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## How to Leverage the Gravity of Your Intranet

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Most of us have learned about the concept of gravity through our schooling in Newtonian physics. Although, most of us remember it as Sir Isaac Newton

getting hit on the head by an apple. We know that objects draw other objects in. Despite the fact that we've learned this we're confronted with our daily observation where we see that two objects sitting on a desk don't appear to be zooming towards each other through this attraction.

This explains our challenge with understanding gravity as it applies to our Intranets. The concept is one that makes sense -- but it's difficult to see and get a tangible feel for. However, despite its elusive nature gravity does have a profound impact on our lives -- and it can have a profound effect on your Intranet.

In this article we'll talk about how gravity works on the scale of planets and galaxies so that we can see how we can make our intranets larger.

### Gravity Concepts

In short gravity is the tendency for all mass to attract other mass. In other words, things are drawn together. This fact is quite handy as it keeps the Earth together, us clinging to its surface, and keeps the Earth flying around the sun. We know that the amount of gravity that one object exerts on all others is based on its overall mass (size \* density). Thus larger objects exert more force on other objects and tend to pull them in faster.

Similarly large objects move less (because of their greater mass) than the objects they are attracting. If you look at the path of the earth, for instance, it's not one long ellipse (or circle for that matter) around the sun. The pull of the moon -- which is swinging around the earth at a relatively fast clip -- is causing small variations in the earth's distance to the sun. The moon, because it's smaller, is having in orbit around the earth but the earth isn't impervious to the gravity of the moon.

Intranets are like this. When they're small they tend to be buffeted around by the forces and systems around them. As they become more and more massive they tend to be influenced -- and controlled -- by other systems in the organization. Thus the intranet getting larger helps it in terms of the ability to cope with outside forces.

With intranets the primary concern is for apparent size. That is to say that it isn't necessarily that the one true "intranet server farm" has to actually house the entire body of content but rather that the content and systems should be consistent in branding and navigation.

### Leveraging the Gravity of Other Systems

Perhaps the best way to create long-term gravity for your Intranet is to leverage the gravity of other objects in your organization. Sure, you'll still have to work at creating a gravity for the intranet itself, but here are some ways that you can leverage the gravity of other systems to make it easier to create gravity around your intranet.

Large planet protection and leveraging other large systems In our solar system life was allowed to develop, it is believed, because the gas giant planets in the outer area of the solar system were able to protect Earth from cataclysmic events. They did this by deflecting and diverting errant stellar objects from getting too far into the core of the solar system. This protection allowed life on Earth to develop, or so the theory goes. Without the protection of the larger planets a stray comet, asteroid, or other stellar object might have come crashing into earth ending life as we know it. That isn't to say that the earth was impervious to random stellar objects as the dinosaurs can attest to -- however, it offered an extra level of protection.

In your organization you can leverage the protection of larger systems by successfully suggesting that the latest and the greatest plan of the week be implemented in another system. It may seem odd that while you're trying to build gravity in your Intranet that you may want to deflect ideas from becoming a part of the Intranet, but just like a large rock slamming into the Earth could end all life, one sufficiently large bad project can end the life of your Intranet.

So sometimes the right answer for helping your intranet is to leverage the gravity of these other systems to allow risky ideas to be captured by them instead of threatening the intranet.

### **Slingshot acceleration**

Slingshot acceleration, or Gravity Assist, is used to accelerate the speed of an object, typically a space probe, on its way. It works by leveraging the gravity of another object -- typically a planet to increase the object's speed. This works because of the relatively low gravity of the space probe and the relatively large gravity of the object that's being used to assist in the speed. In Intranet terms you can leverage the popularity and limitations of another system to accelerate adoption of your intranet. The classic example is reporting most online transaction processing (OLTP) systems are designed to get things done and fall down at some level in their ability to generate reporting data for decisions. Data warehouses and Online Analytical Processing (OLAP) systems are designed to for reporting and analysis but often need a place to house those reports. Using the popularity of the existing systems in the environment coupled with a reporting an analytical system can push your intranet along its way towards growth.

The popularity doesn't have to be another system. It could be as simple as the company newsletter. Shifting the company newsletter from paper or email to an online presence can have a substantial impact on how people feel about the intranet. With an anchor piece of content that every employee wants or needs to read can help accelerate adoption of your intranet.

When someone says they've seen a black hole, they're quite literally incorrect. Since black holes are by definition objects from which no light can escape, it's impossible to see them. However, what can be seen is the accretion disc which surrounds the black hole (and other similarly large gravity objects.) In nearly every organization there's at least one black hole -- one system which everything else falls into. In most organizations it's an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system like SAP, PeopleSoft, or Oracle.

The idea behind leveraging the "black hole" in your organization is to be the way that the organization sees the "black hole." In other words, being the portal to get to your ERP system or surfacing the reports from the [ERP system](#) allows your intranet to become visible without being the ERP system itself. This means work to integrate ERP data through report builders, search capabilities, links, and other techniques until the intranet becomes easier to use than the ERP system itself.

### **Creating Gravity around Your Intranet**

The obvious conclusion when you consider gravity of an intranet is that more gravity is better able to keep the intranet around and to keep drawing things into it so therefore the more gravity that you can create in an Intranet the better. So the question becomes, how can you create gravity around your intranet? Rome wasn't built in a day and neither will your intranet. Your intranet will need a set of strategies to keep interest -- and new content over the long term.

### **Collecting Meteorites (Email to Content)**

Nearly every organization whether they have an intranet or not will still communicate information via email. Sometimes there's a perceived urgency to the communication that leads them to believe that it can't wait until someone sees it on the intranet. Other times it's the perception that not everyone checks the intranet or that the intranet isn't the place for information like the information being communicated in the email.

The challenge is that each email message is a passing meteorite that never lands on the intranet and therefore never adds to its mass. In other words it never adds to the reasons for users to come back to visit. Intranets need to seem like they are alive and well and the more content that they capture the more alive they seem.

In order to improve the gravity of the internet it's necessary to address these objections and capture the emails instead of allowing them to go by.

The urgency of [communication](#) can largely be addressed by setting everyone's [home page](#) to the Intranet and working on a policy where by the members of the organization know to expect that semi-urgent information may be contained there. One organization that I worked with formalized their policy that all employees were expected to check the system three times a day: When they came in of a morning, around lunch, and at the end of the day. Obviously, it's difficult to enforce this, and they didn't bother. However, it became a framework for evaluating which messages could be on the intranet and which needed to go out via email.

Even if you can't get a mandate to look at the intranet multiple times a day it's possible to have it be the home page for all of the users in the organization -- at which point you can at least guarantee they'll see it -- even if it's on their way to something else. The challenge here it to get them to stop and take a look at what is on the intranet page. Paradoxically if you start reporting information on this page -- particularly if done well -- they'll start to stop on the page to see what's changed. Get the pump primed, get folks to start reporting news there and set the home page of their [browser](#) so they'll see the news you publish.

The final typical objection is that the type of information being communicated isn't the sort of thing that is seen on the intranet. This is most often that the creator of the information doesn't have a way that they can understand to enter the information on the intranet. Because of that they do what they know how to do which is to send an email to everyone. In working with these folks (as you see the emails come into your inbox) you can make sure they have the appropriate access to enter the announcement in the first place, and also to make sure that the ways that you've allowed for announcements to be created fits with their needs.

### **Smashing Planets (Connecting [Applications](#))**

Sometimes to get the mass you need you have to smash a few planets in the process. One sure fire way to increase your mass is to merge two or more objects. In the stellar scale this sometimes works and sometimes breaks apart both objects into a string of smaller objects. You can think a big bang followed by a rain of asteroids.

Luckily the process with intranets tends to be much less violent. In the case of an intranet you're typically trying to integrate [applications](#) into the intranet to create more of a draw. This can be the random, and sometimes rogue, [web application](#), or it can be the application that just look like it belongs anywhere else.

By pulling in the random web applications into your intranet you begin to centralize the expectations of the users that they will come to the intranet not just for content but for applications as well.

### **Stable System**

Understanding how gravity impacts things on a stellar scale can give you the clues you need to have a successful [internet](#). By leveraging other systems to protect your intranet from things it shouldn't do, accelerate the growth by providing an access gateway to the other systems, and capture more content and useful information for the users of your organization. Once you've developed enough mass to your intranet in terms of content and applications, you will hopefully end up with a stable system that continues to grow and change as the needs of the organization change