



**Impact of Intranet as a knowledge sharing tool:
experiences of ZIMRA**

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to highlight the experiences of Zimra in using the Intranet as a knowledge sharing tool. A study was conducted to assess the impact of the Intranet in knowledge sharing at the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) and the findings were to the effect that usage of the Intranet was low although there was a general view that the Intranet is a valuable asset in knowledge sharing. The low usage was largely due to limited access to PCs and to lack of connectivity. Many challenges were met in the quest to achieve the goal of using an Intranet to improve communication for knowledge sharing. For instance, most people in different offices and departments did not have personal computer technology. In other locations, the network infrastructure is not in place to support a TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol)-based application. There however was frequent use of the email facility. A survey was employed using the stratified random sampling method to select respondents. Questionnaires, interviews and observation were used as the data collection instruments. Other challenges were persuading the staff to use the Intranet. Some staff members were found to have little exposure to the Intranet or other information tools. One of the greatest challenges is to persuade the knowledge owners to share their knowledge.

In this discussion, I am going to talk to you about Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, herein referred to as Zimra. Zimra is a revenue generation and collection arm of the government of Zimbabwe, a developing country in Southern Africa. Its main functions are to collect revenue, enforce import and export controls and to facilitate international trade. Among the organisation's operations are clearing goods for import and export, collecting customs and excise duties and collection of inland taxes such as Value Added Tax(VAT), Pay As You Earn(PAYE) and others. It has offices scattered throughout the country from ports of entry to inland offices. The intranet was installed to allow employees to share information pertaining to the various activities that the organisation engages in and to lessen the time taken to get information around to all offices.

This paper seeks to highlight the experiences of Zimra in using the Intranet as a knowledge sharing tool. A study was conducted to assess the impact of the Intranet in knowledge sharing at Zimra and the findings were to the effect that usage of the Intranet was low although there was a general view that the Intranet is a valuable asset in knowledge sharing. The low usage was largely due to limited access to PCs and to lack of connectivity. Many challenges were met in the quest to achieve the goal of using an Intranet to improve communication for knowledge sharing. For instance, most people in different offices and departments did not have personal computer technology. In other locations, the network infrastructure is not in place to support a TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol)-based application. There however was frequent use of the email facility. A survey was employed using the stratified random sampling method to select respondents. Questionnaires, interviews and observation were used as the data collection instruments. Other challenges were persuading the staff to use the Intranet. Some staff members were found to have little exposure to the Intranet or other information tools.

CURRENT SITUATION

Currently in Zimra, the Intranet Policy states that that the Intranet should be used for:

- a) Communication and collaboration:
 - send and receive e-mail and faxes;
 - discussion rooms and chat rooms using Microsoft Groove;
 - virtual team meetings and project collaboration;
 - online company discussions as events (e.g., Microsoft Forefront);
 - in-house blogs;
- b) Web publishing:

Develop and publish hyperlinked multi-media documents such as:

 - policy manuals;
 - company newsletters;
 - product catalogues;
 - technical drawings;
 - training material;
 - telephone directories
- c) Business operations and management with the use of SAP and Asycuda:
 - order processing;
 - inventory control;
 - production setup and control;
 - Management of information systems e.g. Remote Assistance and Remote desktop connections to clients' machines;
 - Database access.
- d) Intranet portal management:
 - centrally administer all network functions including servers, clients, security, directories, and traffic;
 - give users access to a variety of internal and external business tools/applications; integrate different technologies;
 - Conduct regular user research to identify and confirm strategy (random sample surveys, usability testing, focus groups, in-depth interviews with wireframes, etc.) (ZIMRA 2009)

According to Muller (2002) companies adopt Intranets to improve internal communications, distribute information and enable more employees to access legacy systems. Increasingly, Intranets are being used to deliver tools and applications like collaboration to facilitate working in groups and teleconferencing for sharing knowledge or sophisticated corporate directories, sales and customer relationship management tools, and project management, to advance productivity. Intranets are also being used as corporate culture-change platforms. For example, large numbers of employees discussing key issues in an Intranet forum, application could lead to new ideas in management, productivity, quality, and other corporate issues.

Intranets can serve as powerful tools for communication within an organisation, vertically and horizontally. From a communications standpoint, Intranets are useful to communicate strategic initiatives that have a global reach throughout the organisation. The type of information that can easily be conveyed is the purpose of the initiative and what the initiative is aiming to achieve, who is driving the initiative, results achieved to date, and who to speak to for more information. By providing this information on the Intranet, staff has the opportunity to keep up-to-date with the strategic focus of the organisation.

An Intranet saves reproduction costs of paper-based information, such as employee handbooks, job postings, and travel and expense reports. Intranets are also being used as a platform for developing and deploying applications to support business operations and decisions across the internet worked enterprise. The advantages that are realised are: Intranets are cost-effective in that users can view information and data via web-browsers rather than maintaining physical documents such as procedure manuals, internal phone list and requisition forms. They promote common corporate culture because every user is viewing the same information within the Intranet. Collaboration is enhanced with information easily accessible by all authorised users and thereby enabling teamwork. Intranets can enhance productivity at an organisation. They can be used for many things dealing with communication. For instance, Intranets can be helpful to organisations large and small, by giving it the ability to use Intranets as delivery mechanisms for applications, drivers and collaborative projects. Another great way Intranets can enhance productivity is that information is available when a worker needs it, not just when people with the information send it out via email.

The impact of Intranets on organisational life goes far beyond the publishing and access to rich, up to date information. The more significant effect of Intranets is to dramatically increase personal and group messaging or knowledge sharing, and to create a climate in which work moves online and in which virtual remote working is regarded as an obvious solution for an increasingly global business environment.

A study to assess the impact of the Intranet in knowledge sharing at the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) was carried out by the writer. The study sought to:

1. Assess the use of the Intranet in knowledge sharing
2. Identify what information employees need and the appropriate Intranet tools they use
3. Identify challenges faced by employees in using the Intranet for knowledge sharing
4. Identify and suggest solutions that can be implemented to effectively use the Intranet in knowledge sharing for improved organisational performance.

The research questions were:

1. Are the employees aware of the Intranet and its tools?
2. Are employees able to use the Intranet and its tools?
3. What information do employees share on the Intranet?
4. To what extent is the Intranet contributing in knowledge sharing for improved revenue collection?
5. What challenges do employees face in sharing information through the Intranet?

Awareness of the Intranet

All the respondents said that they were aware of the Intranet and its tools. All of them indicated that they had become aware of the Intranet through the on job orientation and training. The same responses were got from all the executive managers who responded to the telephone interview.

Ability to use the Intranet

From the interview all the executives pointed out that they had all the requisite skills to utilise the Intranet effectively because they were all computer literate and knew how to navigate the computer and make demands on the subsystems on the Intranet that will enable them to get the information they needed to execute their duties. However, from the middle managers going down to employees, some said they were able to and others said they did not have all the requisite skills and therefore, could not use it effectively.

Uses of the Intranet

All respondents indicated that they used the Intranet several times a day; however, the support staff said that they used it several times a week. All the executive managers responded in a similar manner when they said that they use it for: Communication and collaboration through sending and receiving e-mail and faxes. However, use was decreasing as compared to the executives amongst the middle managers who indicated that they use it for emails, policies and procedures, access to databases and other updates. The support staff said that they just used it for checking their emails and browsing the staff page.

Information shared on the Intranet

Eighty-seven percent of respondents pointed out that they share information that is work related (new innovations, new policies, new legislation, new tax regimes, changes in work processes, updated forms) vacancy notices, jokes, and informative articles, with fellow employees on the Intranet. However, the remaining thirteen percent said that they solely used it for emails. All respondents (100%) agreed that the Intranet's importance is in that: Information dissemination becomes faster, queries can be attended to quickly for there are databases available to consult, and inconvenience to clients is minimised.

Intranet, knowledge sharing and improved revenue collection

All respondents to the interview believed that the Intranet facilitates knowledge sharing. They further indicated that this is why they are supportive of its use. In response to how the Intranet promotes knowledge sharing, all the executive managers interviewed referred to the

application tools and knowledge that are available and accessible to most employees to help them become a learning community hence a learning organisation.

Responding to what extent the Intranet was contributing to knowledge sharing for improved revenue collection all managers except the support staff agreed that it was to a greater extent. The reason was that the revenue collecting organisation's employees were capacitated to get up-to-date information when the system is queried enables officers to keep abreast of any developments that may affect revenue collection.

The majority of the people of the managers agreed that the Intranet was very useful in carrying out their jobs. They cited that work process is changed because, instead of referring clients to the ports of entry where they were cleared, they would check the records in the database or communicate with those at the ports and assist clients. Where there were any ambiguities in a clearance they could easily communicate and exchange information and solve those issues.

All of the managers except the support staff said that they had experienced some huge changes in the work environment through the use of the Intranet. These included that work had become easier as there was no need to go through much paper-based documents which are difficult to update but simply check on the Intranet. Exchange of encouraging e-mails from colleagues, sharing in each other's moments of happiness and sadness through e-mail made them a family which facilitated teamwork that definitely would lead to further knowledge sharing.

Challenges faced by employees in sharing information through the Intranet

All the interviewees and questionnaires respondents said that they faced challenges of: Unreliable connectivity, Unwillingness of others to share important information they have, Lack of recognition from other ZIMRA community, lack of computer equipment, Lack of connectivity due to poor infrastructure, Identifying the 'owners' of specific knowledge was very difficult, and Lack of information that you needed most. One middle management employee further pointed out that the other challenge he faced was when the system was down and there was need to urgently contact another station regarding a client's documents. Most of the time clients were not that patient to wait up until the Intranet was up again.

From this study, eighty-three percent said that Intranet was an effective tool for managing knowledge at ZIMRA. Those who said it was effective noted that it was important as everyone in the organisation could access the same information and information could be shared throughout the organisation. Others rated it as average, to some extent, average and not too good. They cited the problem of connectivity as affecting its usefulness and that not everyone has access as such it becomes only useful to the informed user.

Eighty-three percent of the respondents to both the questionnaire and the interview highlighted that the Intranet was effective. This was because information was easily disseminated and was always readily available when needed in the databases on the Intranet. There were also many platforms that allowed teamwork or group decision making.

Hundred percent of the respondents to the interview believed that the Intranet facilitates knowledge sharing. They further indicated that this is why they are supportive of its use. Fifty-five percent of managers believed that it facilitated knowledge sharing. In response to

how the Intranet promotes knowledge sharing, all the executive managers interviewed referred to the applications tools and knowledge that are available and accessible to most employees to help them become a learning community hence a learning organisation.

Responding to what extent the Intranet was contributing to knowledge sharing for improved revenue collection all managers except the support staff agreed that it was to a greater extent. The reason was that the revenue collecting organisation's employees were capacitated to get up-to-date information when the system is queried enables officers to keep abreast of any developments that may affect revenue collection.

CHALLENGES

The results of the questionnaires highlighted many different challenges to using the Intranet for knowledge sharing especially at Zimra. There are many challenges that are met in the quest to achieve the goal of using an Intranet to improve communication for knowledge sharing. First, most people in different offices and departments do not have personal computer technology. In other locations, the network infrastructure is not in place to support a TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol)-based application.

All the interviewees and questionnaire respondents said that they faced challenges of:

- Unreliable connectivity;
- Unwillingness of others to share important information they have;
- Lack of recognition from other ZIMRA community;
- Lack of computer equipment;
- Lack of connectivity due to poor infrastructure;
- Identifying the 'owners' of specific knowledge was very difficult;
- Lack of information that one needed most.

One middle management employee further pointed out that the other challenge he faced was when the system was down and there was need to urgently contact another station regarding a client's documents. Most of the time clients were not that patient to wait up until the Intranet was up again.

Some respondents noted that the system is not input and output user-friendly. There are so many restrictions such as passwords and user authentication that makes it difficult to work if they fail to log on. All the respondents were aware of the Intranet and its tools. Although some later indicated that they did not know all the Intranet tools because they did not use them. The orientation and on job training was an effective way to make sure that employees made use of the Intranet.

The respondents also brought out issues that affect the effective use of the Intranet. These range from:

- inability to fully utilise the tools available on the Intranet to share or access knowledge, inadequate training,
- Limited computing resources, poor and slow connectivity.

Another challenge is of persuading the staff to use the Intranet. Some staff members have little exposure to the Intranet or other information tools.

These challenges show that the executives were not promoting or supporting fully the use of the Intranet for knowledge sharing across the whole organisation. If they supported Intranet use they would have provided with all the resources to make the whole organisation efficient.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that all the employees were aware of the existence of the Intranet but did not really understand how and why it was supposed to be used. This means that this Intranet was not well communicated and not everyone participated in its installation hence poor or incomplete use of it was happening. Not all employees were able to use the Intranet and all its tools. From middle management upwards, they were able to use the Intranet effectively and all its tools. The reason for this as was observed by the writer was that most of them were trained university graduates and were properly oriented in the organisation and the tools available for use in executing jobs on the Intranet.

The information they shared was good if it could happen from top to bottom and bottom to top. Most information was from the top to the bottom hence it was not two way communication as is recommended by prominent communication experts for people to be able to share knowledge. Some people shared information that made them learn and become an organisational family which promoted good team spirit.

To a greater extent the Intranet was contributing in knowledge sharing for improved revenue collection. All the employees were interdependent hence they needed to share information as quickly as possible so as to meet their prime aim of collecting revenue for the government of Zimbabwe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Respondents to the questionnaires and interviewees came up with possible solutions to the challenges such as using broadband connections. The writer agrees with the respondents and is of the opinion that by addressing the issues raised, ZIMRA can increase the effectiveness of the Intranet for knowledge sharing. There is need to get all the functional groups and committees in all the departments to provide a reliable and consistent flow of knowledge. Many of the functional groups on the Intranet are still under development at Zimra for example. Thus, a user might be able to access information from some functional areas but not

others. This situation will improve as these groups develop over time and better adopt electronic communication.

Rapid technological changes require constant training in the use of the Intranet to the staff. Applications change time and again and information needs to be migrated to the new platforms as well as hardware.

The organisation should invest in high speed network connections such as broadband and wireless connections that allow employees to use their personal computers away from work. This will also help the employees, especially those that are at border posts that are far away from cities where connectivity is normally reliable.

The Intranet should be constantly updated with current information so that changes can be effected immediately so as to keep up with changes such as legislation and new tax regimes. There is need for improving access to knowledge and information inside and outside the organisation by uploading it as and when it's needed by the employees. More content should be uploaded to the Intranet to reduce paper based work.

Executives who responded to the interview noted that all players should be given room to participate in formulation of policies and or making comments regarding information dissemination. Above 50% of the questionnaire respondents suggested that there is need to dedicate a technically sound team to upload relevant information for operational efficiency and improve connectivity reliability. Monitor staff usage and introduce incentives and recognition for usage of Intranet. Encouragement and formalisation of information sharing activities that can be done through proactive training and debriefing of any new initiatives, leading by example, mentoring and assisting, create a shared identity through mailing lists; offer incentives for those who publish on the Intranet.

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