**Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox**, January 4, 2010:

**10 Best Intranets of 2010**

**Summary:**
Intranet design is maturing and reaping the rewards of continuous quality improvement for traditional features, while embracing new trends like mobile access, emergency preparedness, and user/employee-contributed content.

The 10 **best-designed intranets for 2010** are:

- Enbridge, Inc., a leader in energy transportation and distribution in North America (Canada)
- GE, a diversified technology, media, and financial services company (US)
- Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), a nonprofit medical research organization (US)
- Huron Consulting Group, a consulting company (US)
- Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), a NASA Center that manages robotic spacecraft exploration of Earth, the solar system, and the universe (US)
- The MITRE Corporation, a not-for-profit organization managing four federally funded research and development centers (US)
- SCANA Corp., a Fortune 500 energy-based holding company (US)
- Trend Micro, Inc., a leader in Internet content security (Japan)
- URS Corporation, a leading provider of engineering, construction, and technical services for public agencies and private sector companies (US)
- Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. (Walmart), a retailer with more than 8,000 retail units under 53 different banners in 15 countries (US)

Walmart also won in **2002** for its previous intranet, and thereby joins a very small group of companies that have won the award multiple times: Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu has won for both its worldwide and Australian member firm intranets, and Cisco Systems' intranet has also been recognized twice.

While many of this year's winners are from the US, we also have a winner from Canada and, for the first time, a winner from Japan.
Breaking with past trends, this is the first time in 10 years without any winners from Europe or from the financial sector. (GE does have a finance business, but it's not a dedicated financial services company.) The lack of banks, brokers, and insurance companies might be explained by the finance crisis: these companies had other things to occupy their attention and smaller (if any) budgets for intranet design. In contrast, there's no excuse for the poor showing of European intranet designs given that Europe accounted for 31% of the winners from 2001 to 2009. Let's see some more good European intranets next year, please.

**Growing Intranet Teams**
This year, the median company size among our winners was 6,350 employees (the median is a better metric than the mean this year because Walmart is so huge that it would skew the calculation of an arithmetic mean.) From 2001 to 2006, ever-bigger organizations tended to dominate the awards, peaking in 2006, when the average company size was 107,000 employees. From 2007 to 2010, however, smaller companies became more prominent among the winners. This trend likely shows a maturing of intranet technologies: it's becoming easier and easier to build a good user experience without access to the substantial resources found in 100,000+ employee companies.

An alternative interpretation is that companies of all sizes are giving intranets higher priority and giving intranet teams more resources. The average team size this year was 14 people, which is 27% higher than the average team size in 2006 when the winning companies were much larger.

**Mobile Intranet Sites**
This year, 30% of the intranets had special mobile features. In previous years, we might have heralded this as a big number, but now that mobile is the big trend on the open Web, our conclusion is the opposite: intranets appear to be lagging in mobile device support.

One fairly obvious explanation might be that most intranets are accessed from the office. Also, as one team found, employees who express a desire for mobile access might not be familiar enough with their own mobile devices to actually use them easily.
Neither explanation is likely to remain true for long. Although most intranet use probably does occur at work, people increasingly expect "anytime, anyplace" access because that's what they get from those big websites that set user expectations. Also, employees who frequently travel often account for particularly high-value use cases (such as sales calls). Finally, employees will get better at using mobile devices to access intranet content, services, and applications for two reasons. First, they'll be getting more experience as their mobile Web use grows. Second, mobile devices are getting significantly more usable with every generation (and mobile revs every year), which will make it increasingly easier for users to perform all mobile tasks.

Given our general research on mobile usability, we strongly recommend that you create a separate design for mobile users. User performance declines significantly when people attempt to access a general-purpose website — that is, one that's desktop-targeted — from a mobile device. All three winners followed our recommendation, but in different ways.

The JPL team built a dedicated application, rather than a site, to optimize the design for a single platform — the iPhone — and thereby offer a richer user experience.

Both Enbridge and MITRE created special mobile-targeted sites, with scaled-back offerings of critical content and applications. This more general strategy supports a wider range of users than a single application. Even so, MITRE designed mainly for BlackBerry, though people with other smartphones can also use the site.

These examples highlight an important difference between mobile intranets and mobile websites: for enterprise use, you can target a specific device if it is already the company's preferred platform. On the Web, of course, you must serve all comers or lose business.
Social Features on Intranets

In addition to being the year of mobile, it was definitely the year of social networking on the Internet at large. On intranets, this second trend was echoed more strongly than the first.

Social features were common on the winning intranets. Many of the issues in designing social features for an intranet are similar to those in designing social features for a website. But there are important differences as well.

Most strikingly, there are two levels of social networking on intranets:

- Social features for employees as individuals
- Workgroup support and other features that encourage work-related connections

Examples of social features targeting individuals include Walmart's discussion and profile pages; Trend Micro's TrendSpace, which included employee-contributed content; MITRE's social bookmarking service, which lets employees share their favorite links; and GE's commenting and rating features.

Work-oriented social features include the URS technical forums, where engineers collaborate and share best practices; MITRE's Expertise Finder, which helps users locate coworkers who have specific knowledge; and HHMI's project pages, where teams collaborate directly and share information.

Another major difference between social intranets and social websites is the significantly increased accountability within the enterprise, which again can lead to higher quality and more widespread participation if handled right. It's common to avoid anonymity. Trend Micro goes a step further with an elaborate system of reward points that accrue to employees when they contribute to the intranet's community features. Points don't just give bragging rights; they can be redeemed for real prizes — a good way to combat participation inequality.
**Beyond Boss Blogs**
For several years, we've noted the trend of CEO blogs on better intranets. This is almost a special subgenre of social networking; CEO weblogs often include social features such as discussions and/or comments.

Such blogs were again strong this year, but included enhanced features to show executives with a "human face" and help make them more approachable. On Walmart's intranet, for example, the executive profiles go beyond work experience to highlight personal experiences and interests. And Trend Micro combined executive blogs with semiannual online meetings where employees can engage directly with the executives.

**Change Management; Internal Marketing**
Users hate change. That's as true for intranets as for websites. At the same time, intranets are often bad enough that change is desperately needed. Even a good intranet can vastly increase employee productivity through a few improvements, given that people use it every day. (If people don't use the intranet every day, that's a sign in its own right that it's not good enough.) Still, most users really do prefer to muddle along with a familiar user interface, which raises the question: How can you resolve the tension between the need for change and the pain that change entails?

Many of this year's winning intranets took explicit steps to manage design change and encourage users to try out new and improved features. For example, many teams conducted extensive user research before deciding on their design direction. This definitely keeps teams focused on user needs and lowers the risk of releasing something that people will resist. If you get bad feedback, at least you get it before launch, giving you time to overcome employees' objections. Besides the actual feedback, usability studies serve a second function as an explicit signal of the team's willingness to listen. Research is one way to engage stakeholders and let them know you care.

Beyond user research, several teams engaged a wider range of stakeholders in early communication that continued throughout the design process. As designs became more defined, some teams fielded special early-access programs that let smaller groups of people use the new design before it was rolled out to everybody. For example, SCANA did a one-month beta test with
150 employees who later became "ambassadors" for the new design.

Finally, once the new design launched, explicit internal marketing campaigns helped promote early uptake. Don't assume that employees will discover new features for themselves. People are too busy and just aren't as interested in the intranet for its own sake as you are. This year's promotional initiatives included an IT expo, cafeteria demos, posters, road shows, and emails, as well as SCANA's grass-roots campaign to enlist the beta testers as site ambassadors. SCANA also created internal commercials, using employees as volunteer actors.

**Emergency Preparedness**

Maybe it's a sign of our unsettled times, with threats ranging from mutating influenza viruses to terrorist attacks to global warming. Whatever the reason, 40% of winning companies designed intranet features with the explicit goal of addressing unexpected emergencies. Walmart and URS were both impacted by Hurricane Katrina a few years ago, creating an impetus to ensure that their intranets could be quickly adapted to help out in future emergencies. Of course, after a disaster hits, it's too late to start a project to figure out what to do; by then it's time for action. The Boy Scouts had the right idea with their motto, "be prepared."

This year's winning intranets offered a range of emergency features, including:

- a homepage alert system that pops up emergency information without waiting for a page refresh;
- separate emergency-specific homepages that can be activated on short notice;
- dedicated homepage sections that appear during emergencies; and
- a full-blown emergency operations center.

The trend toward using the intranet to help manage emergencies is a sign of maturity: intranets are becoming recognized as a key part of the organizational infrastructure.
Continuing Trends = Continuous Quality Improvement
Many trends among this year's winners are continuations of long-term trends that we've identified and commented on in past years. Some of these include:

- Frequent use of SharePoint
  - Many other technology platforms were common as well, including Google Search Appliance; no one solution guarantees a great intranet
- Reliance on page templates to ensure consistent user interfaces
- Firming up the editorial workflow to ensure content quality; at Enbridge, for example, each page has a named content owner to guard against stale information
- Many interesting presentations of news streams on the homepage
- Role-based personalization to focus users on the content and apps most useful to their jobs
  - Widespread customization let users adapt the UI on their own, including improved designs for the ever-popular Quick Links/My Links feature
- Focus on improving search, including interesting approaches to advanced search
  - Even so, intranet search remains a sore point, and many teams relied on manual tweaks (such as offering "Best Bets")
  - People search remains an extremely popular feature
- Extensive use of usability methods, from simple user testing to card sorting, field studies, and personas
- Poor monetized ROI metrics, but some promising measures of increased usage and employee satisfaction
  - In one hard ROI example, Trend Micro saved $1.6 million per year by hosting meetings on its intranet

For these — and many other — issues, this year's best intranets show steady improvements over previous years' designs. It's not that these things haven't been done before, it's that the new designs build on the previous ones and become ever-more refined. In other words, we're benefiting from a process of continuous quality improvement for intranet user experience. In virtually every other field, CQI is known as the way to true quality, so seeing it in intranets is a further sign of this field's growing maturity.
And thus we have this year's meta-trend: **intranet design is maturing**. We see this growing maturity in many aspects of the winning intranets, from team size to the reliance on CQI. So with this, the 10th *Intranet Design Annual*, we mark the anniversary of the award not only with great winners, but also with kudos to the entire field for having come of age.

**Full Report**

449-page *Intranet Design Annual* with 198 screenshots of the 10 winners for 2010 is available for download.

**Taken From:** [http://www.useit.com/alertbox/intranet_design.html](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/intranet_design.html)