Chapter 1

A Global View of Intranets

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What exactly is an intranet? It's one of those terms that's more thrown around than understood, and has become more of a buzzword than a commonly understood idea. Simply put, an intranet is a private network with Internet technology used as the underlying architecture. An intranet is built using the Internet's TCP/IP protocols for communications. TCP/IP protocols can be run on many hardware platforms and cabling schemes. The underlying hardware is not what makes an intranet-it's the software protocols that matter.

Intranets can co-exist with other local area networking technology. In many companies, existing "legacy systems" including mainframes, Novell networks, minicomputers, and various databases, are being integrated into an intranet. A wide variety of tools allow this to happen. Common Gateway Interface (CGI) scripting is often used to access legacy databases from an intranet. The Java programming language can be used to access legacy databases as well.

With the enormous growth of the Internet, an increasing number of people in corporations use the Internet for communicating with the outside world, for gathering information, and for doing business. It didn't take long for people to recognize that the components that worked so well on the Internet could be equally valuable internally and that is why intranets are becoming so popular. Some corporations do not have TCP/IP networks, the protocol required to access the resources of the Internet. Creating an intranet in which all the information and resources can be used seamlessly has many benefits. TCP/IP-based networks make it easy for people to access the network remotely, such as from home or while traveling. Dialing into an intranet in this way is much like connecting to the Internet, except that you're connecting to a private network instead of to a public Internet provider. Interoperability between networks is another substantial bonus.

Security systems separate an intranet from the Internet. A company's intranet is protected by firewalls-hardware and software combinations that allow only certain people to access the intranet for specific purposes.

Intranets can be used for anything that existing networks are used for-and more. The ease of publishing information on the World Wide Web has made them popular places for posting corporate information such as company news or company procedures. Corporate databases with easy-to-build front-ends use the Web and programming languages such as Java.

Intranets allow people to work together more easily and more effectively. Software known as groupware is another important part of intranets. It allows people to collaborate on projects; to share information; to do videoconferencing; and to establish secure procedures for production work. Free server and client software and the multitude of services, like newsgroups, stimulated the Internet's growth. The consequence of that growth stimulated and fueled the growth of intranets. The ease with which information can be shared, and with which people can communicate with one another will continue to drive the building of intranets.