

Establishing an Extranet

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An extranet allows authorized stakeholders (for example, customers, suppliers, vendors, or business partners) controlled access to parts of the company's intranet, enabling the parties to share information in an efficient and timely manner. Heavy in content, an extranet should be password-protected to ensure security. When exploring the establishment of an extranet, consider the following:

- Extranets are designed for the rapid delivery of relevant information.
- Supplying current, accurate, and complete information to stakeholders is not a simple process.
- Connecting stakeholders into an extranet can increase their loyalty and make it more difficult for them to switch to a competitor.

What to Do

Know When an Extranet Makes Sense

Establishing an extranet is practical when a company has stakeholders who continually require substantial information or when stakeholders are located in different time zones. By including them in an extranet, you are essentially offering them a self-service option. Instead of delivering the requested information by phone, fax, mail, or in person, an extranet allows your stakeholders to obtain information whenever they want it.

Extranets can be useful to different stakeholders, as shown in the following examples:

- A consulting firm implementing a job for a client can use an extranet to keep the client fully informed on all aspects of the work.
- A private e-marketplace, essentially a complex extranet, can be a site where products and services can be bought and sold.
- A product design may involve a number of partners. The partners can use an extranet to share design specifications and to facilitate effective collaboration.
- An organization can offer customers an extranet that contains specific information on a complex product, including support, upgrades, and ways to use the product.

Plan for Extranet Security

An extranet will contain confidential information that a company is willing to share only with identified partners. In order to maintain secure information, keep in mind the following:

- An extranet often contains elements of the company intranet. Make sure that it is properly locked off from other parts of your intranet.
- Consider encryption, encoding information transferred between parties, so that only the relevant parties can read it.
- Establish a joint security policy with your business partners, so that equal standards and procedures are maintained.

Manage Content Effectively

An extranet is only as useful as the information it contains. If the content is not accurate, current, and comprehensive, then the purpose of the extranet is undermined. Establish quality content management procedures at the outset. Many extranets fail because the content is not being updated and managed properly.

Keep the Design Simple

Business partners will not be happy if they are left waiting for a page to download because of some fancy animation containing a swirling logo. Extranet design should be even more minimal than that of other Web sites to ensure that content can be navigated and downloaded as quickly as possible. Remember, this kind of extranet is very much a work environment.

Provide Adequate Bandwidth

Extranets are often hooked into company intranets that are hosted internally. You will need to make sure that bandwidth is adequate to allow external stakeholders quick access.

Contract With Your Partners

An extranet between business partners involves the communication of confidential information. A contract should be signed by all parties detailing who owns what information, who is responsible for maintenance, and so on.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Heilesen, Simon B. and Sisse Siggaard (editors). *Designing for Networked Communications: Strategies and Development*. IGI Global, 2007.

Web Sites:

Intranet Journal: www.intranetjournal.com

Mark S. Merkow, "Extraordinary Extranets": www.webreference.com/content/extranet

SearchNetworking.com: http://searchnetworking.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid7_gci212089,00.html