

Extranets

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You may have heard the terms “Extranet” and “Intranet” used - but are unsure about what they are, and how your business could benefit.

In this Fact Sheet, our E-Business Advisers discuss Extranets:

1. What is an Extranet?

In essence, an Extranet is an Internet web site, one which is wholly or partially accessible to authorised users and selected external partners (such as business partners, suppliers, key customers etc) for exchanging data and applications and sharing specific business information.

Whereas an “Intranet” resides behind a firewall and is accessible only to people who are members of the same company or organisation, an Extranet is normally based on a web server, and provides accessibility to external visitors. (See “Intranet” Fact Sheet in this series.)

You can only gain access to an Extranet if you have a valid username and password, and your identity determines which parts of the Extranet resources you have access to.

Often, an Extranet is accessed through a login and password section of your public web site.

2. Ask yourself these questions.....

- Is your business prepared to work collaboratively?

- Are you willing to share production and sales information with partners?

Companies of all sizes are coming under increasing pressure to use online ordering, order tracking and inventory management.

At the same time, small businesses are keen to meet the demands of larger companies in terms of working flexibly, adopting new technologies and enabling the exchange of business information and transactions.

Traditionally, the method of exchanging business data was via Electronic Data Interchange (see “EDI” Fact Sheet).

However, Extranets offer a cheaper and more efficient way for businesses to connect with their trading partners.

The ability of the Extranet to automate the trading tasks between you and your trading partners can lead to enhanced business relationships and help to integrate your business firmly within their supply chain.

3. A great resource for your own staff too!

A globally available Extranet web site can also provide remote access to company systems for your own staff who spend lots of time out of the office, for example those in sales, customer support, or home workers.

Business Benefits - a range of benefits to your business, which can include:

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- Joining the supply chain through the use of online ordering, order tracking and inventory management.
- Reducing costs by making manuals and technical documentation available online to trading partners and customers.
- Enabling collaboration between business partners or team, allowing them to work on common documentation online, cutting time for development and approval processes and reducing the need for so many meetings.
- Helping to improve business relationships with key trading partners because of the close collaborative working that Extranets support.
- Improving customer service by giving customers direct access to information and enabling them to resolve their own queries.
- Providing a single user interface between you and your business partners.
- Improving the security of communications between you and your business partners, since exchanges can take place under a controlled and secure environment such as a virtual private network (See VPN Factsheet).
- Sharing news of product development exclusively with partner companies.
- Assisting in the move towards flexible working for your own staff, as an extranet allows remote and mobile staff to access

core business information on an as-required basis, irrespective of location.

4. Planning your Extranet

It's important to consider some key points:

When planning the development of an Extranet, you should carefully ensure that it is flexible enough to meet not only your immediate requirements, but also the extended needs of your business and those of your business partners.

Don't forget to consider the user !

If you are in the planning stages, why not get a small group of users together (e.g. partners) to discuss which current business processes would be improved or enhanced further if you were to develop an Extranet.

At the simplest level you can portion off a section of your existing web site and make basic data or resources available to your business partners and associates.

5. Identify your Outcomes and Objectives

- How will you restrict access to your Extranet?
- Will you allow all of your customers to use it?
- Do you want to promote flexible working for your remote workforce?
- How will you measure the success of your investment?
- What information will it contain?



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- Do you need to make all of your production and sales information available to your partners, or will private sub-sections for each be more appropriate?