

Intranets, An

Take the Guesswork Out of Using

by **ANGELA D. SINICKAS, ABC**

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The data referred to throughout this article are based on research with 20 organizations over the last four years, during which time Sinickas Communications Inc. asked similar questions about how employees prefer to integrate electronic channels into existing print, face-to-face and audiovisual communication. Not every question was asked of each organization. Individual company results are often quite different from the averages.



When we turn to electronic channels for communication, that decision is often based on popular wisdom. Sometimes communicators follow their gut feelings on what to do. At other junctures, executives dictate what should be done. Fortunately, we've had electronic channels available to large numbers of employees long enough to now have hard research available to help answer the most common questions about electronic channel selection and usage.

ARE EMPLOYEES GETTING TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE INFORMATION ELECTRONICALLY?

Employees often complain in focus groups about receiving too many e-mails. We asked employees from nine companies whether they were receiving the right amount of information, or too much or

too little, through various information sources (Figure 1). On average, just under half said they were getting the right volume of information electronically, with the other half evenly split between wanting more electronically and wanting less.

The findings at individual companies are not always so well-balanced. At two companies where most employees work outdoors away from computers, more than half of those employees said they wanted more electronic communication. But at a similar company, where virtually all field staff have regularly scheduled access to computers as part of their paid work time, nearly half of employees said that they were getting too much information electronically.

WHAT TOPICS DO EMPLOYEES LIKE TO LEARN ABOUT ELECTRONICALLY?

Figure 2 shows some of the topics that employees most and least prefer to learn about electronically,



gone?

Electronic Channels

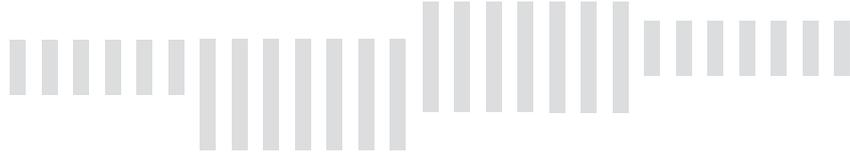


Figure 1. Employee Satisfaction With Volume of Information by Type of Channel

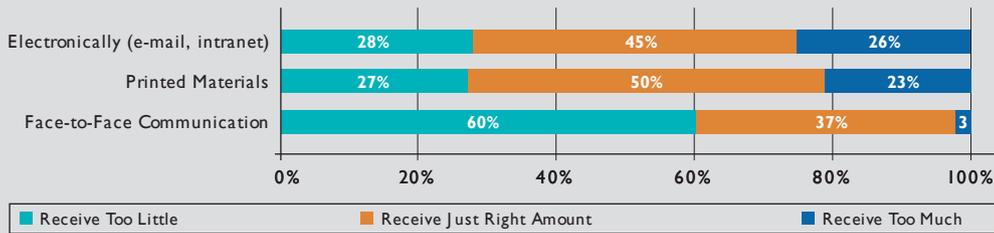


Figure 2. Top Two Preferred Sources on Eight Subjects, on Average

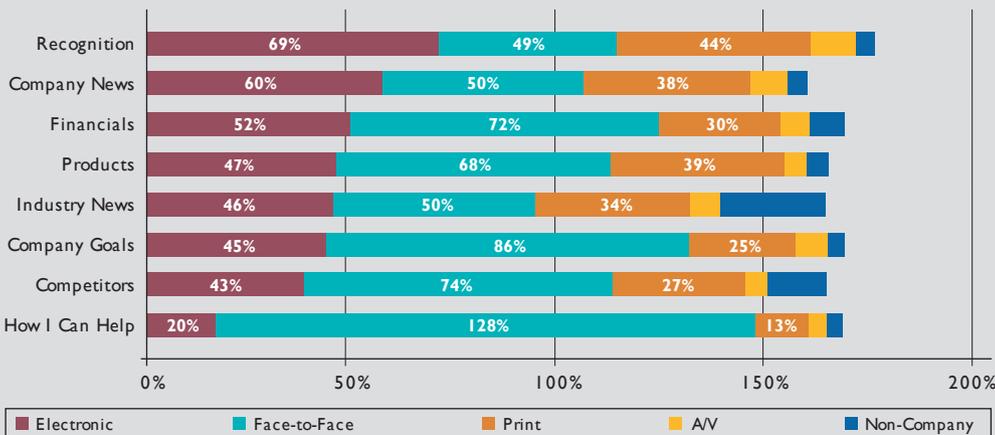
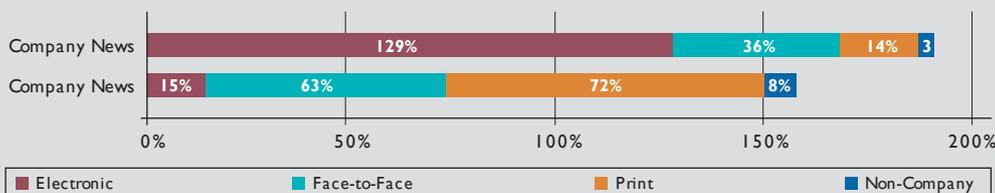


Figure 3. Top Two Preferred Sources at Different Companies

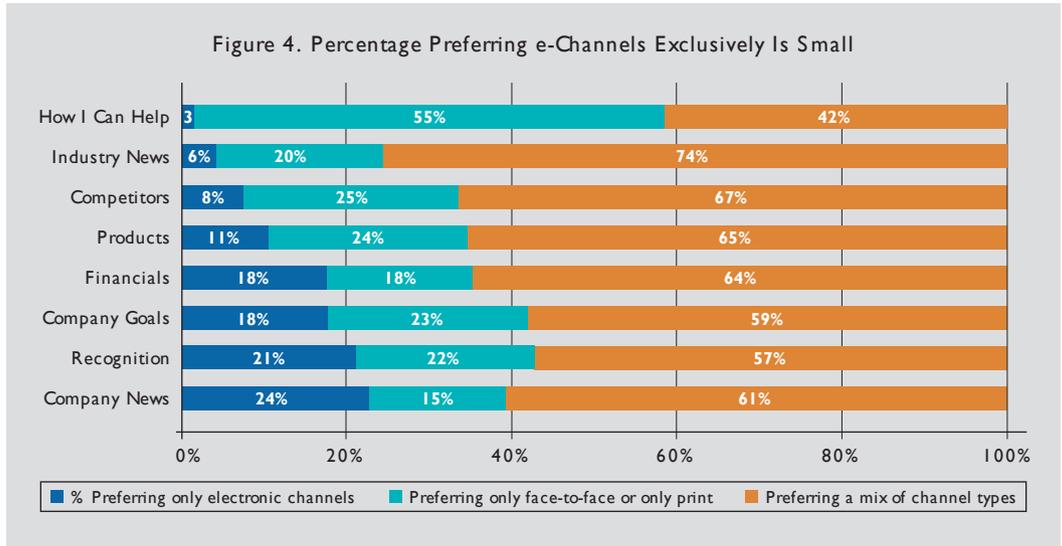


on average. On every topic, there is a wide response range from company to company, depending on their employees' access to electronic channels and how effective the channels are perceived to be (Figure 3). When we survey employees on topic preferences by channel, they are allowed up to two

choices per topic. Thus their preferences can add up to as much as 200 percent, as indicated on the figures.

Communicators take it as a truism that we need to provide a variety of information sources for audiences, but we generally guess at how many

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« Print is preferred not only at companies with large numbers of employees lacking electronic access. Field sales reps also report that they're more likely to read a printed publication while in their clients' waiting rooms than an online posting when they return home or to their hotel room at the end of a long day. »

different sources and if the sources should vary by topic or audience. The data in Figure 4 show how often employees' top two information sources are in the same family of sources. For most of the surveyed topics, between half and three-fourths of employees want a mix of channels (electronic and face-to-face, or print and electronic, for example). And yet communicators report that many of their executives want to distribute all information solely via electronic channels. Unfortunately, employees tell us through these surveys that few of them will exclusively go online for their information needs.

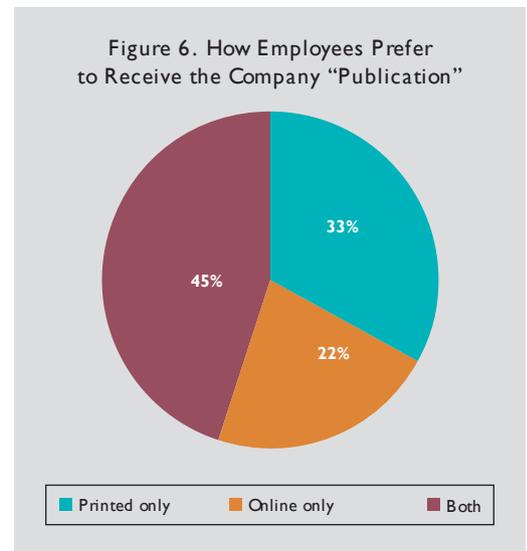
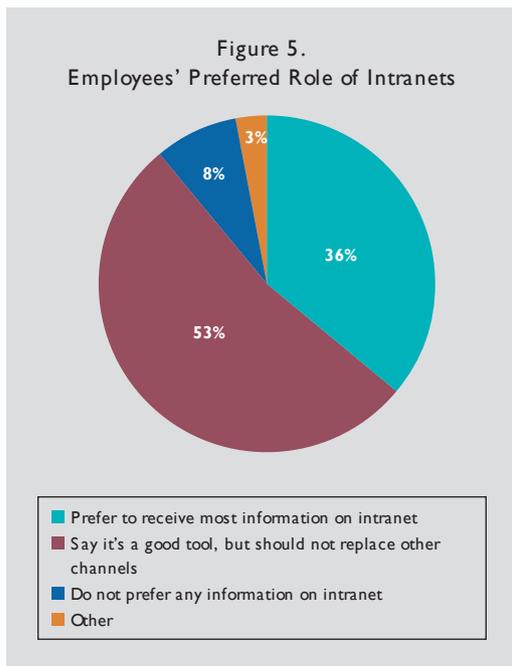
In fact, when we ask employees what role the intranet should play in the mix of communication channels available to them, just over one-third say they would prefer to rely on the intranet exclusively.

More than half want to see it as a part of their mix, and nearly 10 percent say they don't want any information through the intranet (Figure 5).

WHEN CAN I PUT ALL MY PRINT CHANNELS ONLINE?

Maybe never. Despite the supposition that once everyone has online access, print communication should die a quick death, more than three-fourths of employees at six companies respond that they want printed versions of publications to remain available (Figure 6).

Print is preferred not only at companies with large numbers of employees lacking electronic access. Field sales reps also report that they're more likely to read a printed publication while in their clients' waiting rooms than an online posting when they return home or to their hotel room at the end of a long day. Consultants who spend most of their week at client sites often have difficulty surmounting firewalls to access their



own employer's electronic channels, and say they prefer to read print when traveling or commuting. Even IT employees say they get tired of staring at their screens all day and prefer to read paper versions of publications.

Ever since intranets and e-newsletters popped up on the corporate landscape, communicators and non-communicators have assumed that the electronic channels can replace print. Although that's often what we've done with our channels, the fact is that increased availability of electronic channels actually reduces employees' reliance on face-to-face communication more than it kills their appetite for print.

This surprising conclusion was the result of analyzing employees' preferred information sources in companies where electronic sources were and were not available (Figure 7). Because the surveys used in this research allow people to select up to, but no more than, two preferred sources, someone choosing an electronic source (that is new and available for the first time) must "give up" a vote previously pledged to a different type of channel. It turns out that very few people chose to give up a print source; employees were more likely to trade face-to-face communication for electronic.

In fact, this outcome makes sense. Being able to electronically search an intranet that includes an archive of e-newsletters—from a process and

result perspective—is a lot like asking a question of a supervisor. It bears little resemblance to the process or result of reading a printed publication. Savvy supervisors who want to keep themselves and their staffs as productive as possible may wish to encourage use of the intranet for research and learning, instead of subtly, or not so subtly, discouraging its use as if it were something entertaining and fun, but not useful.

DO NEW ELECTRONIC CHANNELS REPLACE RELIANCE ON OLDER ONES?

No. It appears that adding electronic channels actually increases the appetite for all electronic channels (Figure 8). For example, adding an e-newsletter doesn't reduce preferences for the intranet or mass e-mails. Again, it's face-to-face contact that gives way to new electronic channels if employees are allowed to select only their top two preferences. Although limiting the choices to two may seem artificial, time pressures at work do curtail how much time and energy employees can devote to searching out information they want. In effect, they may have time for only one or two communication sources.

HOW DO EMPLOYEES REALLY USE INTRANETS?

Knowing how frequently your own employees access your organization's intranet is a valuable piece of data to have if you're trying to dissuade

Figure 7. Top-Two Preferred Sources at Companies Before and After Intranets Were Available (averaged for eight topics)

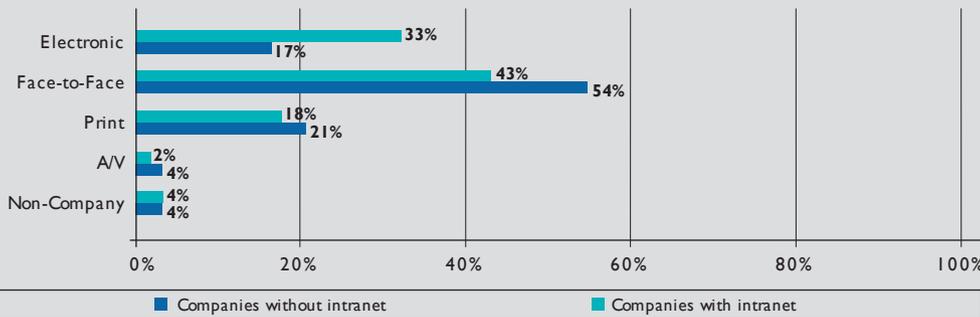
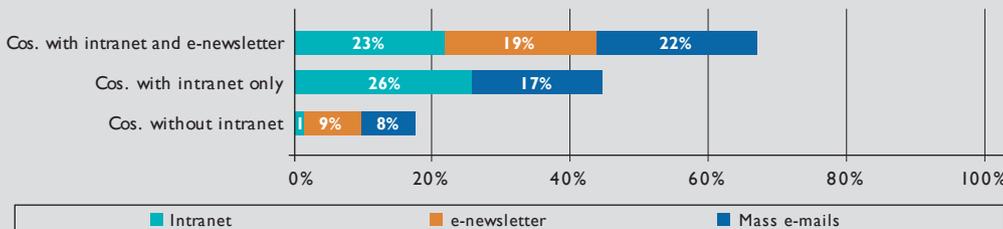


Figure 8. e-Channels Selected Among Top-Two Preferred Sources as More e-Channels Become Available (average of eight subjects)

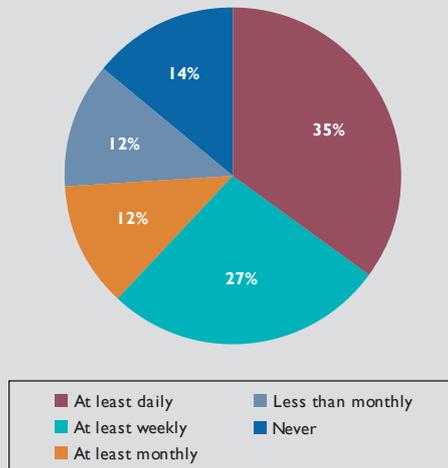


« Increased availability of electronic channels actually reduces employees' reliance on face-to-face communication more than it kills their appetite for print. »



« On average only 35 percent of employees actively look at their intranets at least once a day... More than one-fourth of employees either never look at their company intranet or access it less than monthly. »

Figure 9. How Often Employees Access Intranets

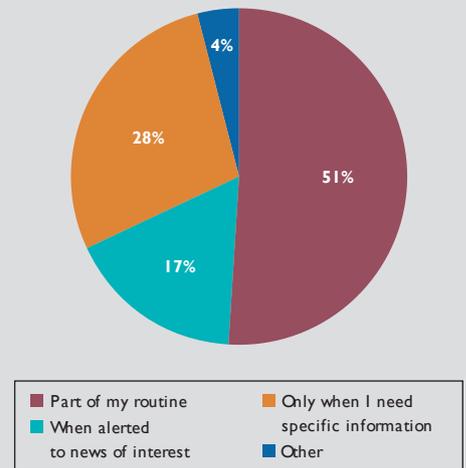


executives from relying on passive intranet posting as your company's main approach to communication. Relying on usage data (e.g., number of page views or visitors) can be misleading, especially if your organization's intranet is the default home page on your employees' web browsers. Just because it's on the screen doesn't mean it's being read.

In our communication audits, we find that on average only 35 percent of employees actively look at their intranets at least once a day (Figure 9). The number ranges from a high of 72 percent to a low of 6 percent (both results are from surveys conducted in the last few months). More than one-fourth of employees either never look at their company intranet or access it less than monthly.

In addition to knowing usage frequency, it's also valuable to discover why employees go to their intranets. Our research shows that about half of employees access intranets as part of

Figure 10. Reasons Employees Visit Intranets



their regular work routines (Figure 10). The other half of employees go there only when they feel a need—either when prompted by the company or when they want to search the site for their own reasons.

GET ANSWERS, DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

Electronic channels have been around long enough now that employees have a good sense of how to use them and what these channels can and can't do for them. The time is past when we could rely on our instincts or expect to argue successfully with executives without hard numbers to back up our recommendations. The numbers in this article may or may not apply to your own organization, but they should give you a good idea of the right questions to ask of your own employees. ☑

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