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# HR CANADIAN Reporter

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## Technology a tool for strategic HR

By DAVID BROWN

HR PEOPLE may finally become the strategic players they have always said they could be, and smart use of technology will take them there. That was the message coming out of last month's International Association for Human Resource Information Management fall conference and trade show in Toronto.

Human resource professionals can finally cut back on time spent doing administrative processes and record keeping and dedicate themselves to being the strategists and consultants so many want to be, said Fred Lievertz of Florida-based Aris Consulting, who spoke on HRMS strategies for the new millennium.

"I know you've heard this part before, but with the Web it is going to happen this time."

The thinking goes like this: eBusiness has paved the way for eHR and the benefits are too great to ignore. Employees want access to information and they want it quickly. By giving it to them through an effective intranet you not only make them happier but you will free up time for yourself and your HR department to concentrate on strategic planning and achieving results instead of being bogged down with "administrivia," as Lievertz called it.

And it's not just a matter of smoothing out administration. Any time you provide information to your employees in an efficient timely manner it helps them to im-

prove their performance, said Rahemin Nanji of Toronto's ONYX Interactive, an e-Business Solution provider.

"The intranet exists to tap into the intellectual capital of your organization," said Nanji. "If you create an effective intranet, that means your employees are better equipped to generate knowledge, which means your intellectual capital is stronger and because your intellectual capital is stronger, you then have a competitive advantage."

And it's not just about reducing time spent on administrative tasks for the HR department, said Nanji. The human resource department exists to make sure the employees are happy, he said. If they can find a system or a tool to assist them in that, then they should use it.

Employee self-service was a popular theme at the conference, dominating both the speakers' series and the trade show.

Few, if any, start-up companies would even consider the old-school manual methods for their HR functions and there is no good reason established companies have to either, was the consensus, with one critical caveat: If you're going to introduce an intranet you have to make certain it's done effectively and within a larger business strategy or else there is no point in doing it at all.

Sooner or later someone is going to come to you as an intranet provider and ask you to prove it is worth it, said Nanji. If it is done correctly, the benefits will al-



*Rahemin Nanji of ONYX Interactive spoke at this year's IHRIM conference and trade show on effective use of intranets.*

ways outweigh the costs.

"You have to have a sticky intranet," said Nanji. You want to keep bringing them back. The site must be visually appealing and easy to use with the useful information employees want. When it becomes a pleasurable experience for people to use, word spreads and people start talking about it. "Word of mouth is still quicker than e-mail," he said.

Intranets are created to provide information, but de-

signers must be wary of overloading their users. Simplicity is important — no more than six links per page for example — and your employees should be able to use it with very little training.

Simply pouring as much data as possible onto the site is also a bad idea. You have to make sure you don't have too much information, said Nanji, otherwise you end up with an information explosion; it overwhelms the user and is no longer effective.

Because of the Internet,

everything has sped up, said Sally Grande, manager of the Bank of Montreal's (BMO) HR Intranet and Knowledge Transfer. In 1998, BMO's HR department totally redesigned its Web site and part of that project was the introduction of a full range of HR information and transactions for their employees.

People don't want to be bothered with filling out forms or waiting for manual processing, she said. Human resource departments always had an army of people doing the manual stuff, backchecking and tracking down files. It no longer has to be like that, she said.

Workers also want opportunities for career development, and it is the HR department's job to assist them to that end. Aside from providing information on courses and programs, BMO employees can use the intranet to help them develop their resumes.

People like to feel like they are involved, that they are part of a community where they can get answers to questions and information they want, said Grande. BMO created a "virtual place" where employees can go if they want to invest in their careers.

Intranets can even be proactive, said Nanji. Once an employee logs on and inquires about a professional development opportunity, the next time he comes back he could be provided with new leads or links to information or opportunities to

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## IHRIM conference

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improve in that area.

Aside from professional development information, BMO will soon launch a job-sharing site for all of its employees. New parents, or people who want to develop new skills can list their job or find someone who may be

interested in sharing responsibilities.

BMO also has created a special site just for HR people. "The Oasis" provides professional development information just for their human resource employees. Users can log on, choose a discipline and find out which universities or academic institutions

are offering courses in that subject.

Self-serviceability is definitely a buzz-word that is catching on, said Nanji. A big intranet advocate, Nanji designed and introduced Nike Canada's intranet from scratch before moving on to ONYX.

He said that if an intranet is well-designed,

benefits will always outweigh the costs. Measure how much time is saved by using automated processes, he suggested. However the mad dash toward automation can not disregard the human element. Grande points out that a concerted effort is being made at BMO to provide more people-friendly phys-

ical environments, and Nanji said automation is not about reducing staff.

The intranet has to be tailor-made for each organization, so in most cases you'll be better off retraining people you have on staff who are familiar with how the organization works, rather than bringing in new people.