Use Office 365 as an Intranet Portal

LEARN HOW TO TAKE MICROSOFT OFFICE 365 BEYOND BASIC OFFICE APPS AND DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT TO PROVIDE AN INTRANET PORTAL FOR IMPROVED ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION AND BUSINESS PRODUCTIVITY

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ABOUT SP MARKETPLACE www.spmarketplace.com

SP Marketplace is a provider of software applications that drive higher organizational productivity using Microsoft Office 365 and SharePoint. SP Marketplace offers application templates, web parts and branding solutions designed for Office 365 and SharePoint Online and On-premise implementations. These templates include Intranet Portal, Employee Self-Service, HR, IT Support, Project Tracker, Facilities, CRM, Customer Service, and other applications. SP Marketplace, through its unique "Application Provisioning" approach, offers a cost-effective business solution approach for small to medium businesses that wish to use the Office 365 and SharePoint platforms.

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Introduction

If you are reading this whitepaper, then you are probably considering or are already using the Microsoft Office 365 cloud platform for your organization. This document is targeted at small to medium businesses under 1000 employees that are interested in leveraging the Office 365 functionality to drive more collaboration and improve productivity within their organizations.

Many organizations that have Office 365 make the mistake of using only a portion of its capabilities. Too often they use it just for email, Office apps (Word, Excel), and perhaps file sharing in the cloud. This is like driving a Ferrari 25 mph on the race track; it leaves lots of potential power left unused.

This whitepaper will provide helpful information about SP Marketplace's experience deploying Intranet portals at SMBs. The majority of information available online about Intranets is targeted at enterprises that have large budgets and ample resources and are looking to build an enterprise Intranet structure. Likewise, many consulting firms that offer Intranet portal services target enterprises and will over engineer (and overprice) a solution for SMBs.

This whitepaper will provide best practices that SP Marketplace has learned, advice on strategies, and will even recommend some specific solutions. We hope it is useful in educating you about available options for turning the Office 365 platform into an Intranet portal solution.

I. Intranet Portal on Office 365: It's more than a team site

If you have Office 365 and SharePoint Online, you might think an Intranet portal comes with the package. According to Microsoft, many of the Office 365 plans include an Intranet site for your teams. SharePoint sites provide workspaces with customizable security settings for individual teams within the organization.

In other words, Microsoft's vision of an Intranet portal is a home page template in SharePoint Online. It's a basic site intended for small teams to collaborate and share documents that includes a document library, a news feed, a One Note library. That's it.

Let's simplify things:

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in·tra·net 'intrə,net
noun Computing

An **internal** web site that helps
employees **get things done.**

The path to a successful Intranet portal is in the details. Over 50 percent of Intranets run on SharePoint. So Microsoft's definition of an Intranet generally accurate, except that they should say it is a great platform for an Intranet, not an out-of-the-box Intranet as many assume.

Here at SP Marketplace we have deployed our Intranet portal template in over 700 organizations and we have learned a thing or two that we'd like to share.

A. What should an Intranet look like on Office 365?

Most important is that the Intranet reflects the structure of your organization. Next, the Intranet should make it easy for employees to find the things they use most often while offering intuitive access to the things they need only occasionally.

A typical organization might have an organizational portal at the top (Home) and several department portals (HR, IT, Marketing, Engineering) underneath supporting the Home portal. A retail organization or an organization that has several divisions that share common services might have the organization above plus a portal for each division, store, region, and so on.
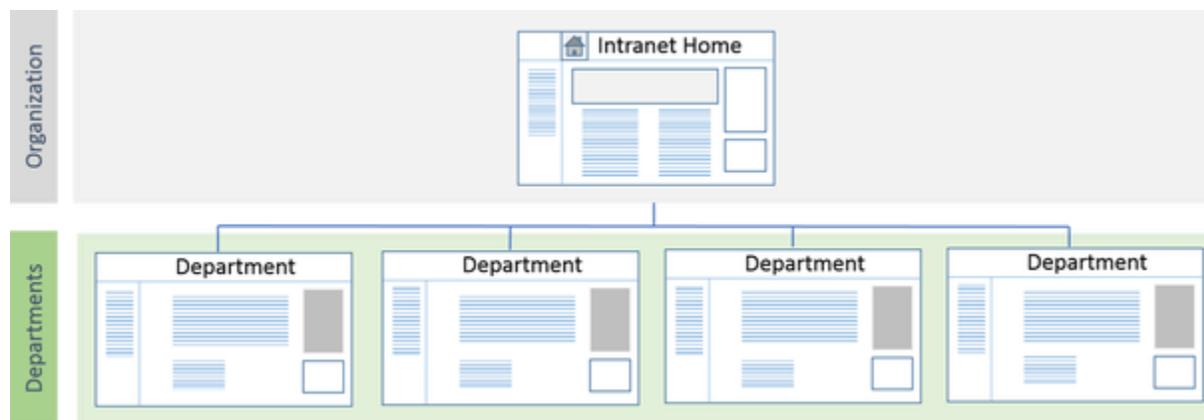
Basic Intranet Structure

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Each department might act as an extended Team Site with department tasks list, calendar, document libraries. Create a Team Site and copy the template for other departments and staff to access and use. This is the simplest structure and is a good place to start.

However, while this structure serves an SMB's basic needs, eventually you will want to expand the structure to provide self-service functions for employees and employee portals in each department. These portals should separate the department staff site from employee access with an employee portal for each department. Here is an example of the structure it should follow (as provided in SP Intranet Portal module from SP Marketplace).
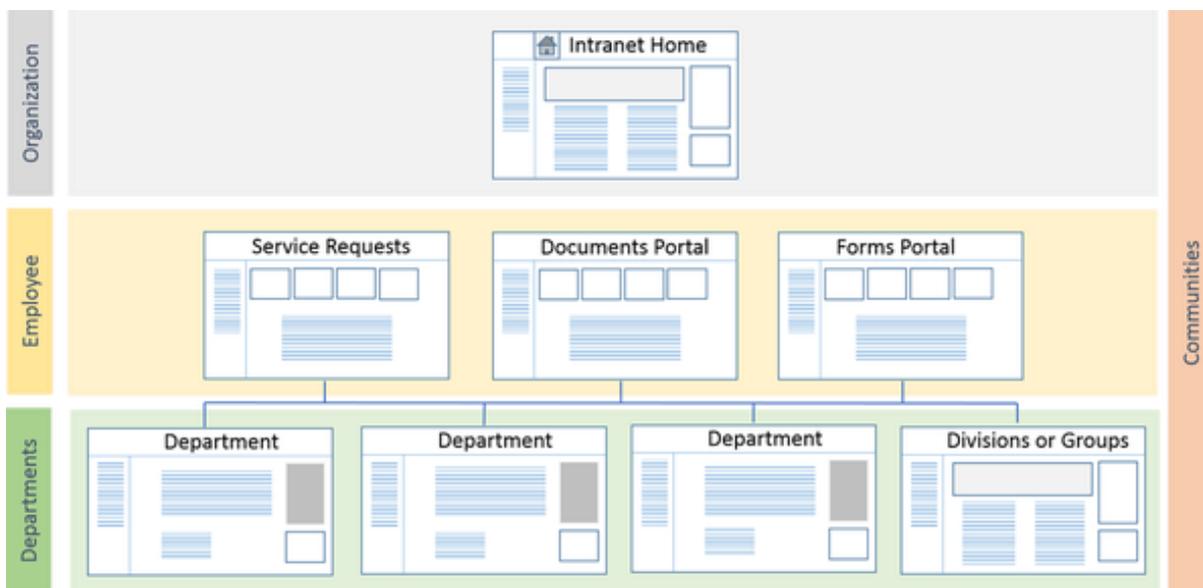
**Advanced Intranet Structure (Source: SP Marketplace)**

Additionally, you will want to add collaboration sites as well with a Community Site template. This allows Sales, Services, or other groups to use SharePoint Online for storing documents and managing activities, while also sharing knowledge, experiences, and information easily.

Key User Adoption Strategy 1: Consistent look, layout, and user experience

Having the right structure is a good start, but it is equally important that the user experience is consistent across sites. An employee that visits the Intranet first, then goes to the IT Portal or the HR portal should have a consistent intuitive experience.

Frequently this is not the case because each department sets up its own portal without taking into account a common experience for the end user relative to other departments.

If access to important documents or forms for IT or HR are in completely different locations in the department portal then the user may become confused or frustrated. If each department uses a different Help Desk or Service Request approach, that can be confusing. So an important aspect is for each of the departments to use a common design approach to their employee facing portals. Below you can see an example (source: SP Marketplace) of consistent portal design across two departments.
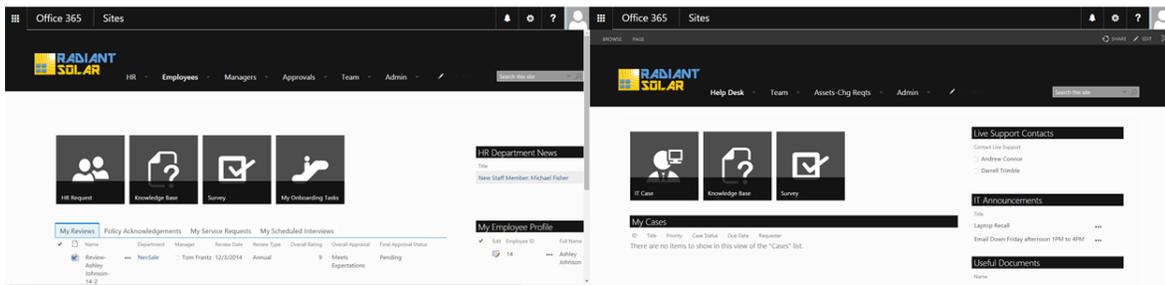
HR Employee Portal　　　　　**IT Support Portal**

Consistent Department Portal Design (source: SP Marketplace)

Key User Adoption Strategy 2: Branding: Make it look like it is part of your organization

Another key to achieving high user adoption is to make the look and feel of the template reflect your organization's website branding. You can easily do that using Themes in SharePoint Online, changing the colors to match your organization's colors and also add a logo.

This at the minimum should be done. If you want to go further, then you can hire a consultant to design a custom SharePoint branded master page. However, be aware that if not done right, this could result in problems upgrading to newer versions of SharePoint. An alternative (and more cost-effective) way is to use a preconfigured branding template offered by third-party vendors. You can often apply your specific colors and other elements to bring it closer to your organization's branding. Below is an example of one of our customer's external site next to their Intranet portal.

External Web Site   Intranet Portal

Implementing an Office 365 SharePoint-based Intranet: Build, Buy or Both?

By implementing an Intranet, many organizations are looking to create a central point to share information, collaborate, and provide access to internal services. Frequently they are using Office 365 or SharePoint Online or SharePoint On-Premise as a platform. A survey conducted by Modalis Research Technology showed that the average Intranet took more than 15 months to implement and cost over $40,000. Another interesting aspect of the survey is that the basic features required in an Intranet across organizations were very consistent. Those were:

- Organization communications: Announcements, news, events, policies and procedures
- Employee collaboration: Employee directory, forums, discussions
- Employee self-service: Service requests, time off, expenses, and more
- Integration of processes: Links to key applications like ERP, CRM, email, customer service
- Support for department portals: HR, Sales, Marketing, Finance, IT

The question is, if 70 to 80% of all organizations need the same features, why are so many Intranet portals built from scratch? Why not start with a template containing 80% of the features and customize from there?

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In reality, this is what many consulting firms who build bespoke Intranets do. They have templates they use in engagements. Unfortunately, they do not always tell this to clients because if they did, then they would not be able to charge the fees they are getting.

However, aside from these consulting firms are a few companies that provide full-featured Intranet applications that are easily brandable and can be deployed and customized to an organization's requirements without programming.

Companies like SP Marketplace, Clerkswell, and others offer turnkey Intranet applications that introduce an option for Buy versus Build. These applications are prebuilt Intranet portals that can be installed and configured and branded for much less money and time than the traditional bespoke engagement.

Additionally, because they are developed to be customized, configuring them to your needs can be done without programming and thus having to call back the consultants. Finally, when the next version of SharePoint requires you to upgrade, many of these solutions provide upgrades as part of their support agreements.

For example, one SMB in Virginia with 100 employees looking to deploy an Intranet received build bids from traditional SharePoint consulting firms ranging from $38,000 to $57,000 for the project. Alternatively, the buy route from SP Marketplace is less than $10,000, deployed and configured. Deployment time was one month versus six months.

This is a natural market progression, and we will see more packaged application vendors enter the SharePoint marketplace. This will result in lower overall costs for clients. With the introduction of Office 365 as a lower-cost model for SMBs, providing the corresponding savings for application solutions will need to follow. This can only be done with repeatable packaged applications that are flexible enough to address the custom 10 to 20% of features required.

For traditional SharePoint consulting firms, they will either need to stick with just the large enterprise deployments or adjust their business model to fit the financial realities of the SMB market.

Intranet Portal in Office 365: What staff resources are needed for success?

An Intranet is very different from an organization's external website. After more than 300 implementations of our SP Intranet Portal, we have gained some insight on success factors.

With an Intranet, there should never be an emphasis on marketing, PR, and over the top graphics. Its function is much different: To facilitate the quickest possible access to information, collaboration, and tools to help your employees do their job.

A successful Intranet implementation may start with the right technology platform, such as Office 365, and the right structural design; but, its ongoing success relies on a commitment from the organization for staff resources to keep it running. In small to medium businesses this can be a challenge. These organizations do not have the budgets or staff available to commit exclusively to the Intranet.
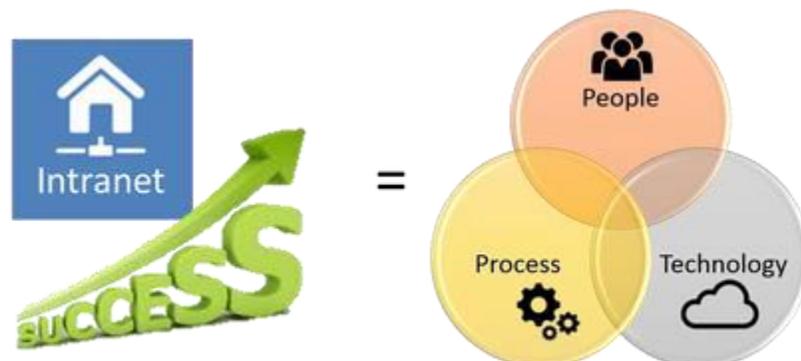
To see a return on investment from an Intranet implementation, organizations' need to:
- Have executive support for the ongoing project
- Keep the content updated and create new content on a regular basis at all levels
- Continuously review and add new business automation processes
- Make sure you are taking advantage of available new technologies

Quite simply you can invest all the work initially only to see diminishing returns through lack of attention.

Create a Virtual Intranet Team

To reiterate the point above, SMBs don't have the luxury of hiring a team to build and manage an Intranet. So, as in most challenges, they need to be creative. Creating a Virtual Intranet Team with representatives from multiple areas of the company works very well. This team not only guides the development of the Intranet, but also ongoing management.

As in most SMBs, these team members probably already where multiple hats in their roles, and this is another. We suggest the following part-time roles for this team:
- **Executive Sponsor**: A senior executive who has responsibility for internal services such as IT, HR, Accounting, etc. Titles include CFO, COO, or CIO
- **Intranet Administrator**: Not a techie, but preferably a business analyst type. They should be trained as a SharePoint Power Business User (see our suggested curriculum)
- **Content Administrators**: These are staff who are responsible for the content on the site, announcements, event calendars, etc. You should plan to have one for the top Intranet Portal, and one for each department. These may be administrative personnel
- **Technical Resource**: Typically someone from IT, perhaps the same person responsible for the Office 365 platform administration. This role will perform technical work such as data migration, permissions management, etc.

On an ongoing basis, the most important role above is the Intranet Administrator. They should be the "owner," responsible for making sure there is ongoing work being done to keep the Intranet "fresh."

Most important is for the Administrator to have at least a power user knowledge of SharePoint Online. We are not talking about deep knowledge, but rather the level of knowledge an Excel power use might have. Here is an example curriculum for a SharePoint Power User training. The Intranet Administrator should have a good overall picture of the status of the different sites, and should coordinate the virtual team.

The second key role is that of the Content Administrator(s). The biggest reason for Intranet Failure is stale content. This is where this role plays and it can be overwhelming if you don't break up the responsibilities into departments or sub sites. Each department probably has an employee portal which needs to have the latest announcements, documents, links, etc. By delegating content responsibility to each department, then chances are content will be kept up to date across the entire site collection.

The team itself should meet at least monthly to review activity, user acceptance and issues with the Intranet. Also, the team can plan new phases of features or functions which can be implemented over time. The executive sponsor should play a key role in setting organization expectations and planning around budget. Finally the technical resource should keep the team updated on new opportunities to use technology to the organizations advantage in the Intranet Portal.

By using a Virtual Intranet Team your Intranet Portal can be a success during implementation and in the future.

SP Intranet Portal: An Office 365 SharePoint accelerator template

SP Intranet Portal is a SharePoint solution template built specifically for SMBs to quickly set up and deploy an Intranet Portal structure for their organization. It is 100% customizable without programming.

SP Intranet by SP Marketplace turns Microsoft Office 365 into a portal for organization, collaboration, communication, knowledge sharing, document access, and access to internal employee services. This application addresses the challenges of transforming SharePoint into a full featured, easy to use Intranet Portal so your employees can focus on content rather than spending tens of thousands of dollars on consulting services to build a portal from scratch. This application could be compared to a SharePoint Intranet Portal template but with all the functionality of an application.
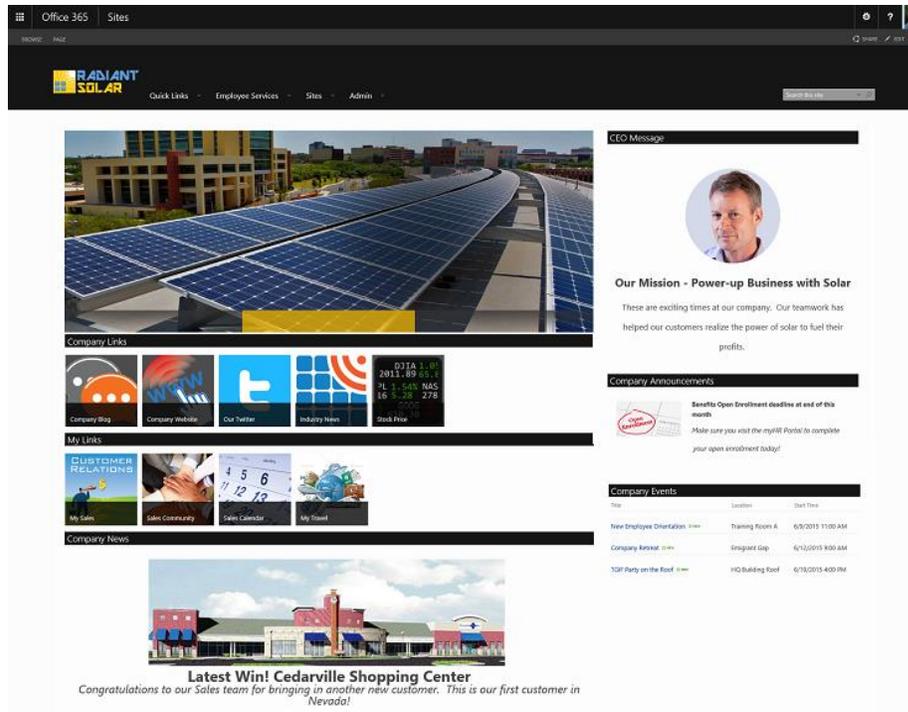
SP Intranet Portal is more than a pretty site; it provides access to Company and Organization information, such as latest announcements, industry news feeds, and latest social networking items, messages from management, a forum, and a blog.

Resources like employee directory, policies and procedures, and a company FAQ are readily available. Capture input from employees via a suggestion box, polls and surveys. It is integrated with our Employee Self-Service module to provide time off requests, expenses, and more. You can even add web parts for weather, maps, and stock tickers to round out the portal.

Departments can deploy department portals from the Department Template, which give staff a center for receiving and tracking service requests, managing documents, staff schedules, and tasks.

SP Intranet is part of SP Business Suite, a set of business solution templates built to operate individually or work together.

To learn more about how an Intranet can transform your organization, or to speak with an Intranet expert, visit us at http://www.spmarketplace.com.

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