Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, January 4, 2011:

10 Best Intranets of 2011

Summary:
Knowledge management progressed from cliché to reality, based on simpler and thus more-used features. Mobile intranets doubled.

The 10 best-designed intranets for 2011 are:

- AMP Limited (Australia), a wealth management company
- Bennett Jones LLP (Canada), one of Canada's largest law firms
- Bouygues Telecom (France), a telecom, mobile, fixed, TV, and Internet communications services company
- Credit Suisse AG (Switzerland), a global financial services company
- Duke Energy (US), an electrical power holding company
- Habitat for Humanity International (US), a non-profit, non-denominational Christian housing ministry
- Heineken International (The Netherlands), a leading brewer and owner and manager of a portfolio of beer brands
- KT (Republic of Korea), an information, communications, and technology company
- Mota-Engil Engenharia e Construção, S.A. (Portugal), a leading construction enterprise
- Verizon Communications (US), a provider of wired and wireless broadband and communications services to US consumers, as well as of global business networking, data, and managed solutions to enterprises worldwide


(This may sound like a lot of repeats, but this is the 11th Intranet Design Annual and we've had 110 winning slots in all. So, the 5 companies who've won twice correspond to just 4.5%, making these few companies the elite of the elite.)

This year's winning sites include two specialized sites. Mota-Engil's winning site is its InnovCenter, a site aimed at creating and implementing innovative
ideas. Heineken's winning site is its BrandPortal, which is used to share marketing and brand assets worldwide.

This is our most international group of Intranet Design Annual winners yet, with companies from 8 different countries, including our first winners from Korea and Portugal.

Although European intranets and financial-sector intranets both put in a poor performance last year, Europe has certainly made a strong comeback with 40% of this year's winners; it's also nice to see strong financial-services intranets again.

**Smaller Companies Get Better Intranets**

There have always been small companies among the winners, and this year was no exception, with winners such as Bennett Jones (925 employees).

The average size of this year's winning organizations is **37,900 employees**. This is remarkably close to the previous two years' averages of 37,500 (2009) and 39,100 (2010, excluding the outlier Walmart, with its 1.4 million store associates). On average, recent winners have been less than half the size of the winners from 2005–2008, when the average size was 76,250 employees.

Although 37,900 employees is certainly not a small organization, the fact that recent winners are half as big as past winners is a remarkable change. How is it that smaller companies now achieve such excellence in intranet design? Partly, it's a reflection of increased investments in intranets (see the team size discussion below), and partly it's a consequence of better tools for building intranets. The easier it is to make the implementation work, the more resources are left for design and usability. This is especially important in smaller organizations, which were harder pressed to make things work with clunkier technology.

The average size of the winning teams was **14 people** this year. (Same as last year.) This is about twice the size of the winning intranet teams 10 years ago, when the winning companies were typically bigger.

One cautionary observation: many winners supplemented their intranet teams with outside resources — such as design firms and consultants — for their redesign projects. While this makes sense, there is a danger in staffing down the intranet after launch. Long-term usability requires ongoing commitment, both for continuous design improvement, and for things such as search quality initiatives, consistency and style guide enforcement, and training new content contributors.
Mobile Intranets

Last year, 30% of winning intranets had a mobile version. This year, 60% of winners had a mobile intranet. Doubling in one year is truly a sign that mobile access is a huge trend right now.

In testing mobile websites on mobile devices, we found that sites with fewer features have much better usability than full-featured websites. This year’s winning mobile intranets followed this recommendation, focusing on specific features that were important to employees on the go instead of trying to squeeze the entire intranet onto a tiny screen.

One major difference between mobile intranets and mobile websites is that an intranet team can optimize for the relatively small set of company-issued mobile devices. The result? Substantially more emphasis on Blackberry support for intranets than for websites.

Knowledge Management

If there’s anything that has been overused, abused, and hyped beyond the level of cliché, it’s "knowledge management." Thus, it might be better to say that many of this year’s winners were strong in "managing knowledge" on their intranets. We already know that social networking is a natural fit within the enterprise, where designers can avoid many of the Internet-wide weaknesses of such tools. This year’s winners had particularly compelling solutions in 6 areas:

- **Knowledge sharing.** Offering repositories for case studies, samples, and other existing information can help people with similar problems avoid having to start building their solutions from scratch. Examples range from Habitat for Humanity’s fundraising templates to Bennett Jones’ Share Your Work widget. Sometimes, knowledge sharing can be as simple as a Q&A tool to connect employees with questions to colleagues with answers.

- **Innovation management.** Companies managed and encouraged innovation by offering users tools for taking ideas and improvements from conception to completion. Indeed, this is the sole purpose of Mota-Engil’s winning InnovCenter. Verizon offers a mobile version to capture ideas as they occur, which is often on outside jobs, far from any old-fashioned suggestion box.

- **Comments.** The simplest way to inspire user-contributed intranet content is to let employees comment on existing information, ranging from news stories to knowledge bank resources. Commenting features reduce the fear of the blank screen; systems that force people to create content from scratch every time inhibit user participation.
• **Ratings.** Giving a grade requires even less work than writing a comment, and thus rating systems can further broaden user participation. Sites that use ratings can list top-rated resources first in menus or give them added weight in search listings. Mota-Engil and Verizon offered an even simpler approach by noting how many users had previously accessed a resource (even if they had not rated it). Sometimes, bad content gets substantial use simply because it addressees a key need; on average, however, better stuff gets used more, so a usage count is a reasonable proxy for quality — and has the huge benefit of requiring no extra effort from users.

• **Participation rewards.** We know from research on social features that user participation increases when contributors are visibly rewarded, such as by adding points or badges to their profiles. Many winning intranets did exactly that. Because there's real business value to features like knowledge sharing and innovation management within an enterprise, some intranets went beyond the symbolic value of visible recognition and offered real prizes to employees who gathered sufficient participation points.

• **Customized collections.** The default intranet information architecture (IA) must be based on the average employee's tasks and usage patterns, but can never predict any individual user's information needs with 100% accuracy. To contend with this fact, designers often allowed users to customize content collections.

Employees are the ultimate knowledge resource, and many winning intranets provided features to transform user behavior into manageable knowledge. As noted above, companies took advantage of usage frequencies to create a simple rating system for intranet pages. Another interesting idea is Heineken's search results pages, which list employees who've conducted similar searches — and thus might be working on similar problems. If implemented on Google, such a feature would spark a privacy outcry; within the enterprise, it's just one more way to help employees share knowledge.

Although more in the area of general social features than knowledge management, several winning sites offered features that let employees create and **share video** content. This builds on the trend we've noticed for several years toward increased use of video on intranets.

**Continued Trends**

Once again, we saw many key findings from previous *Design Annual* in this year's winning intranets, with the main difference being even better usability as the designers built on lessons from previous winners.

• A wide spectrum of technology solutions: there's no single way to build a great intranet.
• Better-structured intranets based on task-centered IAs, often breaking up a legacy of information silos.
• Reliance on user research methods — including user testing, personas, and card sorting — both for design decisions in general and IA decisions in particular.
• News as a main homepage feature, but with increasing emphasis on the usefulness of news stories.
• Better employee profile pages. In addition to offering information beyond plain contact listings, profiles were typically coupled with a more structured way of finding employees with specific expertise.
• Blogs by both executives and regular employees.
• Emphasis on search and on initiatives to improve search quality (which continues to suffer on many intranets).
• The use of pre-designed page layouts and a CMS to establish and maintain content consistency.
• Training for site managers and people in charge of individual areas, in recognition of that fact that UX quality derives from people and not just technology.
• Content curators assigned to keep specific pages up-to-date.
• Intranet branding, typically with somewhat functional names, such as BenNet, BrandPortal, the Hub, InnovCenter, kate2.0, My.Habitat, the Portal, and Wooby.

We also noticed that several intranets used design ideas — such as mega-menus and search suggestions — that until recently were considered emerging design patterns on the public Internet. The main difference is that, on intranets, such features can be adapted to the organization's special circumstances. For example, a user who is starting to type out the word "vacation" can be shown "paid leave" as a suggested query if the HR handbook uses that term.

**ROI**

As in past years, the return on investment from better intranet design seemed strong, but was mainly supported by anecdotal evidence: happy users, extensive use of new features, and fewer calls to support. Of course, when something is used more and yet generates fewer support calls, it's a safe bet to say that usability has improved. It's also reasonable to claim the reduced support costs as a direct monetary gain from the usability efforts. (And remember: support costs include not just the money spent on the call center, but also the cost of users' time, both while they're getting help and while they struggle with the problem before deciding to call. All such support expenses are the price of poor usability.)

There were impressive ROI indicators across this year's winners. On the AMP intranet, for example, use of search increased by 300% after the search

http://www.useit.com/alertbox/intranet_design.html
feature was improved. Because we know that users are quick to abandon poor search features, this is a strong indication that the new search is better at getting people the information they need. Although a 300% increase in search use is a huge jump, it's not an unprecedented magnitude of growth in the **annals of usability ROI** when a team really focuses on improving a key feature.

Decreased use can also be a good ROI indicator. For example, Habitat for Humanity saw a 60% drop in "where do I find...?" questions after launching its improved design. A sure indication that users are getting the content they need more often.

Sometimes ROI is quite indirect. In the case of Bennett Jones, the direct benefits of an improved intranet — with increasingly useful knowledge management — come from helping lawyers better do their job. But indirect benefits accrue in areas as diverse as sales and recruiting: Potential clients want law firms to show evidence of efficient technology use to hold down billable hours, and promising law school graduates ask recruiters about the level of technology support they can expect from a given firm.

**Full Report**

433-page Intranet Design Annual with 218 screenshots of the 10 winners for 2011 is available for download.

**Learn More**

In-depth course on intranet usability in several cities visited by the annual Usability Week conference.

The New York City conference in February also features a special day with presentations by some of this year's winning intranet teams.

The conference also has a full-day seminar on Fundamental Guidelines for Web Usability and a 2-day course on Information Architecture (IA), which mostly are just as applicable to intranets.

We cover the underlying research that explains why certain UIs work or don't work in the seminars on The Human Mind and Usability: How Your Customers Think and From Science to Design: Applying HCI Principles to Real World Problems.

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