

In the loop: building your own Intranet

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When some state or federal agency issues an order that the folks in your practice have to be trained as soon as possible on, let's say, hand hygiene, what's the reaction in the office? Grumbling? A disorganized scramble to comply?

Not at the Washington Square Endoscopy Center in Philadelphia.

There, if you were to follow one of the staff members, you might see her duck into her office at lunch time, click on an icon on the computer, then sit down to watch a PowerPoint Presentation of the mandated material. She might absorb the lesson all in one session. Or, before taking a test on the subject to certify that she has gotten the point, she might just spread her studies over four or five 10-minute sessions.

In any case, she has avoided being herded into a stuffy conference room to hear a droning lecturer or watch a brain-numbing video at an inconvenient time. That's because the mandated lesson was on the center's Intranet.

Intranet is not a typographical error.

The *Internet* and its bottomless well of information, videos, games, and oddities is a collection of several hundred million computers spread around the world. An *Intranet* is the Internet's local cousin: a network that links all the computers within a practice—whether those PCs are in one building or in several satellite facilities all over the city—to a central computer containing the practice's data and programs.

What you want

An Intranet can be as simple or as complicated as you and your colleagues desire. It can be confined to your office. Or it can be configured so that it can

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be accessed from home, linked to your electronic medical records system, or connected to the network maintained by the medical center affiliated with your practice. It can be set up to offer nothing more than a central calendar where everybody can see everybody else's schedule. (See our October 2006 issue, page 674, for an article about online calendars.)

Intranets rely on the same interactive technology that allows people to use the Internet to fill in forms on shopping sites, search for information, take part in discussions, or make postings on forums, among other things.

At its most sophisticated, an Intranet can be used to:

- Request and track vacation time
- Assemble on-call schedules
- Organize phone messages from patients and medical personnel
- Offer training courses

Perhaps most importantly, an Intranet can be the repository for the hundreds, if not thousands, of documents and forms used daily in your practice for the benefit of your patients. For example, all those patient information sheets given out by the hundreds from the Washington Square Endoscopy Center are now stored on their Intranet, where they are quickly accessible to anyone within reach of a computer.

Says Stephanie Diem, RN, clinical director and de facto Intranet administrator for the endoscopy center: "I don't need to have papers for patient training lying around anymore to be photocopied over and over. When I need something I can just print it out."

How to build it

Building an Intranet does not have to be difficult. Someone on your staff may be technologically savvy enough

to load documents and programs on a central computer and show your colleagues how to use a browser such as Internet Explorer or Firefox to access those resources from their own computers. It may not be fancy, but it qualifies for the title of Intranet.

That in-house techie could, of course, also use commercial software, including Microsoft's SharePoint Services and Webex's WebOffice, to build all or part of an Intranet.

A better approach might well be to use an information technology specialist, which is what the Washington Square Endoscopy Center has done. Ms. Diem may create many of the center's Intranet contents and administer it on a day-to-day basis, but the actual business of building and maintaining the pipelines and programs behind the Intranet is in the hands of Nick Strbic, an outside consultant.

Resources

Microsoft

SharePoint Services

- www.microsoft.com/sharepoint/default.msp

Webex

WebOffice

- www.weboffice.com

Before images of dollars flying out a window flash before your eyes as you consider hiring a consultant, know that the endoscopy center uses Mr. Strbic's services only one day a week.

The key advantage to using an IT guy such as Mr. Strbic, of course, is that you get an Intranet personalized for your practice alone. An even more important advantage to using a part-time consultant is that he or she can design and introduce the Intranet to your practice in baby steps.