-related, however, and by 2000, Step Two had pivoted to be a purely intranet-focused consultancy.

2002 -2016 – Many awards but little progress

For more than a decade now intranet managers have been striving to get the story across of how important the intranet is to their organisation. Having failed to do so they move on. There is no obvious career development route for intranet managers just as there is no certification for their abilities. Intranets end up in three-four year cycles of enthusiasm/proof-of-concept /evaporation of organisational commitment. A small group of people have done their best to help break this cycle. [Jakob Nielsen](#) and his team have published not only the annual Intranet Design Awards but a great deal of related research. [Sam Marshall](#) has summarised some of the trends from these reports in an excellent post to celebrate his decade in the intranet consulting business. [Jane McConnell](#) started research for her Global Intranet Trends survey in 2006. This was the first (and still the only) research project that has provided a global view of the development of intranets. It has now become [The Organisation in the Digital Age](#) survey. In 2009 [Andrew Wright](#) set up the Worldwide Intranet Challenge which enabled participants to rank their intranet against an aggregation of previous responses.

But probably the person with the highest profile in the intranet business has been [James Robertson](#), who has published many books, launched a conference in Australia and in 2006 started the Intranet Innovation Awards, now renamed The Intranet and Digital Workplace Awards. What does come through is that, with the possible exception of Gartner, none of the major consulting companies has ever made a significant contribution to the development of intranets in terms of reports that would help convince C-Suite executives of their value.

The lessons of history

For me the main lesson from the history of intranets is that we should have paid more attention to the history. In most respects, there has been little technological change compared with what has been happening with (for example) mobile technologies. The core good practice principles were well established by the end of the 1990s, the options for intranet governance were fully explored by Jennifer Stone Gonzales in 1997 and the Nielsen Norman Group began tracking what makes for intranet excellence in 2001. Enterprise social networks are often presented as new and innovative but are arguably no more than enterprise collations of [blogs](#) and [wikis](#), both of which date back the mid-1990s.

So what went wrong? Probably two things. One of these is the ownership of intranets. Most are owned by internal communications, some by IT and some by HR. Very rarely are they owned by any senior manager with a line-of-business link to make the case for intranet investment. The second is that we seem always to be talking about intranets and not about information. We confuse the channel with what is being delivered.

Further reading

A short history of intranets and what's next with social, mobile and cloud is a blog post by James Dellow, published in 2012. [A short history of Intranets](#)

The author

Martin White

Martin White is an intranet, enterprise search and information management strategy consultant. He founded [Intranet Focus Ltd](#) in 1999.

He has undertaken projects or managed business operations in nearly 40 countries. Martin has been managing global virtual meetings since the mid-1970s. He began his consulting career in 1979 and has participated in several thousand meetings in around 500 projects carried out in 40 countries. Not all have been good meetings but it is from the meetings that don't go to plan that the most valuable lessons are learned. An information scientist by profession, Martin has been a Visiting Professor at the [Information School, the University of Sheffield](#) since 2002. He writes a monthly column on enterprise search for [CMSWire](#).



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