



intranets: inside worlds

a look at chicago intranets

content company inc.
september 2003



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1.0 introduction

What is an intranet? Simply defined, an intranet is a website designed for the employees of an organization. Usually accessible only at a company location or by dialing in to a remote network, an intranet enables an organization to communicate with its employees, provide access to software, tools and forms that allow employees to do their jobs, and ideally, to collaborate on projects online.

An intranet is, fundamentally, an organizational business opportunity. If it is destined to be successful, its creation must stem from a business need, and it must be conceived as a business tool that, coincidentally, uses technology.

Intranets enable employers and employees to interact more effectively and more efficiently.

In existence for 10 years or less, intranets are still in the early stages of their development, which is both advantageous and risky.

Intranets represent the numerous, diverse cultures of the companies that employ them. In being developed, each one must solve similar problems: how to find support, how to succeed in the organization's culture, and how to add value and be sustainable. There are trends, but few fixed standards; each company must analyze its needs and develop its own solution.

Some organizations have in-house resources who can plan, organize and develop their first intranet, or later evolutions; others hire consultants, such as Content Company.

Intranets vary widely in several basic areas:

- their strategy and scope
- where they "live" within an organization
- their degree of centralization
- the structure and process by which they are governed
- whether there is just one intranet, or several
- how they define and encompass "news"

Without revealing names (except in the "good ideas" section), this white paper shares facts about several Chicago organizations, presented in a context that will help readers decide how to adapt this information to their own organizations.



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1.1 why this white paper exists

Since intranets are private and the people behind them largely shielded from external influences, they have each had to solve these problems on their own. The only outside influence most intranets have had are software vendors, whose marketing materials often imply that their technology by itself will create a valuable internal website.

We interviewed 14 Chicago corporations, associations and nonprofit organizations, with employee populations ranging from 42 to 275,000. (See [appendix a](#) for the company name, sector and employee population size.) Surprisingly, many of the basic issues were the same at all the organizations, and the larger companies or those that had larger staffs and budgets did not necessarily have the better solutions.

Please see [appendix b](#) for the questions we asked. Since our study size did not lend itself to numerical documentation, we have focused on trends and anecdotes in this white paper.

The publishing tools mentioned by companies in this white paper are listed in [appendix c](#). For screenshots of four intranets, see [appendix d](#).



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2.0 intranet histories

2.1 early stage looks alike

Almost every organization's intranet has the same early history:

Once upon a time, in about 1995, various people around the company started putting things online. Some created simple websites, others used a database or shared server. They did this on their own or working with IT – in fact, these were often sites related to IT information. There was no consistency between sites, but no one cared. This was for several reasons:

- each site served its own separate audience
- there was no reason for them to be consistent
- management didn't know or care that these sites existed

Then, management began reading about the Internet, and maybe even about intranets, in business or technology journals. It was brought to their attention (often by their children, neighbors or friends) that their competitors had websites. With that, they began taking note of the Internet.

2.2 evolution varies

Here's where each organization's culture comes in. Each organization had the same questions, but their answers varied widely. For each organization, the answers to the following questions have shaped the continuing evolution of their intranets:

- What do we want our intranet to do?
- How much information do we want to share with our employees?
- How much information do we want our employees to share with each other?
- How much time can we allow our employees to spend on this intranet?
- How will we measure the value the intranet is bringing to us?

An organization's answers may change over time, as the organization's priorities shift and as the intranet's existing and potential value becomes clearer.

For a look at some of those answers, read on.



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3.0 intranet strategy and scope

overall models

There are three general models for intranets, progressing from simplest to most complex:

- communications focused
- integration with business applications
- knowledge management

Knowledge management is often the end goal of an intranet, but communication is usually the starting point, and, depending on the corporate culture, knowledge management is not always attainable; for some companies, it might not make sense to go further than integrating the intranet with other applications.

The simplest way to create ROI from an intranet is through saving money, by helping employees find information faster. The second comes from making processes work better, helping people collaborate, and saving unnecessary rework. This is where content management becomes knowledge management.

3.1 focus on information

3.1.1 publications

Companies already understand the need for communication with their employees, and the Web is a natural medium for delivering communications. It eliminates the mailing and printing costs that make print publications too expensive to produce frequently. And by putting publications online and sending out a link via email to all employees, server space is maximized as well.

In addition to formal publications, the intranet provides more opportunity than ever to share news with employees. Many intranets started as an online employee newsletter, so news is still often their heart.

3.1.2 news

“News” can mean so many things, including company acquisitions, job changes, personal congratulations, blood drive and press releases. Each organization needs to define what kinds of news they will deliver via the intranet, which via other channels, and whether that information will be tailored to employees based on role, geography, business unit, etc.

There are two primary models for news publishing:

1. any employee can submit a news article, which is then evaluated by communicators and/or subject matter experts
2. a small set of people suggest or recommend news articles to the intranet communication team, who then crafts the articles to focus on the information employees need to know

Only one organization in this study uses the first model. This intranet has more than 80 news “channels,” each featuring news about a particular business unit, location or group.



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Employees are presubscribed to the news channels containing news about the company and their business unit, but they can choose to subscribe to any other news channels. Any employee can submit a news article to any channel; that channel's editors can edit, approve or reject each article, or transfer it to a different channel.

Another large organization has two communicators who accept employee article ideas and then do the research and writing required to publish news that is relevant to employees.

There is much about news that differs among companies:

- some include industry news
- some have created processes to publish news articles on multiple pages, so that employees can read news on the homepage, specific business pages, or where there is information on related topics
- some regularly publish a newsletter containing links to the latest local news, which leaves the intranet homepage more available for business news
- some intranet owners do not concern themselves at all with location-specific, non-business news, such as the cafeteria closing early or a local blood drive

3.1.3 intranet as one medium of communication

For almost every company, the intranet is only one way of communicating with employees. There are groups of employees at every company that don't have constant access to a computer – customer service representatives, salespeople, maintenance workers, clinicians, data processors, etc.

Communicating with these employees is more complex. Almost every organization provides a small number of kiosks where employees can access the intranet, but they realize that not all employees will make the effort to use them.

Most organizations have additional channels to use as appropriate: face-to-face meetings, voicemail, email, paper handouts, public signage, and even first-class mail. But the intranet has added a communication channel that is unprecedented in its efficiency, and also in the speed with which it has been adopted in organizations.

3.1.4 other content

In addition to news and publications, intranets contain a substantial amount of content from individual areas of the company. In almost every organization in this study, that content is relatively static. This is logical, but it presents a content management challenge, since a content management tool needs to be intuitive enough for content owners to use on an infrequent basis.

Several organizations outsource some specific content areas, especially HR content.



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3.2 intranet as a gateway

Soon after considering how to streamline communications using the intranet, companies realize that there is an enormous opportunity to gain efficiency by making the intranet the primary way to access email, databases, forms, custom applications, maps and more. By creating a single point of contact with employees, an organization can ensure that all employees are getting accurate information, using updated applications and working more systematically.

Each organization needs to answer the following questions to determine whether and how they will link employees to the other applications:

- Is single sign-on possible and smart in our environment?
- Will employees adopt the intranet as the gateway to their applications?
- Do we have the development resources to make this possible?

More of the companies with portals use their intranets as an application gateway.

3.3 intranet as knowledge management tool

At organizations with a collaborative culture or those that offer consulting services, knowledge management is happening. Intranets at these organizations are often key to these knowledge management activities:

- helping people find information, as well as the individuals and teams who created that information
- share knowledge about industries, clients and projects

Only two of the companies in this study fully incorporate knowledge management into their intranets. One organization focuses primarily on connecting people with those who know the information, through a highly customized and extremely robust employee directory.

This robust tool incorporates

- org chart functionality, enabling people to see where in the company someone fits and reach a colleague if necessary
- physical maps showing people in proximity to a person, conference room, etc.
- friendly directions to each employee's location
- a page for each employee, with room for the employee to add information about special skills (languages, certifications, etc.) or previous relevant experience – in addition to a photo and basic information

At the other organization, teams have developed the habit of documenting the knowledge of their project, their customer and their practice – and their search engine makes it easy for other employees to find out who knows what, and access information electronically or get in touch with those people.



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4.0 ownership and governance

4.1 an editorial model

While intranets serve as a gateway to email, forms, custom applications, maps and more, their central function remains communicating information. Appropriately, then, communicators own or manage the content in most of the intranets in our study.

Sometimes these intranet content or communication managers oversee technical development; often they work in conjunction with the technology department. These communicators are sometimes housed inside Employee Communications, Human Resources, Public Relations, Public Affairs, Training and Organizational Development, or Marketing, and sometimes in a group not tied into any specific corporate function.

Some examples:

- At one large organization, the intranet is jointly owned by Human Resources and the Knowledge Management group, combining a high-profile company initiative with the frequent use of a corporate support function.
- A small company's intranet was developed and is managed by a team of people pulled from various areas in the company.
- A large company intranet is owned by the triumvirate of Marketing, Human Resources and IT.
- One intranet is ultimately directed by the same person who manages the company's internal television and video efforts, which creates opportunities for multi-channel delivery of information.

4.2 the centralization debate

Organizations occupy all points of the spectrum in their degree of centralization. Some enable any employee to share information through the intranet, while others, even large organizations, have only two or three people who can publish content.

There are numerous ways in which intranets can help organizations:

- conduct business
- access information
- share knowledge
- manage change
- collaboration

Chicago companies use their intranets for some or all of these purposes, to varying degrees.



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A few companies operate on more of an internal agency model, with the intranet core team members acting as liaisons for one or more business units or corporate departments; each liaison works with “their” groups to coach them on how to best use the intranet and how to use the content management system to publish their information.

Another company sees its intranet as helping the company cross-sell products to customers, so the more every employee knows about all of its business units, the better they will be able to broaden their relationship with customers, which is best for the company. The intranet is just beginning to be leveraged for this purpose.

As often as not, intranet managers do not get involved in the content posted on internal sites that are linked from the intranet homepage: business units, corporate functions, etc.

This was an especially conscious decision at one large organization, whose intranet primarily consists of some 500 databases. These databases contain information relevant to a specific audience, whose size may be 10 people, or 30,000. The job of the intranet team is to manage the welcome page that serves as the gateway to these databases, as well as to the corporate functions accessible to all employees.

At another company, after the intranet initially launched, the team’s next priority was to incorporate the separate intranets that the business units were using. These sites had provided valuable information to the employees in those business units; incorporating them into the navigation, design and templates for the overall intranet helped employees outside the business units benefit from that information as well.

4.3 how big a staff?

To our surprise, we found no relationship between a company’s overall size and the intranet’s staff.

While every intranet has someone in an editor-in-chief role at least for the homepage, the responsibilities of intranet owners include varying degrees of the following:

- governing the look and feel of the intranet, and ensuring that all pages within the intranet follow the graphic standards
- ensuring that all intranet content is reviewed periodically to remain up-to-date and accurate
- choosing the sections or pages linked from the intranet’s homepage
- leading redesign efforts to ensure that the intranet’s strategy enables the organization’s strategic direction
- gathering, writing and editing news, or overseeing those who do

There is no consistent ratio of employees to content owners (defined for this white paper as people who make the decision to publish information to the intranet and have the rights to directly do so). There are usually 2 to 50 content owners, no matter what the company’s size is.



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4.3.1 BEST PRACTICE: While organizations may think these economies of scale negate the need for additional staff, the reverse is true, in the experience of Content Company. Larger organizations have more complex relationships, more information and greater need for different kinds of management involvement, requiring more people to manage effectively.

4.4 governance councils

About half the companies in the study have governance councils for their intranets; the remainder are either forming one now or may do so in the future.

These councils have various names and include people from diverse areas in the company. At CNA and William Blair, governance decisions about the intranet are included in executive-level marketing councils; Aon's governance council consists of knowledge managers around the globe.

In many organizations, governance councils are convened more frequently in the early stages of an intranet's formation and at major redesigns; in the interim, they meet less frequently to review and approve major decisions and releases.



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5.0 good ideas

We liked these ideas so much that we included the company names!

- ZMF is rightfully proud of its “Hot or Not” idea tool. With engaging graphics and areas for both submitting ideas and giving feedback on ideas that other employees have submitted, the tool is a fun way to participate in company idea initiative.
- While many intranets feature “quick links” to popular content on the homepage, William Blair’s displays the actual top 10 most frequently visited pages -- reviewed monthly.
- In addition to its portal, the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business has a course management tool (still in its infancy) that will soon enable professors to create separate websites for each section of each course they teach, with features including assignments and bulletin boards. This will foster a feeling of community among students who are often geographically dispersed.
- At rapidly growing companies, new employee orientation is a top priority. The two smallest companies in this study, ZMF and Business Logic, used the intranet to help acclimate new employees quickly. ZMF put its new employee checklist online, so that new employees learn to use the intranet to find the appropriate person for accomplishing specific new-job tasks (forms, etc.). Business Logic included information for its new college graduates about dress code, etiquette and nearby places for lunch.
- When Sears launches its employee portal in October, each employee’s intranet homepage will display news, links and content relevant to his or her role, team and location.



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6.0 common complaints

While the positives were distinctive, the intranet managers in this study expressed a common set of challenges:

- Software was selected without adequate requirements gathering – as a result, content owners cannot update their own content.
- Software was too restrictive, requiring extensive customization.
- Inadequate staffing, where day-to-day maintenance takes up the time that should be spent focusing on strategy, or that causes delays in updates or training.
- Too little ownership of content, with pages left “orphaned” for the Communications staff to maintain.
- Creating, maintaining and updating intranet content is not in the official job descriptions of those tasked to own content. Therefore, there is no incentive for content owners to maintain their content, although some content owners post information regularly because they choose to. As a result, departments have widely different amounts of content on the intranet, and even more widely varying levels of quality and accuracy.
- “Rogue” sites that are difficult to find (since they may not be linked from anywhere), define ownership for and modify to comply with corporate standards.

These complaints are all fixable, with proper strategy, staffing and budget. Once organizations realize the value of the intranet, both in cost savings and in measurable improvement in knowledge, they will put more resources into it.



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7.0 increasing usage: draw vs. demand

Some organizations choose to inform managers with the specific aim of having the managers communicate with their employees; others rely on signage in visible spots, paper handouts or even first-class mail to ensure that their employees find out about important information.

A key, many organizations have found, is to make people want to or have to use the intranet. Frequent draws:

- cafeteria menu
- classified ads
- merchandise with the company logo
- games
- small rewards (a Starbucks or Blockbuster card, for example) each month to the employee who uses the intranet most

At a large company, the intranet team placed a news item on the homepage inviting people to visit a specific office for a surprise. When they stopped by the office, they received a sticker, and employees with stickers were given special recognition at an employee meeting, as well as being eligible for a prize drawing.

At other companies, employees use the intranet because it is the **only** means to do certain things, such as enroll for benefits, see a pay stub or submit expense reports. And it is common that the intranet is the only way employees can access the applications they need to do their jobs.

Either way, once people begin using the intranet regularly, they are likelier to develop the habit of turning to it as a primary source of information about the company.



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8.0 the intranet reflects the culture

Significantly more so than a public website or print communications, an organization's intranet reflects its culture. Is it a communication vehicle -- centrally managed, with article ideas screened and then produced by professional communicators? Is it primarily a gateway to small information centers of specific information for narrow audiences? Is it a hodgepodge of processes and looks? Is it the center for sharing and collecting knowledge?

Each of these kinds of intranets exists in Chicago. The intranet reflects the culture: controlled and filtered, centrally governed or not, aggregated or dispersed. "Seeing a company's intranet is like seeing it with its pants down," a colleague recently quipped, and it's all too true.

8.1 creating the right kind of intranet for your culture

It takes a special set of skills to create the right kind of intranet for a particular organization or to reshape an intranet that is not as successful as it can be. It takes a combination of perspective about a company and broad experience and knowledge about what is possible. Many organizations have people with these skills. Those that don't might want to consider hiring outside consultants to help. Content Company has brought our skills to several top Chicago companies, and we would be interested in discussing your needs with you. Feel free to contact us at info@contentcompany.biz to set up an appointment.



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appendix a: companies interviewed for this white paper

company name	sector	number of employees
Abbott Laboratories	healthcare	70,000
Advocate Health Care	healthcare	30,000, including physicians
Aon Corporation	insurance	50,000
Bank One	financial services	73,000
Business Logic Corporation	technology	250
CNA	insurance	14,500
Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago	nonprofit	2,000
Hewitt Associates	human resources consulting and outsourcing	15,000
Household International	financial services	33,000
RR Donnelley	manufacturing	30,000
Sears	retail	275,000
University of Chicago Graduate School of Business	education	3,300 students, faculty and staff members
William Blair	financial services	800
Zagnoli McEvoy Foley (ZMF)	consulting	42



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appendix b: intranet questionnaire

How many content owners do you have? How many employees?

What department(s) “own” your intranet, overall?

How is your intranet team organized?

How is your intranet governed?

Do you have an editor-in-chief/managing editor?

Do you have a governance council? If so, who is on it?

If not, how are decisions made about whether to keep/edit/delete content?

How is your intranet content organized?

Do you use software to manage your intranet—CMS, portal, etc.? If so, what software?

Briefly describe your intranet’s evolution

Was there a strategy behind how your intranet looks and works today? Who developed that strategy?

What processes have you used to create and manage your intranet content?

Is your intranet your organization’s only internal website?

If not, what other internal sites exist?

Why do they exist?

What areas of the company does your intranet encompass?

Intranet news:

What constitutes “news” on your intranet?

Who requests news articles? who writes them? who posts them?

Who decides whether or not the news article should get posted, and who should have access to read it?

How is news disseminated in your organization (intranet, email, paper, voicemail, etc.)?



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appendix c: publishing tools

While there are some intranets that publish information manually, most use some degree of automation. The amount of automation is very closely connected with the size of the organization, the complexity of information it publishes online, the sophistication of its publishing model (personalization, etc.) and its general reliance on technology.

Tools range from Dreamweaver, FrontPage and ASP forms to content management systems and portals. Of the CMSs that were not homegrown (custom built especially for the organization), those mentioned:

Broadvision <http://www.broadvision.com>

Documentum <http://www.documentum.com>

FileNet <http://www.filenet.com>

Interwoven TeamSite <http://www.interwoven.com>

Lotus Notes <http://www.lotus.com/>

Medseek Sitemaker www.medseek.com

Plumtree <http://www.plumtree.com/>

RedDot Solutions <http://www.reddot.com/>



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appendix d: selected screenshots

Abbott Laboratories

Welcome
to the **Abbott Wide Web**

[New Memo](#) [New Calendar Entry](#) [FAQ](#) [Survey](#) [My Page](#) [My Workspace](#)

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- [Abbott Web Sites](#)
- [Executive Office](#)
- [The News](#)
- [Company Directory](#)
- [In the Community](#)
- [Abbott World](#)

Abbott Information

- [Company Fact Sheet](#)
- [2002 Annual Report](#)
- [2003 Proxy Statement](#)
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...s death rate rise to 15 percent • SARS takes heavy toll at Hong Kong hospitals • A Doctor Home

News Flash

- An Important Message to associates from Jim Skogsbergh
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News and Information

CDC Alert: SARS

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[Strategic Positioning Survey 2003](#)

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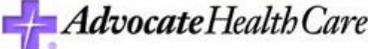
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Top Story

Penny Wars Raises More Than \$5,000 for United Way

Penny Wars ended at 3 p.m. Friday after raising a total of \$5,250 for the United Way. The fourth floor won the fund-raising contest with the most points, even after other floors inundated their jug (left) with pennies to lower their score. The eleventh floor came in second and 2B took third place. Thanks go out to all who helped make Penny Wars a success! [See the final results.](#)

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	Change	Value
Dow	-14.74	9,456.81
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[Today's Menu](#)

[Weekly Menu](#)

[LaSalle Dining Room Menu](#)

Web Picks

- [CNN.com](#)
- [ESPN.com](#)
- [Google.com](#)
- [Weather.chicagotribune.com](#)
- [Digital City - Chicago](#)



intranets: inside worlds

a look at chicago intranets
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Household International

Connect **HOUSEHOLD**

Welcome, Jeff Slogar | 09/16/2003 | Logout HSDC Direct Portal

News | Training | Jobs | Complete Reward Employee Directory Enter Last Name Site Search

Tools

- Email
- Calendar
- Update Profile
- Posting
- Forms Catalog
- Technical Support
- D Drive Locations
- Purchasing
- Travel
- Schedule Reports
- Manager's Toolkit

Company Information

Select Business Unit

Welcome to Connect

Welcome to Household intranet, your source for company news, tools, and information.

Lessons/Tools

Priority Updates 1 of 1

CCS All Locations
published 09/15/03 expires 09/22/03
CCS Profitable Growth Update for August 2003 => [more](#)

News

Executive News
published 09/15/03 expires 09/22/03
Tax organization announcement
Miss DeLaca retiring in March 2004 after 19 years of service. => [more](#)

General
published 09/15/03 expires 09/22/03
September Compliance Alert Reminder
All U.S. and Canadian employees: Your response is required. => [more](#)

Employees Only: U.S.
published 09/15/03 expires 09/22/03

Compliance Alert

All employees: Be sure to read and comply with the September policy => [more](#)

stronger together

Read the latest HSDC Household information news.

REGISTRATION UPDATE

Contact LifeBalance.
Household's work-life resources and referral program, for help with whatever you're facing. => [more](#)

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!
Access the new Connect feedback form.

Home | Contact Us | Site Map | FAQs | Feedback



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further resources

The content company website displays a plethora of intranet resources at <http://www.contentcompany.biz/resources--intranets.html>

be included

This white paper is the first in what will hopefully be an annual analysis of how Chicago organizations are using their intranets. We interviewed only a small number of Chicago's top companies, and we would like to include more companies in our future efforts.

If your organization would like to be among those in the next iteration of this white paper, please contact us at intranets@contentcompany.biz



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about content company

Content Company <<http://www.contentcompany.biz/>> was founded in 2001 as a content strategy and management consultancy.

Content Company's president, Hilary Marsh, is a frequent speaker on intranets, content management, web strategy and related issues at national industry conferences and to corporations. She has also taught professional development courses on content and information architecture. Ms. Marsh has an extensive background in web content and print publishing, writing and editing for corporations and magazines.

Content Company's projects have included

- intranet content migration strategy, training and overall content strategy for Household International (chosen over major professional services firms)
- content management strategy for 37 disparate websites under the umbrella of the American Hospital Association
- content management system selection process for the University of Chicago
- content strategy and development for nonprofit organizations, including the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Donors Forum of Chicago
- content strategy and development for financial services websites including Household Mortgage Services and the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago

contact us

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