The Unexpected Benefits of the Social Enterprise

Companies create intranets and internal company websites to establish a central "start page," a dashboard that users visit throughout the day for relevant, up-to-the-minute news and information. That's the vision. In reality, traditional intranets and websites tend to be static and stale, discouraging user visits. Now, companies can make their intranets more interactive, more sticky, and more useful by "going social" with web 2.0 and social network features. Ultimately, this new breed of social intranet can connect employees, ideas, discussion and content to more fully empower users throughout the organization – in both expected and unexpected ways.

The Enterprise Intranet "Goes Social" at eXo

When eXo decided to launch a social intranet using our own eXo Platform, our goal was much the same. We wanted a better way to communicate comprehensive and detailed information on all things eXo, from project status to team activities and beyond. We wanted something that fell between pushing out email and posting a static page on our previous intranet. But most of all, we wanted our users to *want* to return to the social intranet, eagerly and frequently. If we had to mandate or otherwise force user engagement, our social intranet would surely be limited in its adoption, and possibly a wasted investment.

Discussed below, our social intranet has been a dramatic success. And we offer our own experiences as a case study for project managers and developers charged with

building a new company intranet or adding social network features to an existing intranet. What can be done with social technologies, and what happens when they are introduced to the enterprise? Let's find out.

This paper covers several issues we found significant in our social intranet experience, including:

- Dashboards – the concept of dashboards (which is central to the eXo Platform and to our social intranet) and the benefits and core technology of dashboards:

- Building and organizing the social intranet –the framework and features of the social intranet.

- Using the social intranet – our rollout and rapid initial adoption as well as use cases and snapshots.

- Impact and unexpected benefits – improvements in our day-to-day work experience, including company unification, product development, remote and mobile employees.

Before we move on, let's put a few things in context. First, "going social" for us was far more than the adoption of Facebook-style posts or Twitter-like activity streams. No doubt, those are significant parts of our social intranet. But eXo itself is an enterprise organization. If we really wanted to go social, we also needed to be able to manage content and collaborate on projects—features that work with, but are distinct from the social aspects. The eXo Platform already included that enterprise functionality, so we added the social features to facilitate the work inspired and informed by social activity.

Second, the eXo social intranet was not our first intranet. Like a lot of companies, our

previous intranet was basically a shared drive with no social aspects whatsoever. At best, the static pages made for a great archive and research tool. At worst, information quickly grew stale and got buried. For managers, it was hard to get their teams to pay attention to updates, and it was hard to communicate with other departments. The result? An extremely low user retention rate. Even when we opened the intranet to select partners and customers—using it as a portal—users only came when they were looking for a predetermined resource. Until another, specific document, invoice or file was needed, there was no reason to return to the intranet.

Dashboards: Central to the Modern Enterprise Intranet

Within the enterprise, a dashboard serves as a place where all employees start and return to throughout the work day to access the information, people, functionality and other resources they need to complete their work. An enterprise dashboard is a success if it's sticky, if employees return to it frequently because it is useful, valuable, or a critical part of their jobs. For example, the discussions and feedback within an activity stream or forum can be easier to follow than long email threads, and more efficient to communicate with all stakeholders than one-off phone calls. Or the unique insight that a mashup of data from multiple applications can provide within a dashboard can enable a user to make better decisions.

Building enterprise dashboards is a key function of eXo Platform 3. To do so, users can leverage the following core features:

- **The enterprise portal foundation** lets users integrate third-party application data and content in a single user interface. A page can have different views for different users, based on role, region, etc. Applications are built as portlets

or gadgets. Portlets are an older, Java-specific way to present the views, while gadgets are a newer, faster, and easier way to build views and conform to the OpenSocial specification. To an end user, however, both look and work the same way.

- **The Web Content Management (WCM)** component provides two key functions. One, it ensures a website or intranet has fresh, regularly updated content. Two, it makes it easy for anyone – even end users – to add, edit or publish content without knowing HTML or being a site admin.

- **The built-in IDE** lets developers easily customize a dashboard. While they can be created in any IDE, gadgets and portlets created using eXo Platform's built-in IDE can be developed, tested and deployed in minutes, right within a production environment. This unique feature lets business developers quickly extend and create new applications, similar to using VBA within Excel.

Building and Organizing the Social Intranet

The social intranet (and public website) at eXo is implemented within a framework defined by sites, spaces and personal dashboards.


Social Intranet homepage

Sites are sets of public pages with content and applications. Our intranet and our public website are each considered a separate site within one instance of eXo Platform.

Spaces are group workspaces that you can join on demand, each designed to create a community that includes all the applications needed for communication and collaboration. We use spaces primarily to support specific teams or projects, but any user can create a new space to support collaboration around any theme or topic. Each of our users is typically a member of more than one space.

Inside a space, users have a dynamic, customizable view of the discussions and content relevant to the dedicated topic of that space. Contextual applications feed the activity stream any information entered. For example, the forum and calendar application in the Marketing space display the forum topics and calendar events unique to our marketing department. When a user adds an event to the calendar or posts something to the forum, those items appear in the Marketing activity stream.

Personal dashboards provide highly personalized, relevant, customizable, and adaptable views into the social intranet for each eXo user, similar to My Yahoo! or iGoogle. Admins can set up department-specific, role-based, and other "canned" dashboards for use without modification. Most eXo users, however, opt to modify their personal dashboards with standard and custom-developed gadgets.
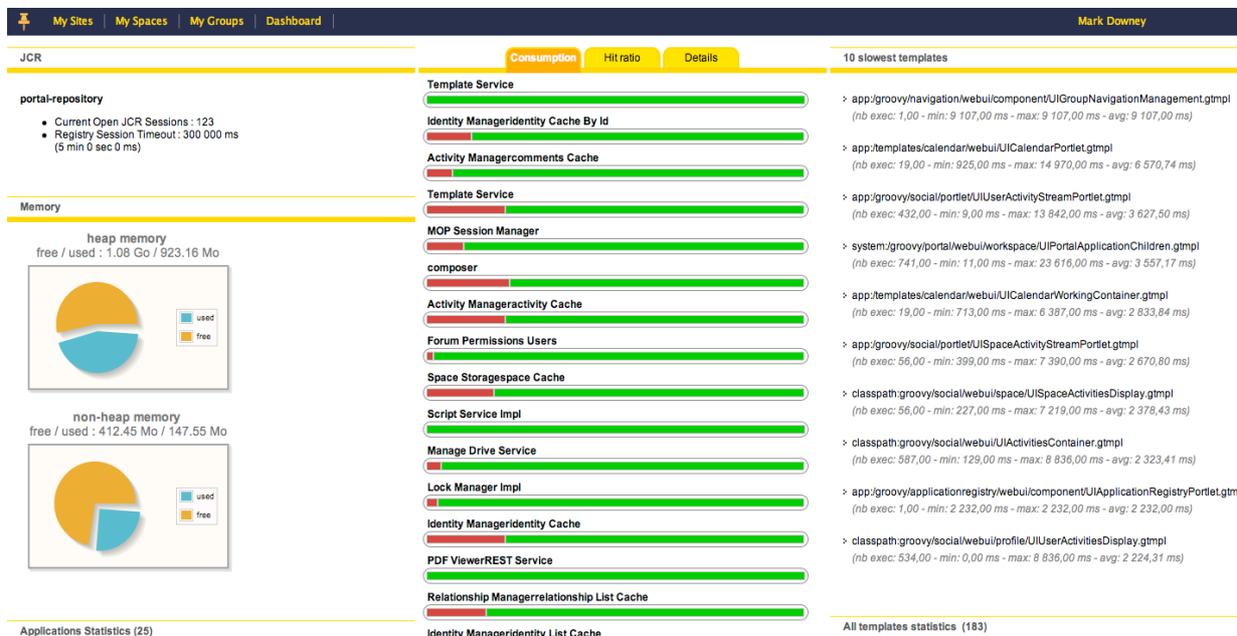
The Monitoring dashboard

Additional features of our social intranet include a content management system that lets users share files. Each eXo user can see all the public drives associated with all the spaces of which he or she is a member, as well as private drives for his or her personal use. Sharing documents with other space members is a simple matter of moving files from one drive to another.

To spur ongoing development of our social intranet—and eXo Platform itself—we also gave our users an IDE *within the intranet*. Instead of making people code gadgets and applets on their desktops and pushing them to the intranet—and making them jump through all the related deployment hoops—we put the development environment in the browser. eXo developers can code in a browser and test in eXo Platform, without system admin help or complex export processes. In short, we removed the barrier between developers and end users. Now, applications are available to users as soon as developers finish coding them.

Using the Social Intranet

Perhaps the most striking aspect of our social intranet is its rapid adoption and stickiness. We revealed the new intranet to employees on January 1, 2011; participation was and is completely voluntary. Despite the fact that some users were initially skeptical of the value of the intranet, by January 15, we had over 160 users—basically, 100 percent adoption. What turned the skeptics around? The dynamic, personal nature of our social intranet. It's the place everybody goes, throughout the work day, to find real-time updates on projects, discuss and act on new ideas, and share content and feedback with team members. That dynamic, personal quality drove adoption, and it continues to drive user retention: people return throughout the day to see what's going on and to engage and collaborate with other users.

Snapshots and use cases. Judging by the numbers, our social intranet is a success. To date, we have 165 members contributing 2,139 posts on 145 topics -- all tagged and organized, easy to search and navigate. Reviewing the spaces created on our intranet since the beginning of the year reveals four different organizing principals and many different use cases:

- Office spaces – eXo France, eXo US and eXo Vietnam use their spaces to discuss office-related issues in the forum, share HR documents in the document repository, and organize shared resources, holidays, birthdays and other important office events in the calendar.

- Team spaces – Our departmental teams have customized their respective spaces to support their unique functional needs. For example, the Cloud IDE, Platform and Mobile development teams use their spaces to discuss specs in the forum; ask for feedback via polls; post links to useful articles, tutorials, and other information; review and/or update the gadget dashboard; and code quality metrics and issues opened in our bug tracking app.

Meanwhile, eXo consultants have their own space where they can discuss ongoing projects in the forum and store project specs and customer-related documents in the document repository. And our marketing team has a space for sharing market research and other documents, scheduling PR activity and announcements, and applying analytics and business intelligence to the marketing dashboard.

- Project spaces – The spaces established for our Cloud IDE beta program and company website improvements are used to report bugs, provide feedback, request new features and discuss roadmaps. Such project spaces can be archived for reference once the project is completed.

- Theme spaces – The Webinars space is where we schedule webinar dates in

the calendar and discuss topics in the forum. We discuss user experience issues and suggest improvements in the User Experience Feedback space. We even have "for fun" spaces, which foster camaraderie and connections between employees. For example, the Sports at eXo space is used to organize sporting events, discuss favorite teams, and talk trash with colleagues on the other side of the world.

Our social intranet encourages people to share information and ideas, and the community self-regulates, as users can determine the value of shared content. Check out the eXo activity stream and you'll find:

- VPs and product managers disclosing their travel plans—e.g., visiting other eXo offices—so they can better coordinate resources and have more effective visits to remote offices.

- Consultants giving information about the clients they work with, connecting marketing and development teams to valuable customer feedback that can be used to improve the product and overall customer satisfaction rates.

- Salespeople providing information about newly signed deals, so all departments involved with onboarding new customers can react swiftly.

- Executives sharing updates from strategic meetings and partnership opportunities, including related presentations and project plans.

- Managers praising well-performing teams and employees.

- People sharing their satisfaction (or frustration) with our eXo Platform product and the new features they would like to see, transforming every employee into a valuable QA resource.

Impact and Unexpected Benefits of the Social Intranet

How has the social intranet improved our day-to-day work experience and productivity? We've seen social and communications improvements that we didn't anticipate but that are having a positive impact on operations, management and motivation.

Unifying the company. Our social intranet lets everybody participate in the development and evolution of the eXo Platform. Employees are better aligned with the company's strategic direction through visibility into management's activity streams, while company leadership also has improved visibility into all aspects of company operations. All of which makes for a sticky site that everybody returns to, over and over. For a company that has offices in the U.S., France, Ukraine, Tunisia and Vietnam, our intranet unites us in a way that email and file sharing never could. The social intranet has penetrated regional and departmental silos, making it easier for us to communicate and share ideas and operate as a cohesive, unified organization.

Improving usability feedback. Let's take a look at how we develop software, specifically how we deal with bugs. Previously, we used a bug tracking application that centered on tasks, and used email to notify team members of updates and progress. Our updates created an information flood that actively discouraged us from sharing information and discussing.

Now, we still use our bug tracking app. But we've supplemented it with forums in our social intranet to report bugs, suggest improvements and collect related ideas and feedback. Anything written in these forums shows up in the associated activity

streams, making it easy for users to follow and contribute to the resolution. We've also added gadgets to follow the tasks within the space they are related to. Compared to the bug tracking software alone, this approach encourages discussions by establishing consolidated, centralized views of bug-related conversations, each in its own window.

Expanding access. The gadgets and dashboards found on our intranet are accessible on several devices, including mobile devices. We actually consider our mobile applications to be mobile portals, which let us distribute our intranet's customized dashboards to multiple devices, with a user experience designed specifically for the iPhone, iPad or Android devices. Now, our remote employees and those who travel frequently can stay connected to the heart of the company – our social intranet – via their mobile devices.

We consider the web to be a completely distributed environment where apps can be created and hosted in one location, while being viewed as embedded objects in many other websites. To support a broad range of use cases, our gadgets are based on the Open Social standard and our intranet—and the eXo Platform itself—can be viewed as an open gadget directory, which third-party applications like iGoogle can reach to consume gadgets. We also support Netvibes widgets, and allow developers to deploy UWA widgets to cool Netvibes dashboards.

Developing new features. The most powerful yet unexpected benefit of our social intranet is the degree to which it empowers developers and harnesses the creativity of all employees, translating suggestions into real dashboard and product improvements. As noted earlier, our web-based IDE lets our developers skip the operations-oriented processes to deploy new gadgets and applets. It also gives developers access to all the functionality, libraries and APIs provided by eXo

Platform. And while our platform is built on Java, the IDE uses a lightweight development model so almost anyone can build a gadget, often in a few hours, even if he or she has virtually no gadget development experience.

The combination of 1) immediate, one-click deployment, 2) easily reusable code, and 3) a broad developer base fosters a new type of innovation, driven from the bottom up. Most gadgets create different views of existing eXo Platform features, and our developers are extending our intranet with new gadgets and use cases that we didn't anticipate or include in our roadmap.

For example, we didn't roll out our social intranet with gadgets for user profiles, a social inbox, contacts, what's new, who's online, polls, or top-voted topics (to name a few). eXo developers built those gadgets, after spending time within the social intranet, in response to what they believed would be useful functionality. Who decides if a gadget is useful? eXo employees. Useful gadgets get added to users' personal dashboards and to their team and project spaces. Gadgets deemed sub-par are simply ignored. It's simple, objective and democratic—the wisdom of crowds applied to product development.

Social Intranet, Serious Advantage

Is a social intranet right for your organization? Consider these questions:

- Do you have a distributed enterprise, but cross-departmental functions are critical to success/operations?

- Do you have silos of knowledge and resources, duplication of effort between teams, complaints from users about lack of communication?

- Do you have trouble encouraging users to log into the existing intranet or use

other applications provided by IT?

If you answered "yes" to any of the above, you can improve communication, collaboration, your users' overall experience and your organization's efficiency with a social intranet. We've seen these advantages first hand, by giving our users the tools they needed to establish connections and share information, ideas and resources. We've now tapped the wisdom and creativity of our entire organization. We've become a social enterprise. Yours can, too.

About eXo

eXo (http://exoplatform.com) offers the next generation of Java middleware designed for the new era of cloud-based services. The eXo Platform makes Java websites and applications faster to build and easier to deploy, and offers modern features such as content, collaboration, social and knowledge on a services-based architecture. The company has established technology leadership and proven value by their large European installed base and strategic partnerships with Red Hat and Bull. eXo maintains U.S. headquarters in San Francisco, Calif. with global headquarters in France and offices in Tunisia, Ukraine and Vietnam. For news and updates from eXo, follow @exoplatform on Twitter.

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