

# Aragon Research

Author: Jim Lundy

---

## Why Social Networks Are Replacing Intranets

*Summary: Enterprise social networks, when configured and used properly, are becoming the main knowledge repositories in the enterprise. They are replacing corporate intranets as the most comprehensive and reliable places to find information about the company, its processes and procedures, and the people who work there.*

Social networks are steadily entering the workplace, and workers who use them understand their value in connecting people, processes and information. Though they are still misunderstood by some planners, the trend is clear: a race is on to make the enterprise social network (ESN) the primary source of truthful information about a corporation and its workers. This research note reviews why ESNs are on their way to replacing corporate intranets.

People often call social networks “the new digital water coolers,” but they can also be thought of as *knowledge hubs*. A full ESN is more than just updates from people. With the right design, it exposes the full range of intranet functions to users (see Note 1). More importantly, it shifts control to the people who own the content and the processes. Engaged people also share more content than a corporate intranet can provide.

It may take a few weeks or months for users to understand the potential of an ESN, but once they realize how much a social community can enhance sharing and collaboration, they often begin to see the corporate intranet as stagnant and outdated. At that point, the process of replacing the intranet with the ESN has begun.

## The Issues with Corporate Intranets

Corporate intranets consist of pages of information organized into tabs and portlets that let users find the information they need to do their jobs. This approach worked for many years, and it is still

**Topic:** Social Software, Collaboration

**Issues:** What are the trends impacting collaboration in the enterprise?

What are the trends in social software?

### Note 1: Top Use Cases for ESNs

Many of the most useful functions of an ESN are areas that intranets were supposed to address:

- Expertise location
- Social learning
- Content access sharing
- Feedback loops: ratings, reviews and relevancy
- “Idea jams” – brainstorming for innovation
- Communities of practice to build knowledge

---

the de facto “knowledge hub” in many enterprises. However, intranets are no longer the best hubs for several reasons, some of which have to do with their fundamental design (see Note 2).

Intranets were initially libraries where users could share content of broad interest, and connect to other content sources. Over time, additional collaboration features such as wikis and other ways to share documents, discussions and other content were added. In the past decade, however, business has moved from a content-centric model to one in which workers and their interactions are central, and intranets have not adapted to this transition.

Users need quick and easy access to each other, not just to email, documents and other information. Interacting and creating dialogs around content are more important than just having the content. Another key priority is finding the best and most useful resources for a particular need, and personal contact and input from others frequently guide the path to those resources.

One limitation of intranets is the amount of technical involvement needed to make them function, and to add new capabilities. Intranets generally require front-end design and development from the IT organization, and this has tended to keep them out of sync with dynamically changing needs.

Done right, an ESN incorporates a lot of intranet functionality, but it may not mimic all of an Intranet’s capabilities – and in some cases it shouldn’t. When clients say they want an ESN that will do everything their intranet does, one of the first things we do is look closely at the plan and the processes involved to be sure that it’s the right approach.

### **Why Replace An Intranet With A Social Network?**

Central to the value of a social network is its ability to establish and nourish a community. The primary purpose of a traditional intranet is to access content and other applications. They tend to have restrictive approaches to content authoring and content management.

By contrast, social networks not only encourage distributed content creation, they stimulate multiple forms of collaboration by generating a greater sense of involvement and community. Workers in a thriving social network will interact more with a wider circle of collaborators, participate in more activities with more enthusiasm, share more knowledge and stay more current.

### **Note 2: Issues with the Intranet Approach to Information Sharing**

The biggest issue with corporate intranets is that they can easily become static and outdated, in part because they are often controlled by an IT group or Webmaster. Other workloads and the need for more complex coordination and communication can prevent the content from being updated adequately. Managing intranet content can also require more training than business-unit content owners generally receive.

### **The Value of Speed**

Social networks let workers create, share and update information faster and more effectively. A well-run intranet can help workers update content, but the ESN approach eliminates a layer of postings and approvals while allowing others to rate content and contribute comments. Activity streams, wall postings and other ESN mechanisms can inform participants of content updates and changes faster than traditional notifications.

### **Putting People at the Center**

People are the heart of an ESN. Leading products support enterprise profiles (see note 3) that expose people and their knowledge through search and categorization tools that aid expertise location and human-resource allocation. This is a key reason why ESNs are stepping to the forefront as the best new way of helping people interact.

ESN “people” features also expose organizational affiliations and intergroup participation, as well as ownership and control of content and business processes. The managers responsible for processes, organizations and information can update their work product quickly and easily while keeping their people and other colleagues informed.

### **Feedback Loop**

A main goal of intranets has always been to give workers the information they need every day. Social networks help people share, interact and respond to this information to add value. As they track and coordinate their activities, tag and rate content, and contribute positive or negative comments, workers create an expanding feedback loop. By enabling and streamlining this feedback, ESNs help organizations create and identify their best and most useful content.

### **Portal Functionality**

Well-designed ESNs have much in common with portals. For example, announcement portlets can tell users what is going on either at a corporate level or within a small organization. In order to provide these benefits, an ESN needs portal-like page creation and editing tools, and recent ESN products include these. The ESN doesn't have to do everything that a portal does, however, and planners should balance flexibility and speed against the structure and control that a portal provides.

### **Note 3: The Enterprise Profile**

The five essential data sources for creating an enterprise profile:

- HCM/talent management
- Learning management system (LMS)
- Enterprise Social Network (profile, contributions, tagging/ratings)
- Company directory (phonebook)
- IT directory/identity (LDAP, Active Directory, identity services)

When connecting content repositories with the ESN, it's important to provide status notifications, ratings and tags to documents and to people. When work product is tracked effectively, workers can be dynamically notified when new resources are available. This engages workers more than a static intranet that forces them to actively seek out new or updated content.

### Portlets and Apps

A growing trend is the emergence of pluggable third party apps that can be added to the ESN, just as an portlet can appear in a portal or an app be deployed on a mobile device. More and more startups are developing their social apps so that they can be plugged into an Enterprise Social Network using standards such as Open Social and Open Graph (see Notes 4 and 5).

### The Knowledge Hub

As workers use an ESN to create, access and share their work products, it becomes a knowledge repository over time, This is one big difference between an intranet, which stores limited amounts of information, and a social network, which encodes a full-fledged human community. People interact more, share more and provide feedback to each other, allowing all of them to find the information they need to work better and faster. ESNs let people find and use more information faster, not only because more information is available, but also because categorization, tagging and taxonomy tools help them find the *right* information. Improving these content management functions is one of the ongoing R&D goals for ESN vendors, and should be a serious RFP requirement for buyers.

#### Note 4: Open Social and Social Apps

Open Social is a standard API developed by Google that has been embraced by a number of social software vendors, including Cisco, Google, IBM, SAP and SocialText. It allows third-party applications to be quickly added to an ESN and appear as a portlet in the ESN. The current version of OpenSocial is 2.0 (link: <http://docs.opensocial.org/display/OS/Home> )

#### Note 5: Open Graph Protocol

The Open Graph Protocol was developed by Facebook to allow web pages to be used inside of a social networking framework (social graph). Objects can be consumed or published. Open Graph is currently used by Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Time, Yammer, Yelp, Wordpress and others. Here is the overview of the Open Graph Protocol. (link <http://ogp.me/>)

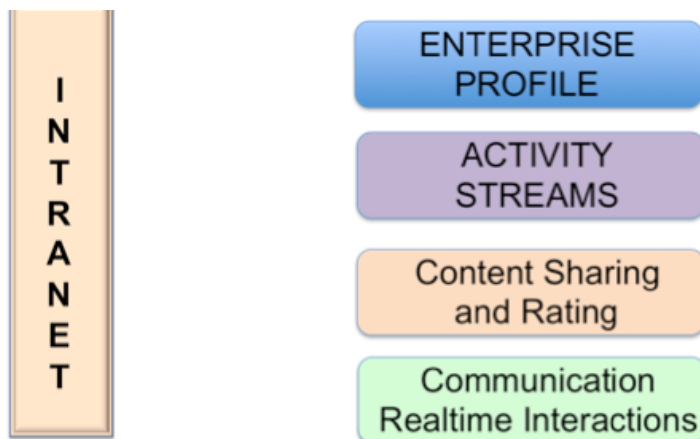


Figure 1: The Structure of an Enterprise Social Network

### **Aragon Advisory**

- If not already conducting an ESN pilot project, do so in 2012.
- Evaluate providers' ability to provide the functionality needed to replace the corporate intranet over time.
- Identify the key people in the enterprise who are ecosystem owners – who need to keep their content and information fresh and up to date. (These are often the same people who “own” the content on the intranet.)
- Certify “official” content with searchable tags that prevent workers from using unauthorized versions.
- Examine the profile capabilities carefully, including the ability to import certifications and skills, as well as search tools to find people with the right skills.

### **Bottom Line**

Enterprise social networks, while still new to many, are poised to play a larger role in the enterprise, particularly as knowledge hubs where people can find each other as well as the content they need to do their jobs.