



## Interactive employee communication

It's what employees want and you should know how to bring it to them.



**C**ommunication portals for employees have been the mainstay of benefits communication for the past decade. Increasingly though, brokers are finding that communication solutions focused on benefits alone are being subsumed by corporate intranets.

An intranet is a private network that can only be accessed by employees or members of a given organization. Modeled on the Internet, intranets allow companies to create a secure, virtual environment — essentially a private version of the World Wide Web inside their corporate firewall.

Today, most organizations have some sort of intranet used for business to employee (B2E) communication. B2E communication is a broad category ranging from bulletin boards and memos to e-mail and, in today's online world, intranets.

Intranet implementations vary significantly from simple Web sites for posting and sharing documents (like corporate policies) to fully functional sites that include sophisticated capabilities like workflow applications, proactive

employee communication and collaboration software. The latter are typically found in larger corporations. The good news is that cost effective solutions, with similar capabilities, have moved down market and are now available for companies of almost any size.

The Web technologies for B2E communication

have benefited from the growth of consumer applications like Facebook and LinkedIn. Generations X and Y, and tech-savvy people of any age, want and expect consumer-like capabilities at work.

For example, in recent years this has driven intranet providers to add social software capabilities to their solutions, enabling a more collaborative environment for employees. But the intranet landscape is messy. It gets complicated because, in addition to a corporate intranet, other software vendors provide employee self-service capabilities for their applications. Thus, employees end up with several different systems to access. And HR ends up having to get support from the different vendors or from their company's IT group, or both.

### Evolving employee communication solutions

A new wave of intranet software solutions is enabling and transforming B2E and employee to employee (E2E) communication. In fact, the term "intranet" is too limiting for this next generation of applications — they are truly interactive employee communication systems. And they

are all about promoting and improving employee engagement and interaction.

These solutions include traditional intranet features and incorporate employee self-service connections (see last month's article on Single Sign On, "The X's and O's of SSO," p. 60). E2E communication features include collaboration tools, discussion groups and real-time business messaging (IM).

In 2011, we should see the expansion and acceleration of capabilities in two key areas: personalization and mobile applications.

There is a set of core intranet functions that employees want and expect. It starts with proactive, real-time communication and online interaction with the system and with their fellow workers. They assume they will have 24/7 access and self-service control regardless of their location. And that they will have easy, secure access to company information including the latest news, policies, forms, corporate directories and documents. They are looking for alerts and notifications that are integrated with the corporate e-mail system. And seamless access to personal information such as online pay stubs, 401(k) balances and health insurance benefits elections.

Proactive communication means that the system automatically reaches out to them. Either individually or as part of a group, the expectation is that their employer will keep them informed of deadlines like open enrollment or limits on annual carryover of paid time off.

Expanding on the PTO example, the ability to view PTO balances, request leave and get online leave approval eliminates paper, automates the request-and-

approval process, and records the process for audit purposes. Furthermore, HR will be able to run reports and analyze trends and patterns of attendance by department, location, business unit, etc.

### It's personal — the Millennials are coming!

I have been using Yahoo as my online home page since 1998. Over the years, Yahoo has evolved and now it's totally personal. News feeds, fantasy sports, weather, stock portfolio, blogs, RSS feeds, my WSJ account and more — all accessible from my home page. And I'm a Baby Boomer. Gen X (51 million) and Millennials (75 million) are fully conversant with the Web, and expect a certain level of configurability in online systems.

Therefore, a deeper level of personalization is needed, allowing employees to configure their online work environment to suit their particular job situation. In

2011 expect to see this trend accelerate.

### There's an app for that

We are all aware of the proliferation of mobile devices. At the mall, at a restaurant, or even at the library people have their phones out — texting, tweeting, surfing the Web or running the latest application or game. Now imagine extending your employee portal, not just to a browser, but to mobile devices as well. Understand that this is more than access to e-mail or a browser from a mobile phone or iPad; it is about mobile applications. Picture the following scenarios:

An employee is out to dinner with her spouse and another couple. They are discussing an exhibit that's coming to town next month and the couple has tickets to a sneak preview event that's taking place on the Friday afternoon before the opening. They all agree it would be fun to attend the sneak preview together. Then,

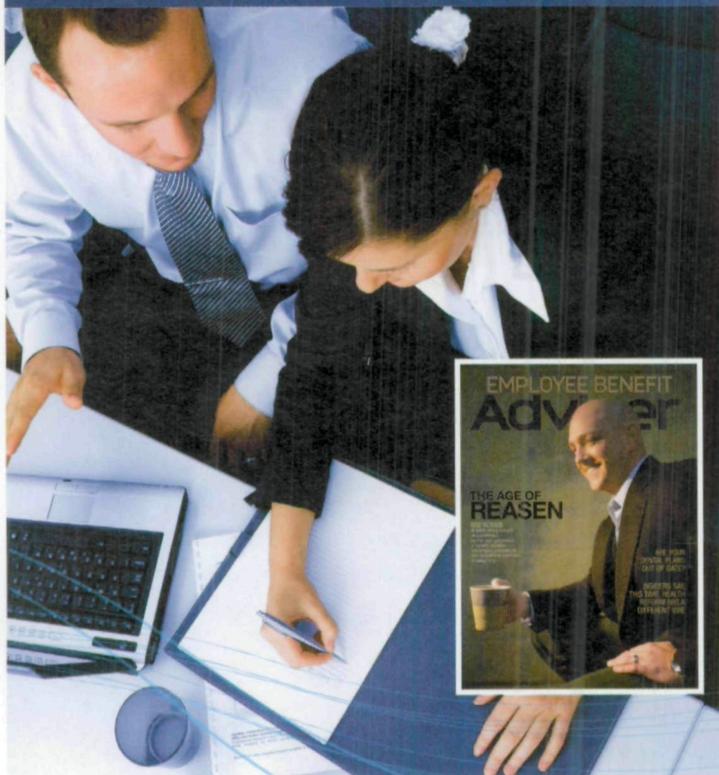
the employee pulls out her phone and, using a mobile app, requests that afternoon off! She gets approval the next day and can expect to get automated reminders as the day of the event approaches.

Or, since it's wintertime, imagine notifying your employees that the office will be closed due to icy roads and that employees receive the notification automatically on their phone via not just e-mail but a text or an app specific to employee communication. The number of potential apps is virtually limitless.

Interactive employee communication is a great topic of discussion to have with your clients. Being able to speak to what employees want positions you to consult with HR on what they want. Understanding both is the key to putting the right employee communication strategy in place for each of your clients. **EBA**

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