

1996

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### Scholar Commons Citation

Perrault, Anna H., "Telecommuting and Intranets: The Role of Special Libraries" (1996). *School of Information Faculty Publications*. 33.  
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# Telecommuting and Intranets: The Role of Special Libraries

by Anna Perrault

Although the concepts of flex-time and working at home have been in existence for many years, technology has only very recently provided the means for making these feasible alternative work styles for large numbers of employees. Indeed, technology has wrought new terms such as "telecommuting" and the "virtual office" for working at an external location but keeping in touch with the workplace via computer.

Just how prevalent is telecommuting, the fast-growing phenomenon of working from home via an "umbilical cord" to the office network? Link Resources, a New York-based research firm, estimated that 46 million people worked out of their homes in 1995, up 2.8 million, or 6.5%, from the year before. That includes those who work full or part-time, the self-employed, those who do work after hours for their companies and those who telecommute<sup>1</sup>. It has been predicted that some 55 million U.S. workers will telecommute or work remotely by the year 2000.<sup>2</sup>

There are many reasons for the increase in at-home workers but technology is playing a big role. Many jobs are now information-intensive in nature and can be performed in any location that online information can be accessed. Other factors are the time pressures of two-worker households, less expensive home office equipment, the

Clean Air Act, and the reluctance of many people to commute. Of the 155 companies responding to a 1994 survey by The Conference Board, 47% said the greatest advantage of telecommuting programs was improved individual productivity. However, only 15% of those surveyed had actually measured the effectiveness of their telecommuting initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

## **Intranet**

When the majority of workers telecommute, the office will become the "virtual office." The latest and most sophisticated technology which is enabling the virtual office is the "Intranet." An Intranet is a private corporate network that uses the Internet to distribute data internally. Using intranets, companies can utilize internal Internet-based applications such as the World Wide Web, electronic mail, news, file transfer and online conference capabilities. With intranets workers use web browsers to point and click through huge corporate databases, to communicate and collaborate. Intranets provide cost-effective ways to disseminate information to key audiences, including customers, employees and other stakeholders. Intranets also can provide an efficient way to implement telecommuting programs and sales force automation using web technology.

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The Internet and private networks are converging in expanding usages of intranets which can span vast geographic boundaries, connecting different types of computers in various branches of an organization. Intranets can be integrated into the Internet, allowing users to access data outside the company. A software safeguard called a "fire wall" prevents outsiders from breaking into the company Intranet.

A recent report from Forrester Research (1) stated that nearly 40 percent of FORTUNE 1000 corporations polled said they are looking at establishing an internal corporate web.<sup>4</sup> Large corporations such as Ford Motor Company, DHL Worldwide Express Corporation and Wells Fargo Bank N.A. Inc. are using intranets extensively, and the number of companies doing so is growing daily. Zona Research Inc., a Redwood City, California based research company, estimates that the number of web servers used for intranets will expand to nearly 1.2 million by 1999, more than twice the number used for Internet applications.<sup>5</sup>

Wells Fargo Bank uses its Intranet to provide access to corporate job postings, telephone directories and even experiments with the Java programming language. "The business justification was easy. We're able to deploy information more rapidly, keep up-to-date information readily available and provide our employees with ubiquitous and easy access," says Eric Hughes, vice president of technical communications at the bank in San Francisco. "We've been a leader in putting an excellent computer-based training program on our Intranet too."<sup>6</sup>

One of the largest telecommunications companies, networkMCIServices has an internal web that contains such detailed company information that a worker in its Washington, DC office can access the schedules for grounds keeping on its Denver

campus. The network services division has ceased publishing a paper newsletter and now produces a multimedia version that saves the \$250,000 annually spent on the paper version.<sup>7</sup>

## **Libraries**

What will be the role of the library/information center in the Intranet/telecommuting environment which is rapidly evolving?

The information specialist will most likely work in a number of modes. The traditional information service functions will remain with the library/information center. There will still be reference questions and research. The library/information center will still be in the business of adding value to information readily obtainable in print and on the web. But a larger and larger potential sphere of influence for the special library lies in the content of the corporate web.

In the company Intranet, the library/information center must establish a presence. It is the content of web pages on which we need to focus. The optimum is to work closely with the MIS department to put up the corporate web page and be a partner in controlling the content.

The librarian/information specialist needs to be the initiator or creator of web pages, if not the corporate web page, at least a web page for the library/information center which is linked to the corporate page. This out front visibility is a necessity in the Intranet environment. The information center web page must have names and links to the information specialist who can offer services.

If in the past, it was difficult for the library/information center to gain visibility beyond a loyal core of customers, the Intranet environment makes visibility a different kind of problem. Now the librarian/information specialist must be conscious of mounting information on the Intranet so that it can be

accessed by workers from any location. While not all of the information on the Intranet is available to the outside world and to corporate customers, the internal web page will be accessed by all workers. Accessing company information from the Intranet will be a necessity for them to perform their jobs. The information specialist can become highly visible offering assistance and mounting information on the Intranet to facilitate the worker's ease in accessing and using the information on the Intranet.

### **Training**

Corporate managers are beginning to realize that training for remote access takes time and energy, much more than most managers anticipate. Training workers in how to access information efficiently could be the most valuable service an information specialist can offer. Just mounting outside databases such as OCLC's First Search, Information Access databases, etc. on the corporate Intranet is only a passive provision of resources for information. Assisting and encouraging workers to hunt for information themselves on the Internet and to access information through the Intranet is a natural progression from simply providing gateways or mounting databases.

As an example of the worth of training and the visibility it offers is the experience of the library at Harcourt Brace in Orlando. The library paid for a trial period for OCLC FirstSearch through a reduced rate obtained by the regional consortium, the Central Florida Library Consortium. It was available to editors and writers at their workstations.

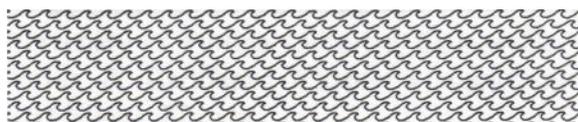
The head of the Harcourt Brace library began to offer training sessions in the use of FirstSearch. The training sessions were so successful that other branches of the corporation in Texas and New York began asking her to come do training sessions for

their personnel. The marketing of FirstSearch within the company and the training sessions gave the corporate library wider visibility than its traditional reference and research services had afforded. With desktop availability of FirstSearch and training, the core services have subsequently experienced an increase in demand. Once many more workers learned what was available to them, they began to appreciate the information services offered by the library.

Accessing government information and business/technical information through the Internet is another area in which information specialists can provide training. As larger numbers of workers have workstations and also telecommute, they will need assistance in accessing the company Intranet and the Internet. And teaching workers to access information themselves seems to be an ideal way to impress them with the value of having a corporate library which has on staff experts in information access and retrieval.

The more others learn about the complexities of information retrieval, the more they will appreciate the services of the corporate information center. Making their lives easy is the top priority of most workers. Both training and value-added information services through the company Intranet can be the means to indispensability for the corporate information center.

The future is here. The web has become an accepted mode of information delivery. The information specialist needs to be enmeshed in the company web. The more entwined in the web—its creation, its content, training for access—the more indispensable the information specialist will become.



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