

## OFFICE TECHNOLOGY

# Opening Up

## Some European firms let employees edit Intranets

By RHEA WESSEL

**T**HE WORLD WIDE Web originally was designed to be an environment where people could exchange ideas, but most people use it in read-only mode, the same mode employees use when sampling their company's Intranet. Dick Stenmark, a senior lecturer in the informatics department of Göteborg University, thinks many employees would share information more readily if given the chance in an easy, user-friendly way.

In a study released earlier this year, Mr. Stenmark concluded that removing read-only limitations from corporate Intranets, essentially turning static bulletin boards into online forums, can increase the flow of information within a company, helping people share knowledge.

Mr. Stenmark and his team tested the so-called wiki principle on corporate Intranets and examined the effects of allowing Secretary A and Manager B to augment, change or revise a company's Intranet at will. The wiki principle is based on Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia written by an army of volunteers. It was founded on the premise that everybody has knowledge to share with others.

For many firms that have opened their Intranets to editing by employees, the wiki principle has created an overwhelming positive experience: The amount of information available has increased, employees are communicating and coordinating more readily, and mistakes—from punctuation and broken links to content errors—are corrected regularly.

"When editing becomes as easy as surfing, people who want to share knowledge can indeed do so on a corporate Intranet," says Mr. Stenmark.

Wikis have long been used by companies to create virtual project workspaces and help employees work together better from remote locations and in different time zones. Think of this use as the virtual water cooler for select team members. Project members log on, read timelines and notes and post their own comments to such sites. Wiki-style corporate Intranets, on the other hand, are a whole different ballgame. If workspaces are virtual water coolers, then wiki-Intranets are virtual annual meetings. Anyone who has access to a company's Intranet would be free to grab the microphone (or keyboard) and weigh in on the proceedings.

Fears of losing control of critical information may be keeping many managers from taking wikis one step further than dedicated project spaces and using them to open the Intranet.

"In the mid-1990s, many managers focused on the potential dangers rather than the opportunities of editing software," says Mr. Stenmark. "I don't think any managers actually sat down and calculated the risks. They tacitly assumed that Intranets had to be implemented like mainframe and email systems—very much from the top down."

Despite the perceived risks, some companies are plowing ahead. A Nordic call center that has been allowing key employees to edit databases of information about clients' products and procedures says it has not had a single discipline case in the two years that the software has been installed. A Belgian Internet Service Provider that took the lid off its Intranet for all 30 employees has seen the content on its database increase by 50% since it began the project one year ago. And a U.K. software developer says its wiki-style software has become an integral part of the way the company works.

"From the reception, to the sales team, to the developers, everyone is involved with this, and that's the key to its success," says John Cieslik-Bridgen, vice president, customer operations and support, for Orbis Technology, a subsidiary of NDS Group PLC and a maker of interactive gambling software based in London.

For companies considering the wiki principle, qualms about employee misbehavior or vandalism can be swept aside by the obvious

fact that most people are on better behavior at work than at home because they want to keep their jobs.

Mr. Cieslik-Bridgen concedes that his company had some concerns when it implemented a wiki-based software called TWiki in 2003 for its 120 employees. Managers

*There's little reason to worry about vandalism. Most people are on better behavior at work than at home.*

wondered how the self-regulating nature of the system would work. Orbis now says that the more people who use the open-edit Intranet the more value the company gets from it. "We trust people to have full access, and they reward the company with their trust," he says.

Just in case that trust ever broke down, the software retains a repository of changes, and a network administrator could easily

roll back edited pages.

**Belnet**, a Belgian ISP based in Brussels that is dedicated to university and research users, simply downloaded wiki software from the Web free of charge. Belnet replaced its static Intranet with a wiki-Intranet and employees began to use it after a 30-minute explanation. "The net result is that there is a lot more information and documentation available than before," says Vera Gustav, a company spokeswoman. "There are no obstacles to keeping your things up to date. On the Intranet, lots of documents were old because the responsible person didn't know how to update them or forgot about it."

Belnet issued limited guidelines about the wiki to keep the structure consistent. Technical staffers are to post their documents in a certain space, while financial staffers do the same in another.

**Excellent Intressenter AB**, a Danderyd, Sweden-based call-center and outsourcing company, allows some 30 people to change information via its Altova Authentic editing application made by Altova Inc.

Ester Gustavsson, a customer coordinator, says one of her team members recently went to extra trouble to get some information for a caller. The caller wanted to buy a trailer from a hardware company. The agent called the hardware company to find out how the trailer was supposed to be registered with the government and then passed on this in-

formation to the caller.

In the past, these helpful details might have been shared only by word-of-mouth with a few employees in the agent's direct vicinity. Now, the company has a procedure for handling it. The agent clicks on a link that pulls up a template email with the basic information and addresses it to Ms. Gustavsson, her manager. Ms. Gustavsson updates the Intranet and posts a news item about the change.

"The agents have so much information all the time. If they didn't have a direct link to me in this way, the information would probably just get lost," says Ms. Gustavsson. "We emphasize that everybody is responsible for having the updated information. It's not just the person in charge."

Times have changed for Ms. Gustavsson, who joined Excellent as a call agent three years ago. When she started, she had to locate relevant Word documents on file servers and hope her colleagues hadn't left them open, denying her access. Occasionally, she put callers on hold, left her desk, walked to the library, found information in written form and then reported back to the caller.

"This system has helped immensely on call time and in cases when an agent doesn't have all the information in his or her memory," says Karsten Hojgaard, a system engineer. "Search time has dropped by 50%." ■■■

## TELECOMMUNICATIONS

# Triple Play

## PCCW of Hong Kong is one of the first phone companies to offer voice, data and TV service. Here's a report card.

By EVAN RAMSTAD

**L**AST YEAR, Connie Lam accepted an offer from Hong Kong's biggest telephone company to try its television service, delivered over the same line as the phone and high-speed Internet services she gets. After three weeks, she canceled because neither she nor her five-year-old son liked any of the channels then available.

But she signed back up in January after the company, PCCW Ltd., added movie channels like HBO and children's channels like Disney Channel and Nickelodeon. Ms. Lam canceled her cable-TV subscription, which cost nearly \$100 a month. Instead, she pays about \$26 for a mix of channels that she chose. "It's quite a big difference," she says.

PCCW began marketing television service two years ago by touting its big difference with cable TV—cus-

tomers pay for just what they want to watch. Although light on offerings at the beginning, as PCCW added subscribers it added channels, attracting more and more customers.

The incremental growth strategy appears to be working. While using Internet technology to send television programming over higher-speed telephone lines is still a novelty in much of the world, PCCW has signed up nearly half a million customers for its Now Broadband TV service. It's the largest so-called Internet Protocol TV, or IPTV, system in the world at the moment, and a serious competitor to Hong Kong's lone cable-TV system, which has about 620,000 subscribers.

With its TV service, PCCW became one of the first phone companies in the world to offer a combination of voice, data and TV, something known as a "triple play" in the industry. And the company recently acquired control of a cellular system and will add another service to its one-stop shop for consumers.

In the U.S., the three largest phone companies, **SBC Communications Inc.**, **Verizon Communications Inc.** and **BellSouth Corp.**, are all developing IPTV services,

## IPTV Around the World

A look at the status of Internet TV services in various markets

## ■ NORTH AMERICA

**U.S.:** SBC is upgrading its network to offer video services, with help from Microsoft. It may launch IPTV in 2006.

**CANADA:** Bell Canada is working with Microsoft to develop an IPTV system.

## ■ ASIA

**HONG KONG:** PCCW has 441,000 subscribers to its Now Broadband TV service, launched two years ago.

**JAPAN:** Four telecom service providers are offering fledgling IPTV services,

Source: WSJ research

though programming is limited due to copyright and other restrictions.

**SOUTH KOREA:** KT launched a trial of IPTV service in 200 homes in Seoul in April. Hanaro Telecom is expected to launch IPTV in Seoul in late 2005 or early 2006.

## ■ EUROPE

**AUSTRIA:** Telekom Austria launched IPTV nationally in June.

**BELGIUM:** Belgacom launched IPTV nationally in June.

**FRANCE:** France Telecom

last year launched IPTV service in Lyon and Paris. It had 116,000 subscribers at end of June.

**GERMANY:** Deutsche Telekom is testing a system but hasn't set a launch date.

**SPAIN:** Telefonica launched IPTV service late last year, now available to about 25% of its coverage area.

**SWITZERLAND:** Delayed IPTV launch until 2006.

**U.K.:** A handful of small companies offer IPTV in London and its suburbs. BT Group is testing a system, with launch expected in late 2006.

though most will take the rest of the decade to broadly deploy. Four companies in Japan provide IPTV service, and a new service is expected to launch in South Korea later this year.

Triple play is "talked about in North America, but it's happening in Asia," says Julie Kuntsler, founder of Portview Communications, a U.S.-Israeli venture-capital firm that specializes in telecom investments.

While PCCW's à la carte television offerings would seem to limit channel surfing, it built its system so that every channel's programs are always visible to subscribers. But a channel that a subscriber isn't paying for, after a minute or so, turns into a subscription screen that explains the cost to continue watching. And, as PCCW has added subscribers, it has offered more-so-

phisticated pricing, via bundles of channels that cost less when purchased together than they would have separately.

Hong Kong's density gave PCCW an early advantage that may not transfer to spread-out suburban areas in the U.S. and elsewhere. Most of the city's residents live in high-rise buildings, and the company's network doesn't require nearly as many miles of wiring as might be required in a more widespread city with far fewer than the seven million people who live in Hong Kong.

The company started the service with 23 channels in October 2003. Today, PCCW offers 85, about evenly split between Asian-based channels and those from Europe and North America. Most of the overseas channels are dubbed or subtitled in Chinese. ■■■