



# A Guide to Intranet Home Page Design 101

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## About the Author

Matt is an engineer-turned IT/chatbot nerd and Microsoft MVP. His career began designing mechanical systems for nuclear reactors for the US Navy. SharePoint 2007 rolled out soon after and he leveraged it to organize design documents, contracts, and drawings dating back decades; for better or worse, a new power user was born.

The IT department needed some help, so he led adoption for a few years following, including the user adoption sides of upgrading to SharePoint 2013. Next, he spent a couple years in the US Virgin Islands where he led the organization's migration from SharePoint 2013 to SharePoint Online.

Today he consults internationally on Office 365 migration and adoption. He's recently found himself neck deep in AI and bots. He's worked in environments ranging from government to private sector; fewer than one hundred users to thousands; strictly secure to eh-good-enough; custom to out-of-the-box; snowed-in to palm tree-laden.



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# Part 1



## Getting Your Project Organized



It's time to redo your intranet or local department homepage. Maybe you're migrating from an older version of Microsoft SharePoint or it's just time for a facelift. Regardless, it's a great opportunity to learn about the tools available when you take on the task. But it's important to assemble a good team to work on it.

Your intranet homepage is important. I can't overstate that. A successful intranet homepage is something most people use daily (or will use once you market it internally). Whether it's just for clicking a link to go somewhere else or it's to read up on the company news, your home page can and should be a central hub for everyone, with something relevant to all.

In Part One I'll take you through the general guidelines and best practices of how to build your intranet home page in SharePoint Online. Although there are no prescriptive ways to complete this task, I will outline what will work for almost all organizations and company cultures.

Following some or all of these steps should help you get ahead of any risks or potential landmines. That said, I provide no guarantees! Your mileage may vary. Use common sense and apply these concepts as best they work for your situation.

# Part 1: Getting Your Project Organized

## Why do you need an intranet homepage?

In a lot of organizations, the homepage already is a central spot. For others, it may not be. And for those latter teams, don't be discouraged. Just because email is the main source of sending news today doesn't mean it will be next year, next month, or tomorrow.

You can make a webpage the central hub of authoritative information and, frankly, for an office-type organization filled with knowledge workers and professionals, you should. Websites have history, retain information, provide a powerful search engine, and represent discreet, one-stop-shop setups; other communication tools do not.

With some change management and a few sweet nuggets included on your homepage, getting people to it won't be that difficult, even if you think it will be. Now let's discuss some of the steps in planning then cover a few landmines to avoid.

## Build a good team

A dedicated team with the skills and resources needed to complete this task is the most important thing you'll need for a homepage redesign. Read the last sentence again, please.

In many organizations, the team will be made up of experts in their respective fields providing a percentage of their time on the project. In larger organizations, the team will be full-time.

Regardless, the early-stage team will be larger, performing research, reviewing metrics, drafting designs, presenting to management, building, and ultimately finishing the product. Once the page has launched, the support team will be smaller, limited mainly to updates and management.

At a minimum, you'll want some of the following people: information technology (SharePoint support), communications (planning and support), marketing and branding (design and graphics), and your executive champion. In a perfect world, you have a separate team lead who has at least some experience in all of these roles.

If you have the resources, you should also strongly consider representation from the following professions: change management (communication planning and building excitement), information or knowledge management (content build out and organization), and a representative from the team who runs your external website (context with other web experiences).

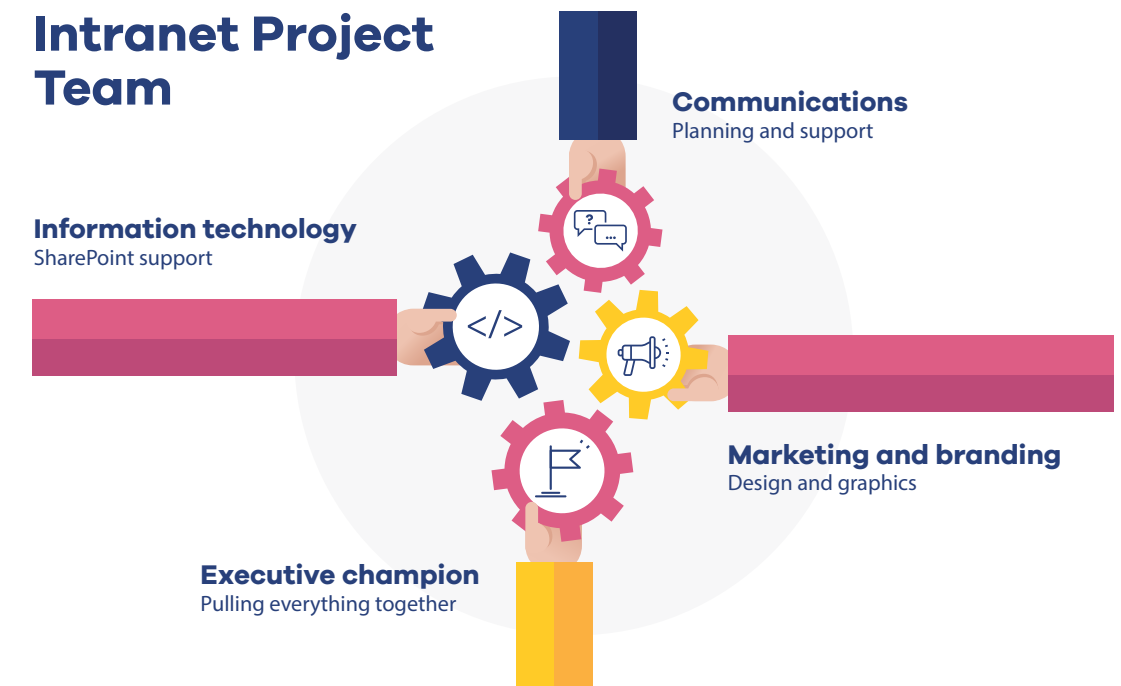
## Find an executive champion

Critically, you need executive support. **Someone with decision-making and budgetary authority must be on this team if you want to succeed.** Lacking an executive champion all but guarantees failure because the project will inevitably get back-burnered by one or many of the managers of your part-time team members. Your champion should act as a shield to those effects and push the project forward among the top folks.

Generally, it's smart to have a member of the C-Suite, but a level down from there is tolerable. Yes, even in a large organization, a C-Suite (or upper-level management) member is important because of the impact and influence your intranet homepage has on your organization and its culture. Think of how many eyes are on the intranet homepage in an enterprise environment. And think of the bad outcome if the C-Suite isn't aware of the updates your team rolls it out and they're... let's say, dissatisfied. Not good.

Avoid those problems by making sure you find a high-ranking champion.

## Intranet Project Team



### Benchmark the status quo

Metrics matter. You likely have an existing homepage. If you don't, you may have an existing intranet. And if people use it, you can easily discern what's already popular and what's not. Your metrics help you identify what to build upon and what to toss. Metrics also will help you define success: you can't say you improved the situation if you can't compare end-of-project status to that at the beginning.

Generally speaking, click counts matter. You can get detailed usage metrics for free using [Google Analytics](#). Your IT representative should be able to set this up or put the request in to get it done. With GA, you'll see how many regular users you have, where they come from, where they go, how often they return, how long they stay, and which content on the page or in the rest of the intranet are most popular.

Next, consider adding a heat-mapping tool to your homepage and any other popular pages or pages you're redoing. Where GA will tell you what people are clicking and who's using your page, a heat map will tell you which sections of the pages are most popular. You can try something like [HotJar](#). A [basic account](#) will record up to 2,000 visitors per day for free; that's a lot of good data to start with.

Lastly, you want qualitative input. Engage your users. On a large scale, you can and

should put together some surveys to find out which aspects of the current page people like, what they don't like, what are must-haves, and who's most interested in the project. You may find some additional team members in this process that are passionate about a good homepage.

Then, lead some internal workshops. Your change management person can lead these and ask similar questions but get more nuanced responses than a survey can provide. This is a short paragraph that describes an intense process; do not underestimate the time and attention required to host workshops nor what it takes to write [good survey questions](#). It's harder than you think!

Keep a running list of popular content because you will want it later for potential inclusion in the homepage design.



### Don't reinvent the wheel

There's absolutely no reason to start this project as if nobody has ever done the same thing before. Your organization, while I'm sure it's unique, really isn't that different from other corporations, governments, etc. Nope, even the most dysfunctional parts are common.

So don't move forward like you have to start from scratch. Do some research. Find out what other organizations are doing. It's super easy!

Wait, no. It's actually not. One thing you never see publicized is intranet screenshots. Intranets contain the bread and butter of what makes an organization successful, so you rarely catch glimpses because legal teams don't want to take the (unnecessary, in their eyes) risks of inadvertently releasing intellectual property or processes. And you can't blame them.

But fear not! You do have options. For one, you can reach out to colleagues and friends in other organizations for ideas or screenshots. You can try to remember what your last company did and run with that. Or you can look up reports on intranet designs. Yeah, let's go with that last one since the former were effectively light forms of corporate espionage.

I'm going to save actual design recommendations for Part 2, but to get you researching, you should check out two important design resources for help understanding both what is functionally possible and what real-world designs are out there.

Your best bet for understanding out-of-the-box functionality of SharePoint Online is the recently released [SharePoint Look Book](#). The Look Book gives you over a dozen different design ideas using the modern experience in SharePoint. I'm really impressed with it; I just wish they had something like this ten years ago!

For real-world designs, I recommend checking out the Nielsen Norman Group's [Intranet Design Annual Report](#). Each year has ten or so actual intranets showcased, with insights into the decision-making process, complete with screenshots for inspiration. Take note that usually the best designs include some or a lot of custom development, which I'm not recommending. But SharePoint Online's modern experience offers a lot of features to help you do your best to replicate what you see. This report is around \$500 USD, but it's a worthy investment and one of the best ways to understand the state of intranets worldwide. Even in a small organization, it's well worth the cost. Anyone who says it's too expensive isn't actually dedicated to the project. (That's right, I said it. You can show that person to this article.)



### Don't let the marketing and branding teams take over the project

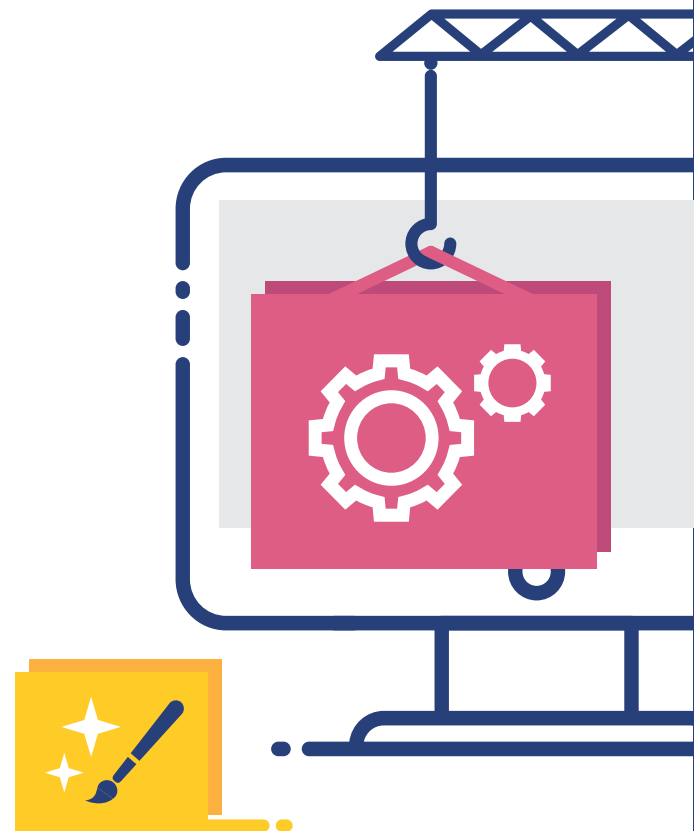
One parting warning I will offer is this: the design, branding, marketing, and external web folks may believe they deserve more influence than they do. While their intentions are always good, their experience is not usually as compatible with an intranet as they think. They typically come from the world of external web design, where organizations spend a lot of time and resources building their websites to be exactly what they want them to be, perfectly branded, using significant resources in the process.

Your intranet homepage is not there to be pretty. It's there to provide good content. Yes, you should aim for pleasant, user-friendly design. But you want function over form. External web folks have the ability to do whatever they need to because web design impacts sales and self-service opportunities; sales pay for things and self-service tools reduce internal costs, ergo they both positively impact the bottom line and justify the investment into custom solutions.

Your intranet homepage will not (and should not) receive the same investment, to be frank. The workspace you're working with is not limitless. You're completing a paint-by-number rather than starting with a blank canvas. Act that way.

Roles need to be made clear to these team members. Branding options in SharePoint are limited, but definitely sufficient! Make sure they're prepped.

(Much love to all the branding and marketing folks out there. I do and have played both roles in various organizations.)



## Conclusion

Your team matters! The most impactful aspect of this project is who works on it. Your teammates—even if they can't provide full-time support—need to be dedicated, as do their managers. You need an executive champion. You need to do your research and understand the status quo. Finally, make sure to build upon others' successes. That's how progress works. Learn from others, improve, and tweak to match the culture.



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## Part 2

# Building the Right Home Page Content

Now that you've **assembled your intranet design Dream Team**, it's time to start brainstorming the content you'll want to include on your new home page. Your biggest task during this process is to keep the user in mind; what people already like, what they indicate they want to see, and what your team expects they'll want are your keys to success. Allowing outside influence, management, or the brand police too much sway will hinder your end product. Always keep this in mind.

In Part Two I'll be overviewing the content development and design aspects of building out your new intranet home. This process balances pragmatism with creativity, which is typically hard to do. You want to be structured with your content, but you also want to create a pleasing end-product that people will say they enjoy, and think is an improvement over the past.





# Part 2: Building the Right Home Page Content

## Plan on some serious brainstorming sessions

Your team needs to meet to discuss a number of topics as you flesh out your design and content. Don't expect these meetings to be half-hour update sessions. Plan on a number of half-day workshops to first discuss and agree on goals and the content to include.

These sessions should have a leader and scribe; the leader keeps people on task and continuously asks questions to get more information out of the team. The more your team members talk and provide ideas, the more (and better) ideas will come from other team members as inspiration hits them. The scribe is critical for taking notes on what was discussed, what came across as agreed-upon concepts, and who is tasked with what between now and the next workshop.

Each member of the team should walk away with some tasks to provide status updates on at the next workshop. Committee-style writing, sketching, and building out real content just does not work in the real world. Instead, provide basic ideas for each person and have them spend time outside of the meeting to build out their content. Then have the team comment, critique, and provide feedback on the expanded ideas and proposals. Groups do better with a straw man than they do with building out content live on the scene.

I would suggest three or four of these half-day workshops, likely held at least a few days (maybe a week) apart. Then continue meeting weekly or twice per week for an hour each as the content is built out and the designs are started and refined. These recurring meetings will go on for as long as it takes for you to deliver a product; I wouldn't go longer than two or three months. Yes, done well, this process can take a good amount of time.



## Give them what they want, but not too much

To ensure people actually use your intranet home page, you have to entice your colleagues with the carrots that will bring them there. And not just one return visit, but over and over. For that reason, identifying what people like—or will like—is important to the success of your project.

But, you also have to balance the needs of the organization. Your intranet home page should ideally be the central hub for internal communications and getting people to the enterprise information they need, like Human Resources documentation, information technology help, facilities and maintenance support, and other central services.

The page should reinforce the organization's brand and values and, yes, be the place for the organization to push its propaganda as needed. Believe it or not, though, that propaganda has its place and can make for a better working environment. Just don't go overboard with how much corporate-level "must-haves" are actually included.

Be sure to sprinkle a little bit of the corporate content in among the good stuff to keep people on track with how the business is doing, where things stand with the strategic plan, how the benefits package is changing this year, and all those aspects that people generally don't want to seek out, but likely need to see.

### Make the most of what you already have

Your intranet is probably already chock full of a lot of great content you can leverage that exists in multiple places. The intranet home page is a good spot to bring this content together into one place, with the option to click through to where it already lives. A central spot with lots of the information someone already wants promotes return customers.

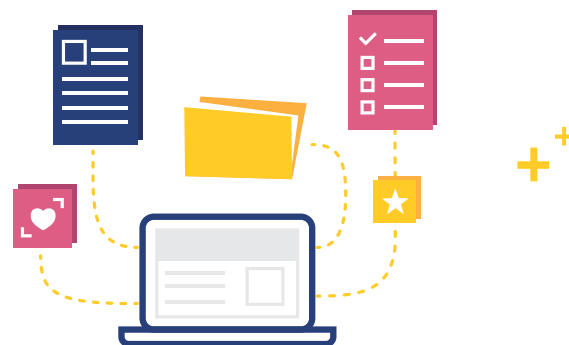
I would be surprised if your intranet doesn't already host things like the WiFi password, cafeteria menu, people search, job postings, and other popular information elsewhere in the network. Take advantage of these and place them (or links to them) directly on the home page. And, of course, use your metrics from part 1 to identify the most popular sites and pages in your network and make sure they're quickly findable on your page. For many organizations, the home page is more of a map to what people need than a real source for new information (and that's okay if it matches your culture).

*Fair warning:* you may get some push back from the people or organizations that own that content because they'll lose metrics on their pages or, more likely, they'll feel they're losing control. In that case, play nice with those people and invite them to take part in your project; preferably, if the content is that popular, you should consider bringing it into your realm of ownership. If all else fails,

have your executive lead sit them down and explain that they can't stop others from linking to good content (or taking it over).

One last major suggestion on using what you have: keep in mind that your intranet likely has tons of documentation on benefits, best practices, tips and tricks, lessons learned, and the like. Break these down into bite-sized chunks for a regular "Tip of the week" or hero image that states a really useful reminder that then links to the source.

For example, look through your Employee Assistance Plan. This is a document that most people know exists, but almost always forget what is included. A lot of organizations provide free legal services for up to four hours per year. That's an incredible service, but no one ever remembers! By providing weekly tips, you can remind your colleagues to make the most of the benefits and tools they receive as an employee. And providing this is a proven way to boost your return visitor numbers, not to mention improve employee morale in the process.



### Build new content that will improve your return rate

Based on your earlier surveys and user feedback workshops, you should have a lot of ideas of what people *want* from their home page. Don't toss those out. Embrace them. Generally, it means you'll be signing up for building new tools or sources of information, which takes time and effort to do. They will also require resources to maintain. But the investment will likely be worth it to keep people coming back and getting the most out of your project.

This is also an opportunity to improve some everyday business processes that may not work very well or could use a good modernization. Perhaps your expense submission process is lengthy and still paper-based. Help that team by automating it or making it more mobile friendly (consider Microsoft Flow and PowerApps for the job). Or maybe building out a dashboard on critical compa-

ny metrics could help keep minds on the big picture, which can be incorporated on your home page.

There are a lot of content ideas you can consider adding to your site that you might not already have. Even content that people can easily find elsewhere—including on the internet or right in their smartphone—have value, believe it or not. I have built plenty of intranet home pages where the users requested things like stocks and local weather, even though these are legitimately a Siri or Google Assistant request away. People liked these and used them, so we provided them.

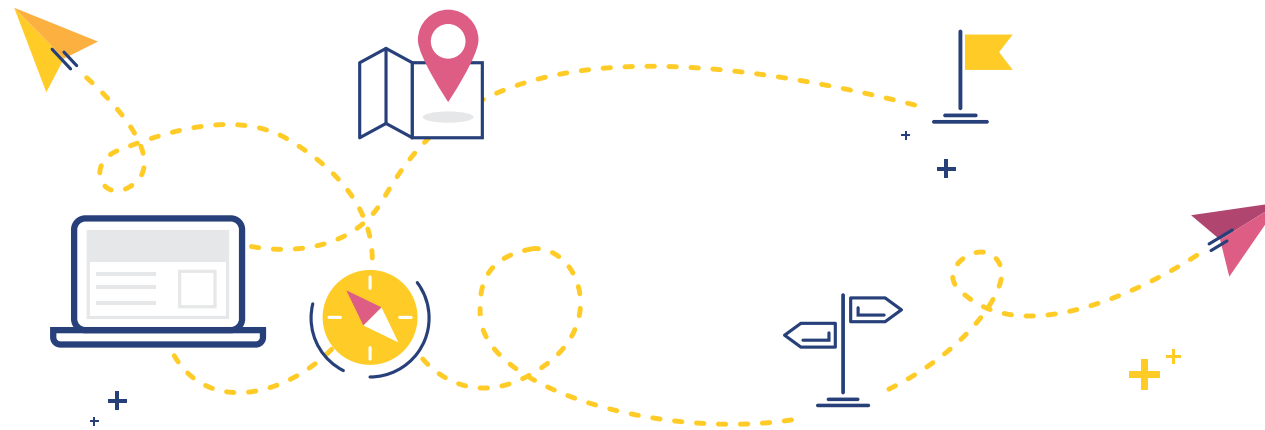
Then, there's user-generated content. Some very successful tools to incorporate are discussion forums and online trading posts. Tools like Yammer offer a great way to keep people in contact in an ever more mobile world and are easy to drop into a SharePoint page. This virtual water color lets people

stay in the know in a more informal way, ask open-ended questions that can get quicker answers than they ever otherwise would, and share successes and praise with the organization as a whole.

The same goes for trading posts—basically internal Craigslist tools—built on simple SharePoint lists. People feel safer selling, trading, or buying from people they work with. Just make sure both of these tools have strong governance and ramifications for misuse; you don't want people feeling they can get away with non-stop whining on Yammer or building a puppy mill on your trading post. These tools usually take a little time after rollout to gain popularity steam, but they generally do become very popular (sometimes the most resourced tool in the intranet, actually). Your colleagues are human: they are social beings and they like their stuff.

### Menus are more important than information architecture

You'll have to figure out where your content should go. Do you create multiple sites or pages for the various things you create for this project? Do you separate files and resources into separate document libraries? Should you post your communications in the home page site or keep them in the existing communications site and pull them up to the home page?



While not necessarily a commonly spoken response to these questions, I'll provide some honesty here: where the content lives doesn't really matter that much as long as you can get to it from the home page and/or you're bubbling the information up to that page. If you don't have the resources or time to reorganize your existing content, moving files to new locations, or you're worried about too many old links breaking if you do move things, that's fine.

What's really important is your links are active (not broken), findable, and relevant to your users. That means your global navigation menu and any link lists are critical to your success. And nothing brings about a good fight like your menu structure. It should be smart, easy to use, not overwhelming, and, in a perfect world, consistent throughout your intranet. Plan to spend a good portion of one of your brainstorming workshops to identify important links, ranking them, and removing some as not important enough to merit space in the menu.

I strongly suggest looking into SharePoint Online's mega menu option, which gives you a lot of flexibility for categorizing lots of links without being stuck with a bunch of levels of fly-outs (which can be infuriating). Just beware that you can have too many links. Too many, and your users get confused and take too much time to find things.

### Content is about users, not content owners

As you're identifying the content and links to include on your page, you're going to run into a lot of people and organizations that will demand their information belongs on the intranet home page. This is especially true of your link lists and navigation menus. Your brainstorming workshops can identify most of the content that will be required. But once you start beta testing the new site with a select group of users, you'll hear some complaints that a beloved link or document is missing from the home page. You should,

of course, take the feedback and discuss it among the team, but the team needs to be confident when they turn down a request like that.

Some content and links simply don't belong on the home page. It's going to be hard to say no to those people. Things like brand standards, corporate mission, - vision, -value statements, and executive blog posts are generally not things that people use regularly or visit freely, yet they pop up as if they're required content. They're not; so don't waste the space. If you need to defend the decision, cite low metrics. Usually, these items are rarely visited and don't need to be placed prominently. They should, of course, be accessible somehow, but they likely don't need to be made available in full right on the home page.

My advice here is to stand your ground on what gets in and what does not. Don't be a pushover because if you let one undeserving link into your global navigation, what stops you from accepting the next one? And the next one. And the next one. Until everyone starts complaining about there being too many links. Those complaints are more important.





### Don't skimp on mobile friendliness

Even if your organization isn't big on mobile access to content now, it's a mistake to overlook making your home page mobile-friendly. A redesign of your home page will likely only come about once every few years at best and by the time the next one comes, it's likely way past when you should have implemented a mobile-friendly page. As you move forward, assume you want a responsive experience so your colleagues don't have to continuously pinch their phone screens to grab the link to submit an expense while they're on the road. And, frankly, you don't have to do too much thinking about it since all of SharePoint Online's modern communication site templates are mobile-friendly by default.

Along these lines, scrolling is a way of life now. In the late nineties and most of the aughts, scrolling on a webpage was seen as something akin to mass murder. If you had content "below the fold" on a website, it was basically a given that "nobody would ever see it". That's no longer the case—hell, it wasn't really the case back then either—and anyone who says otherwise is living in the past. The issue at hand was mainly a hardware one: most people didn't have mice with scroll wheels or trackpads that let you scroll with a finger or two. And now in the day of websites with "infinite scroll" thanks to the ease of moving a web page around with your thumb, you're doing yourself a disservice by trying to cram everything at the top of your page. Aim for larger and more obvious icons, include negative space and enjoy some large text. You have the room, so use it.



### To personalize or not?

An age-old debate on intranet home page design is whether to keep the content general—good for all people—or to go the extra mile to provide space that includes information specific to the person who is logged in. There are really good reasons for both: keeping things general ensures employees stick their heads up once in a while to keep up with what's going on in the enterprise as a whole, but a personalized option gives them more of a reason to come back.

Thanks to tools like Delve and Microsoft Graph, it's easier than ever to drop web parts into a SharePoint page that show a user files they've recently accessed or people they regularly interact with as a shortcut to those resources. Unfortunately, in my experience, many people don't always appreciate the unpredictability of what these tools show: "so what if I interact with my manager all the time... she's not the one I'm trying to contact right now." This AI-infused features can be really helpful, until they're not. So keep these concepts in mind during your user feedback workshops. If people really like the idea, maybe your culture is a good fit for these features. Make sure they play with the tools first to prove they actually like the execution. The idea may seem great; the actual application may be less pleasing.

### Own it

No doubt you'll find it reasonably easy to develop good content for your intranet. As long as you're willing to review what you have, ask for direct user input, and reach out to key stakeholders, you'll likely find a lot of good stuff to reuse or build from scratch.

But your biggest takeaway here needs to be that your team needs to take responsibility for the content development and maintenance of your home page and its support sources. Once they're chosen, changes to the included content should go through a formal review and approval process. After the launch of your new home page, someone from the team (likely a communications representative) needs to own the page and its content moving forward.

Do not fall victim to a squeaky-wheel-gets-the-grease change mentality. Yes, there are things your team might miss along the way. Making updates like that should be quick to recover from. But you *will* receive constant complaints, suggestions, and "you must include this immediately" type feedback. And that's okay. Be sure to follow a firm-but-fair feedback review policy.

Your team spent a lot of time developing the content, getting it reviewed, running it through testing, and garnering feedback. You're the experts. So act like it.



# Conclusion

Content is king! Don't miss the opportunity to repurpose or build great content to include on your intranet home page. Providing good content ensures happy (and return) visitors that find your ultimate deliverable to be a positive change in their day.

I'll repeat one key thing: content is king! Design, color scheme, layout, brand: they are not king. While I hear all the time that "nobody will come if it looks like SharePoint" or "it'll get no hits looking this ugly", these are absolutely incorrect assumptions about an intranet home page.

Consider plenty of websites that are some of the most popular websites on the internet: Reddit, Craigslist, and even Amazon. It's not their beauty that makes you return. It's the content you enjoy that brings you back. Now look at it from a more micro standpoint: do you have a favorite hometown newspaper or blog that you check in with regularly? Those types of resources typically don't have much budget or skill sets to create beautiful displays. And you don't return to them for their color palette and logo: you stick by them because of the information they report, the updates they provide, the mass communications they ensure you get.

The same is true for your intranet home page: content—not design—is and always will be king.



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# Part 3

## Elements of Design

Now that you've developed what **should be included on your home page** (or in the home page's site), it's time to lay out how you'll show it off.

In Part Three I'll discuss design and layout. Although both will be seen by many as the most important aspects of your project. And, in a way, they are. You shouldn't do foolish things with the design. But you're not expected to create your own Mona Lisa. As I mentioned earlier, content is—and always will be—king. Design is a distant second to content and you should treat it that way.

But that doesn't mean you should ignore proven practices and score easy points on branding, colors, and layout. You have a lot of options in the modern SharePoint Online experience. Less so with earlier versions of SharePoint, but that doesn't mean you don't have any.

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# Part 3: Elements of Design

## Branding

If you have representatives from your marketing or branding department on your intranet team, you will hear a lot from them on “reinforcing the brand”. RGB values and icons do not define a brand. They may represent a foundation, but they are not the only arrow in your quiver to successfully reinforce your brand when it comes to your intranet. Below are some ways to push your brand successfully in your intranet.

### Brand the Microsoft Office 365 experience

Microsoft Office 365 offers some built-in ways to configure your ecosystem to represent the organization’s brand. You should aim to complete at least the items below at a bare minimum. These changes are too easy and provide too much brand reinforcement value to ignore.

Many organizations don’t even know these options are possible, so consider yourself ahead of the game. There are some technical requirements to be aware of before performing these steps, so please [read the documentation](#) before you start pressing buttons. These steps can only be performed by an Office 365 global admin.

**1. Add your organization’s logo and a “home” link to the suite (navigation) bar in Office 365.** Choose your preferred color for the suite bar as well.

+ The logo should be a **knockout version** and not be too wide. In my experience, a 2 × 1 ratio width-to-height is best to ensure you can read the image. You want to err on the side of the graphic being legible in the vertical direction.

+ The link can point anywhere you’d like. A standard recommendation is point to your intranet homepage. And why not? You’re putting plenty of effort into making it good. (I recommend against pointing to your organization’s public website. Generally, this URL is known to most employees whereas your intranet homepage isn’t. Plus, internal folks typically don’t have as much use for the public website as they do the intranet, if the latter is executed well.)

+ For the suite bar’s color, I recommend a darker color and generally the primary (not back-up) color from your brand palette. Avoid light colors and pastels. Keep in mind this bar shows up on top of almost all Office 365 apps, so test them out to make sure your chosen color doesn’t clash anywhere. (Note: some apps do not show the chosen color due to technical limitations.)

**2. Add a brand-relevant background image, organization logo, and short terms of service link to the Office 365 sign-in page.** This page will become a familiar experience for your colleagues and if they’re on different machines (at a hotel, perhaps), the design of the page will reinforce that they’re in the right spot.

+ The background image should contain no text because the image automatically scales based on the device resolution, so text can easily get cut off. You can have some fun with this by updating it on a regular basis to celebrate accomplishments, holidays, etc.

+ The organization logo should be your primary logo. It sits on a white background, so any colored logo should look great.

+ You have very few characters for the message, so using something like, “By logging in, you accept these terms: <https://company.com/o365terms>”

**3. Add relevant links and icons in the App Launcher (aka Waffle) to match your brand.** Many organizations include links to the intranet homepage (to supplement the SharePoint link), the Human Resources system, the IT support portal, the travel portal, the reimbursements submission app, and more. These apps also get added to the Office home page. The Waffle isn’t a static thing and you can’t get rid of it, so you might as well take ownership and make it part of the overall ‘intranet experience’.

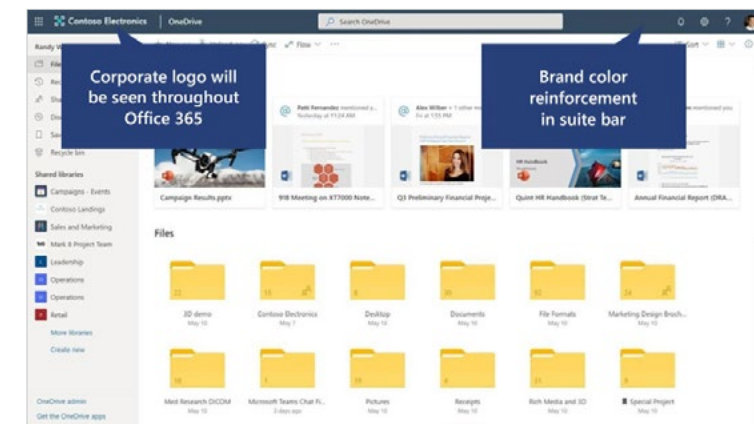


Figure 1: Branding at the Office 365 level affects the entire experience, not just SharePoint. And that’s a good thing. (Image from Microsoft’s SPC 19 OneDrive update post, used with permission.)

## To code or not

I generally recommend sticking to out-of-the-box options for design and layout. For one, I don't have web development skills. But more importantly, the need for those skills means maintenance can be difficult: updates and changes take more time than OOTB web parts and there's a big learning curve when the original developer leaves the team and someone takes over. It can leave your page and site in a state of limbo due to lack of resources.

Right now, you may think to yourself, "Nah, we'll always have the resources for this." Respectfully, that thought is naïve. Always build solutions that are simple to maintain and update. SharePoint Online is easy enough to use these days for almost anyone to make updates to pages and content; easier solutions mean a lower barrier to entry which means a larger pool of potential owners.

That said, thousands of Microsoft stack experts will vehemently disagree with my statements above. The SharePoint team at Microsoft has rolled out [tools and add-ins](#) to make development easier than it's ever been. And while that's all well and true, you're still talking about a small subset of people with those skills working on a platform that—yes, it's true—changes all the time. I have definitely seen the goalposts get moved by Microsoft—on a custom intranet

add-in I worked on, no less—affecting which features and development options are supported.

Development is a big choice. I always steer clear. But if you feel the need to go that route, make sure it's for good reason. Branding and "making it look good" shouldn't be the key reason. Good reasons to custom-develop could be: a custom global navigation solution, roll-up web parts that bring critical KPIs together on the home page, integration with existing custom or third-party apps on right on the home page, and interactive experiences that entice user retention... just to name a few.

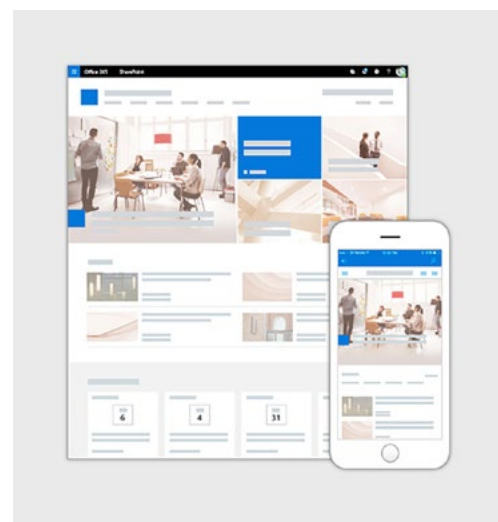


Figure 2: A new SPO Communication Site comes with a hero section automatically included at the top of the page.

## Carousels and heroes

A major web design feature of the 2010s is the grandiose stock image that contains text and links to another place. Here's an [interesting article](#) on the topic, if you're interested. This element of web design may be something we all look back on in some years and say, "Why?" Kind of like websites with gifs, electric-colored graphics, and repeated background patterns back in the 2000s. (See the still-live [Space Jam movie website](#) as an example.)

But for now, they are seen as a best-practice way to share important information in a way that grabs the user's attention and they're always on the top of the web page. These are the digital version of the roadside billboard. They can be effective, but only when implemented correctly.

Microsoft is continuing the life of heroes with [OOTB](#) web parts that push this design. Both the hero and news web parts in SPO modern sites push large images (including built-in access to free-use stock imagery), headline text, and hyperlinks to garner more information on the topic.

I mention carousels in the title of this section because, while a bit older than the SPO hero web part, having a rotating banner on the top of a web page was an earlier incarnation and there are plenty of pre-built plugins and web parts you can install to get this effect in SPO. [Research shows](#) carousels may

not be effective, at least beyond the first image, but your results may vary.

Regardless of your execution, heroes generally get plopped right at the top of the page; very valuable real estate, indeed. You want to make sure you use this space to its potential. For that reason, I have some rules on how to smartly implement heroes and carousels:

- 1. Have a strict schedule for which image displays where and for how long.** The longer an image displays (as in, the longer it doesn't get replaced over a number of days), the more likely people are to ignore it and consequently the hero area itself.

- + For SPO hero web parts, start an image as the primary hero for a bit, then downgrade it to a smaller one. For carousels, the first one is the one everyone always sees. Demote it to a later spot quickly (within a couple days) lest everyone get bored with the area.

- + Pre-schedule necessary announcements ahead of time and give priority to the ones that deserve it. A reminder hero on Fridays from noon to close about submitting time cards is a good one to keep as number one or two during the relevant time period. Benefits elections, performance review submissions, and other HR processes are easy ones to schedule ahead of time.

**2. Provide a way for individuals to request a hero image and provide the resources to design them.** I have always built a PowerPoint slideshow with a base design for requesters to sketch out what they want so graphic designers can use that inspiration in their design.

**3. Stick to the brand standards.** This is one place where you can push major brand reinforcement.

**4. Keep images simple and not overwhelming.** Make sure the text is legible. Use a background color behind the text (on top of the image) if it's hard to read against the background image.

**5. Always include a "click for details" statement somewhere on the image (or use built-in text, like is included in the SPO hero web part).**

**6. For carousels, do not pause an image for more than 7 seconds.** Do not host more than four or five images at once. (Think about it: who sits on the home page for 35 whole seconds without scrolling?)

**7. Never let the hero go without content.** Have a number of images ready to go when you need to fill a void. Friendly reminders, tips and tricks, these types of things are super valuable and don't get much press usually. If your organization has an Employee Assistance Plan, pull out the major offerings from that and have an image made for each one, with a link back to the EAP. People appreciate this.

### The SharePoint Look Book is your new best friend

The actual design and layout is likely the toughest part of building your new home page. Most of us aren't designers. It's difficult to be given a blank canvas, various paints and some brushes and create a masterpiece.

To help stem the tide of bad SharePoint site designs, Microsoft recently rolled out the [SharePoint Look Book](#). The Look Book is one of the best user-friendly guides Microsoft has ever published, if you ask me. We could have used a version of this over ten years ago.



The Look Book takes the OOTB tools and webparts provided in SharePoint Online and puts them together to provide legitimate inspiration on what can be done with an SPO site. And the results are outstanding. Some are truly beautifully executed internal websites.

These examples were created by professional graphic and web designers, so you know taking inspiration and tips from this publication

will do you well at your organization. Each example provides a listing of the features and webparts that were used, with links to documentation on how they work so you can implement them yourself.

The Look Book goes so far as to split up their examples into sections: intranet home pages (how appropriate!), Hub Sites, Communication Sites, and Team Sites.

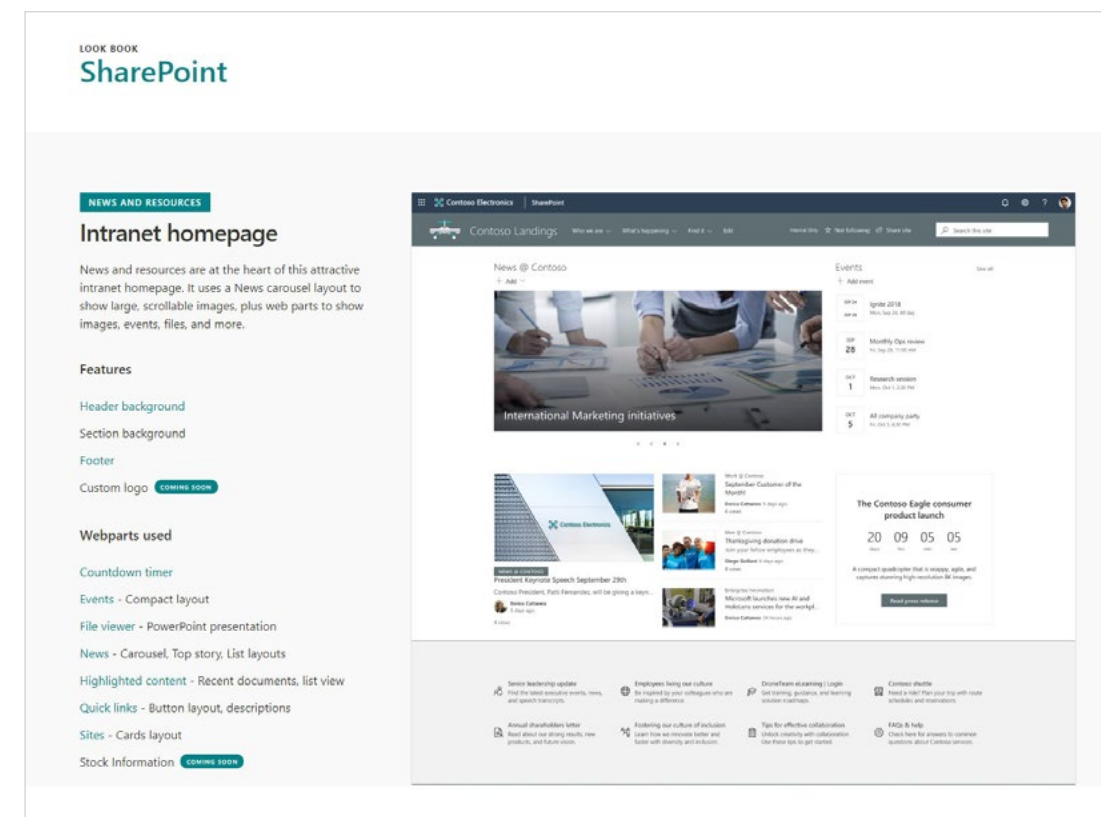


Figure 3: The SharePoint Look Book compiles a number of example SPO sites and explains the features and webparts used to create it.





# Conclusion

Design is important, but it's not the most important thing you have to do with your intranet home page. You have a number of resources out there to design your site in a way that's more paint-by-number than paint from scratch. The SharePoint Look Book is something you need to start looking through so you get some ideas on how to execute on the content you spent so much time collecting. Another good resource (though it comes at a cost) is the [Intranet Design Annual Report](#) by Nielson Norman Group.

Now it's time to execute and build out that site. Run it through testing, garner feedback, make some updates, and eventually you need to launch it! Once you've got it live, though, time doesn't stand still. Ownership of your site is still critical to its success. In Part four I'll talk about what it means to be a good intranet home page owner, how you should iterate and make it better over time, and how you can't let the populace overtake your home page and wear it down into something worse than it started as.



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# Part 4

## Maintaining Your Baby

You've finally gotten to the launch of your new intranet home page; congratulations! Now you have to start planning for the long-term.

In Part Four I'll guide you through how to maintain your new intranet home page design by getting user feedback, using change management, updates, as well as keeping an eye on your metrics.

If you let any of the maintenance fall behind, there will be consequences. And this is another opportunity to point out that strict ownership of the new intranet home page will ensure a better experience, as long as that person or group is genuine when reviewing feedback and later input.



# Part 4: Maintaining Your Baby

## Change management

Preparing for your roll-out of your new intranet home page, you should definitely prep your users ahead of time. Emails, signs, contests, and other engaging experiences will keep the change at the front of their mind, prepping them for what may be a notable change in how they lead their day. Don't forget that the home page is usually the first webpage that loads when they open their browser. A change to that design and layout is impactful. Think about how much your friends and family complain and talk about when even a minor change is made to consumer websites like Facebook.

## Feedback

If you've created an effective feedback mechanism, you'll get responses. If you work for a large organization, you may get a lot of responses. It's helpful to have numerical feedback scores so you can average them and get a big-picture view of overall satisfaction. But always allow for free form responses because you'll get some really helpful suggestions.

You'll also get some really useless complaints. Consider yourself forewarned. Don't take them personally. But do take them seriously (at least at first).

As suggestions and requests come in, respond insightfully and forcefully, espe-

cially if there was a reason that the request wasn't implemented originally. Also make sure to run any suggestions and requests by the home page team. Try not to make unilateral decisions: changes to something like an intranet home page can have major impacts on people, especially as they're only just getting used to the new experience. Unintended consequences are your enemy and having other opinions and viewpoints can help avoid a landline.

If you do decide to turn down a request or suggestion, make sure to respond openly and justify the decision. You'll have to worry about some feelings along the way. The most likely and common request will be more links in the global navigation menu. But you can't add new links willy-nilly; menus need to be concise and only display the links that have an impact on a large majority of users. Otherwise, they become way too long and their entire reason for being—quickly and easily finding important links—is overrun by too many low-value links.

The second most-common requests will be to submit news. You should have a news submission process. The news web part (and the news Hub Site rollup web part) can be really useful for getting information from around the organization bubbled up to the corporate-level home page. But you don't want everything. Your submission and review process should allow a sceptical eye for any submissions and score them based on impact to the organization, interest, and

a positive viewpoint. You will get complaints from people you deny. You just have to get used to it and stand your ground if your home page team agrees.

## Metrics

You want to know how many people are visiting your new intranet home page how long they're staying, their return frequency, what they're clicking, and where they're coming from.

Google Analytics is the gold standard for website metrics. I definitely recommend adding a GA tag to your site; it may require someone with coding experience to set up, but it's absolutely worth the effort. Other than that, there are some simple SharePoint metrics you can use; the better metrics come from the SharePoint admin center, which

requires administrative access within Microsoft Office 365.

Heat maps are also critical for understanding which parts of your page are most engaging. A tool like HotJar can be really useful for getting this data and it's presented in an easy-to-understand color range where blue are uninteresting parts of the page and red are very interesting parts.

But what do you do with the metrics? First, you want to get a baseline of how many people come daily after the first week. Once the new factor settles, you'll find a regular pattern of visitors. You'll be surprised to find that some days of the week bring more people. Sometimes it's random; other times it's very obvious based on local policies (some companies offer a 9/80 schedule where you can take every other Friday off; generally you see half the users you would any other day).





Once you have a baseline of visitors, users, and visit length, you can start strategizing to increase that. Now of course you don't want the home page to be as addictive as Facebook, otherwise nobody would be doing work. But you invested in this project to ensure people stay informed, that communications are top-notch, and that people can find things. Aiming to increase your turnout is a good goal.

So the delta is important. And you can't calculate a delta without a baseline. So make sure you have your metrics solution in place by the time you've launched!

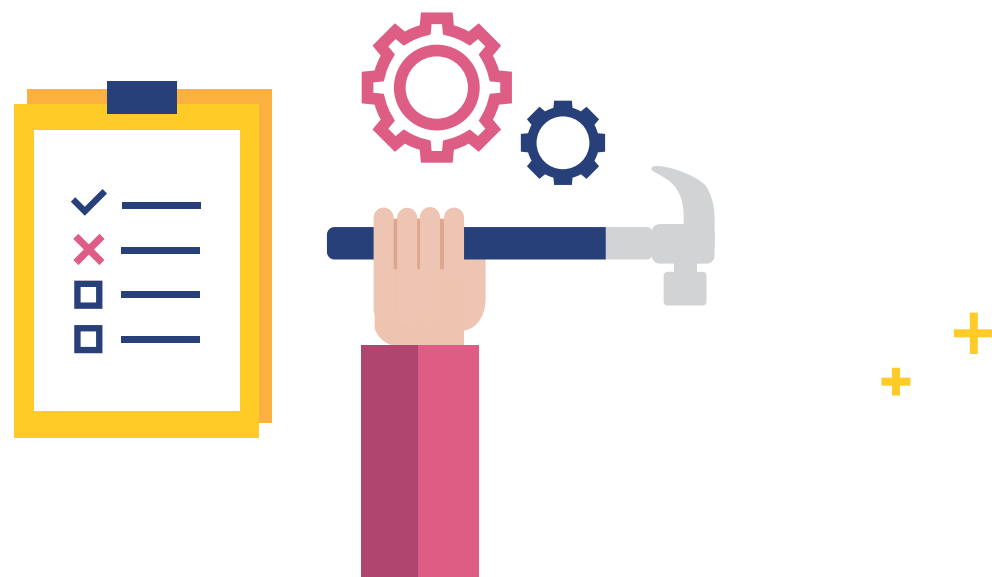
### Improvements

Your project isn't done once you launch. You have to iterate on based on the metrics you see. With your heat map and site analytics,

you can start to do some testing on your design, including A/B testing (where you provide some users one view of the page and other users a version just slightly different to see which they engage with more and therefore prefer).

If you notice that certain aspects of your site are not used, you should try to find out whether they're uninteresting or just difficult to use; there's a big difference. Many of these improvements will come from feedback and requests. Some will come from feature updates, especially given the frequency of new tools that are rolled out by SharePoint Online.

The big takeaway here is to not just let your new home page stagnate and become old. People notice. And a lack of dedication to the home page eventually leads to a worse experience and lower engagement.



## Conclusion

You've reached the end! Or maybe it's actually the beginning. Once you've rolled out your new intranet home page, you have to nurture it. Kind of like a baby. Understand where it succeeds and where it fails. Then act on that information. Provide new features and test new ideas. See what sticks to the wall and what falls flat. Then build on those successes (and those failures).

As you move forward with your new home page, you'll eventually need to think about the next iteration of it. And I don't just mean minor updates in SharePoint Online. Eventually you'll want an overhaul. Perhaps it even becomes a necessity due to changes to how SharePoint Online works.

At that point, it's time to turn back to Part One of this eBook and begin anew. The life cycle of an intranet home page is never ending. Pass on a quality product that can then be improved even more so in its next life, following best practices that should outlive any delivered project.



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