Intranets: A Way to Connect

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by William Thieleman, RHIA, and Susan Postal, MBA, RHIA

The uses of the Internet are well known, but companywide intranets are popular as well. In this article, two HIM professionals share how their organizations are putting the power of intranets to work for training, communicating, and more.

An Intranet in the Healthcare Environment

by William Thieleman, RHIA

Twelve years ago, the modern, 165-bed community hospital I worked at had one personal computer, which was available for directors to do their annual budgets. The comptroller would roll the machine around on a cart, and directors would eye it warily until deadline pushed them reluctantly into action.

Times have changed, though. Throughout the 1990s, we witnessed the advent of local area networks and proliferation of workstations, the birth of the World Wide Web, and dial-up access from home with a "point and click" browser, now a seemingly indispensable part of our lives.

We have reached out to find information on servers around the world and shared information hosted on our own servers. At the same time, it has become clear that the technology of the Internet could be used to share information within a company— across a large organization or just across the hall. This led to increased interest in intranets.

Today, my employer, Group Health Cooperative, has found the intranet concept to be an essential tool for communication. In this article, we'll explore some of the things the intranet does for us—and how to set up one at your facility.

A Net of Information

Group Health Cooperative is a member-governed health maintenance organization with more than 40 primary care, mental health, and multispecialty clinics, two hospitals, a skilled nursing facility, and home health/hospice services. It employs more than 8,000 employees and medical staff and is at the center of a rapidly growing network of contracted providers and hospitals. Group Health's intranet project, "InContext," began four years ago and, at the end of 1999, was logging more than 1 million "hits" a month.

The Group Health intranet begins with a home page that supports ease of use as well as setting the tone for this very rich resource, showing basic categories of content and a search engine. It also offers an organization-wide phone book, a "What's New" feature, alerts, updates on organization initiatives, a help section, a link to the public Web site, and any "hot" news.

The page is designed so that users will keep the application running in the background to use the essential and other features frequently. From the home page, users can go to a clinical home page that offers practice guidelines, clinical pathways, decision support, patient education, nursing practices, a popular online medical search tool, and ancillary departments such as laboratory and pharmacy, call schedules, and continuing education.

Users can also go to the pages of individual departments. For instance, the "Facilities" page logs many visits for its directions and maps, conference room scheduling, mail stops, and a mileage calculator. Other departmental features include:

- "Jobs and Benefits" page: human resources policies, a contractor guide, performance management tools, current openings, and information about the co-op's employee assistance program. Publications offered in traditional form are

also online here

- "Reference Section" page: formularies, HEDIS, organizational charts, documentation guidelines, a standardized forms catalogue, policies and procedures, manuals, and standards for workstations, writing, and use of corporate logos
- "Training" page: calendars and interactive scheduling for computer application training, continuing medical education, and new employee and manager orientation. The user also can find self-study opportunities on confidentiality and security, coding, clinical computer applications, and business skills

Doing It Themselves

Anyone who has dabbled in HTML knows that it is easy to go off on tangents during page development. There are so many new twists and tricks that one is easily tempted to experiment with graphics, animations, or complex backgrounds rather than focusing on a uniform look, consistent navigation tools, current content, and links that work. Creating a page in HTML is relatively simple, but putting together and managing a site that allows users to find what they want is another matter entirely.

At Group Health, management help is provided by Marilyn Goebel, MLS, intranet content manager, as well as a clinical section content manager who works with a physician partner and a content manager for the external Web site. When she's working with a fledgling page designer, Goebel uses a series of questions to determine if a Web strategy is appropriate:

- who are the primary and secondary audiences?
- what are the short- and long-term goals?
- will the effort support the originator's purposes?
- does the department have primary responsibility for the information?
- does the material exist on the Web in another format?
- does the department have resources to support building and maintaining the page?

Once the questions are answered satisfactorily, Goebel and the Web manager draw up an agreement that defines their relationship and obligations—affirming, for example, that the content is owned by the department initiating the project, that the page will help staff do their jobs or provide value to consumers, that format will follow organization development standards, and that the department will contribute all material and keep content current. It also identifies responsible individuals, addresses copyright, defamation, and standards of confidentiality and good taste, and places controls on executable code, programs, and scripts.

To make sure that the intranet resource is as effective as possible, its managers have established a strict framework of standards. Goebel maintains a Web page titled "Web Rules" that offers guidelines, tools, and training resources for creating pages.

Each Group Health department is responsible for maintaining their own intranet sites. According to Goebel, this gives each department a greater feeling of investment in the project and more incentive to keep content updated. She cites the organization's administrative services department as an example of a department successfully building a variety of automated capabilities and changing work processes to take advantage of the new technology. As a result, Group Health intranet users can order clinical and business supplies, computers, and catering, reserve conference rooms, request interpreters, search catalogues, submit expenses, and report equipment failure through the department's site.

Goebel and her fellow content managers provide a great deal of individual training for site managers, helping them hone skills and develop new projects. They offer sack-lunch continuing education opportunities presenting "bite-sized" topics and provide statistical reports that indicate traffic to specific pages on a department's site. When a good resource seems underused, they can recommend ways to increase traffic.

Online Training

Online training is quickly becoming a specialty field for intranet designers, partly because of requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), which requires healthcare providers to not only train staff on confidentiality and security principles but to document completion of training as well. Training is a considerable and necessary investment, but it cuts into productive time. Online training can eliminate travel time and expense, provide uniform instruction

and current content, offer short lesson units allowing the student to proceed as time allows, and document successful completion of study.

Some vendors offer training on a broad array of subjects to healthcare organizations on a subscription basis, or organizations can provide their own training. Here, Goebel suggests caution: creating effective online training modules requires a high level of technical and design skills. If a healthcare organization looks to a contractor to tackle such a project, project managers should ask to see examples of the contractor's work and be certain the contractor can work on software applications used within the organization's technical environment.

The Possibilities are Endless

As it evolves, the intranet concept will support many health information functions online. It's ideal for supporting Joint Commission, NCQA, and state site surveys. It's also a good way to maintain and distribute departmental policies and procedures, a release of information manual, confidentiality and security training, coding and transcription resources, guidelines and standards, and performance standards. Group Health's site also includes our standardized chart order, an online standard forms catalogue, access applications, and incident reports.

HIM professionals also can use an intranet to make confidentiality tools available as well, including your organization's confidentiality statement to print and sign, your official fax coversheet, a patient rights and responsibilities document, and authorizations for release of information. These should be .pdf files so the content cannot be altered.

What's Next for the Intranet?

What's ahead for Group Health's intranet? In the immediate future, Goebel says, she expects to see increased security capabilities added to facilitate safe distribution of proprietary information to selected recipients. She also predicts more database-driven pages that will recognize users and collect information about their preferences and history of intranet use. Eventually, she expects, managers will be updating databases rather than Web pages.

Because of its flexibility, the intranet model will continue to be popular. In fact, according to Ernie Hood, director for data resources, most organizations spend more time communicating within than outside, so a private network automatically becomes highly useful.

In the future, Hood expects healthcare organizations will likely move from providing static content on intranets to creating more dynamic uses for the medium. Organizations will migrate their clinical and business applications to a Web-based platform, consolidating them on a browser while mixing and matching functions from a variety of legacy systems. Further down the line, application service providers, rather than selling an application to the healthcare organization, may sell service by running, maintaining, and upgrading an application and storing data for the provider via the Internet.

At the rate information technology is transforming our work and our lives, it may well be that in another 12 years, we'll look at the browser as something of a Wright brothers' flyer. In the meantime, many people are creating technical solutions to the challenges of providing affordable, quality healthcare.

HIM professionals must take their seats at the design tables. The way we do business and provide service is changing, but the basic tenets of practice remain the same. Providers still need timely access to complete and accurate health information to deliver quality healthcare. By understanding how to use new technology effectively, we become part of the architecture of healthcare's future.

Introducing the Intranet

Some advice for the healthcare organization embarking on development of an intranet:

- get senior management buy-in
- ensure that the intranet audience has Internet access. Secure the technical resources to get the server and pages set up
- develop a communication process to get people using the intranet as a new resource and to foster its continued use

- develop processes to get new content aboard and to keep it updated, fresh, and inviting
- operate from the perspective that an intranet is a means to give people the information they need to do their jobs, not what you think they need

Once the intranet is in place, remember that it is useful only to those who use it. Creating an intranet requires a sizable investment in equipment, software, development, and content management, so an organization needs strategies to help protect its investment and make the intranet as effective as possible. Use of an intranet needs to be constantly reinforced and encouraged by e-mail messages, references in organizational newsletters, and other traditional forms of communication. Even simple telephone inquiries can become opportunities to refer a caller to intranet resources.

"Pointing and Clicking" Your Way to Knowledge

by Susan Postal, MBA, RHIA

In any organization, the coding and HIM department should be guided by a commitment to effective and efficient operational processes. Not only should processes be efficient, they also should be completed in a timely and consistent manner. This seems like a tall order to fill, but some new technologies—like the Internet and intranets—are making it easier.

Columbia/HCA's HIM services department has begun to harness a fraction of the Internet's power by using both the intranet and Internet to communicate coding/HIM standards; support our education and training initiatives; and disseminate tools and resources to facilitate the implementation and application of the standards in day-to-day operations. This article describes some of our successes and lessons learned.

Harnessing the Power

Communicating the Standards

Columbia/HCA's HIM services team communicates coding/documentation standards and operational performance expectations through the company's code of conduct and policies and procedures. These documents are components of a company-wide initiative coordinated by the ethics, compliance, and corporate responsibility department.

In addition to distributing this information through traditional paper methods, our team takes advantage of an intranet—an internal network accessible within the company only—for internal communications. The code of conduct and all policies and procedures are posted on an "Ethics, Compliance, and Corporate Responsibility" intranet site that all Columbia/HCA associates can access. The HIM services department intranet site also provides links to policies and procedures.

Having policies and procedures available on the intranet affords timely access to multiple users inside and outside the HIM services department. It allows us to communicate information that is consistent and up to date. And because our coworkers have easy access at their workstations, the chances of them referencing the documents frequently—and using the correct version—are increased.

While communicating to employees is a priority, Columbia/HCA also has made a commitment to share our ethics, compliance, and corporate responsibility standards. Exchanging success stories also enhances healthcare industry values and standards. For this purpose, the Internet works well, allowing us to offer online access through the Columbia/ HCA "Ethics and Compliance Home Page" at www.columbia-hca.com/ethics. In addition to the code of conduct and policies and procedures, the site also includes sample presentations and guidelines for ethics and compliance officers.

Thanks to Internet and intranet technologies, we are able to communicate a consistent message to multiple users in a timely and efficient manner.

One-stop Shopping: Education and Training

After an organization clearly communicates its standards, a comprehensive education and training curriculum to achieve the articulated expectations is critical. Columbia/HCA's intranet meets this need in multiple ways.

Employees can take advantage of the intranet's "one-stop shopping" approach by using a current listing of education and training offerings. This list, accessible to all employees, provides a description of the seminar, the target audience, and how many continuing education hours are approved by AHIMA. Further, it can be updated frequently.

The HIM intranet site also provides links to other intranet sites that offer related education and training, including the outcomes measurement and the information technology departments.

Because face-to-face training is not always the most cost-effective method for reaching large audiences in remote locations, Columbia/HCA uses conference calls, satellite broadcasts, and teleconferencing to provide education and training. The intranet makes it easier to use these alternative methods by providing online access to education and training documentation, such as PowerPoint presentations, scripts, and reference materials that can be disseminated efficiently and inexpensively to remote participants. Again, technology helps the company reach many people with a consistent message in a timely manner—putting knowledge at the fingertips of our associates.

In addition to facilitating education and training, the HIM services intranet site offers specific help to Columbia/HCA HIM professionals through an online DRG coding course. Designed for the experienced coder, the online course enhances the coder's knowledge of ICD-9-CM code assignments, reviews application of coding rules and guidelines through case studies, and reinforces the use of available coding reference materials. (The course is approved by AHIMA for 12 continuing education hours.)

Employee passwords are required for access. Columbia/HCA participants are able to register and participate online from remote locations. The course is self-paced, providing immediate feedback through an online assessment. When participants successfully complete the course, they receive a continuing education certificate. The course is updated periodically.

The intranet eliminates the need for each trainer to reinvent the wheel. Instead, a standardized message can be shared with easy access to supplemental tools for a train-the-trainer approach—another added value of the new technologies.

The Right Stuff: Tools and Resources

The true test of education and training is *how easy is it to put in practice*? In many ways, the intranet offers advantages to traditional methods. When our associates have easy online access to up-to-date references and tools, they are empowered to achieve greater levels of success.

Although we continue to distribute most of our documentation in paper, we also provide many tools and resources through the intranet. The goal is to move away from paper and use electronic media as our primary communication method. For example, frequently updated online documents include monthly newsletters, policy and procedure implementation guidelines, preferred and certified vendor listings, and our data management catalog.

Columbia/HCA also uses intranet capabilities to link staff to Internet sites that contain valuable information. These resources enhance the knowledge that users can apply on the job. By suggesting prescreened sites that offer the most valuable information, the company helps multiple users save time they might have spent searching for relevant materials.

Finally, in the spirit of interaction, the intranet site also includes a virtual "comments and suggestion box" to which users can contribute anonymously, if they prefer. This is a great way to collect feedback on the intranet site and on services provided to our internal customers. As we work to respond to customer feedback, we ensure continuous improvement.

Where Do We Go From Here?

We will continue to use our intranet and the Internet to make our operations even better. In the future, for example, we hope to use this technology for more education and training offerings. Right now, we are evaluating how we can best use our intranet and the Internet for interactive distance learning.

Our analysis of intranet and Internet training will include a better understanding of these factors:

- **learner demographics**: It is important that we understand the audience we are trying to reach. In addition to knowing the number of learners, we want to identify their geographical locations, skill levels, experience with the technology, and preferred learning style
- **content**: In assessing the use of this technology for education and training, it is important to review current materials and understand how they can be tailored to capitalize on this new vehicle. Assessing what content to "buy" versus "make" is also a key to success. In an effort to maximize use of this technology, it is important to include features such as automated registration, course completion progress reports, pre-testing and post-testing to measure performance results, and the granting and tracking of continuing education hours

As our vendors continue to harness the power of the Internet, we will work with them to understand how we can use the Web to update software and provide more current tools and references to our mutual customers. As HIM professionals, we understand the power of good information. As a part of our organizationwide use of new technology, we have helped promote timely access to complete and accurate information, which leads to better decision making and, ultimately, better performance. As a result, we have learned that knowledge is a "point and click" away.

Lessons Learned

Anyone traveling a new path should remember the lessons learned on the journey to success. Here are some of the key points to consider when exploring the use of this technology in your organization:

- don't assume all of your customers have easy access to the intranet and Internet
- know your customers' current hardware and software specifications and design accordingly
- know how your customers will be accessing your site (network or remote) and design your graphics accordingly
- clearly communicate the hardware and software specifications required for your customers to capitalize on the intranet and Internet
- identify a Webmaster who can make your site efficient and effective
- capitalize on links
- keep your site current
- make it simple to navigate
- continue to explore expansion
- ensure your site has integrity and includes only credible information
- don't clutter your site with unimportant information

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