

INTRANETS AND EXTRANETS

The idea of getting computers to communicate with each other, either on a one-to-one basis or via a network, has been around for a long time. Networks are of two main types, determined by the size of area that they cover:

- **Local area network (LAN)** which can link computers in a single room, one building or several buildings that are geographically close (for example on a university campus)
- **Wide area network (WAN)** which, as its name implies, can link computers that can be hundreds or even thousands of miles apart.

An **intranet** is a network (LAN or WAN) that utilizes Internet technology. However, unlike the Internet, access to an intranet is restricted to specific individuals, and the data it holds will be secured behind strict data security systems or firewalls.

An **extranet** uses Internet technology to link together intranets in different locations. In contrast to intranet transactions, extranet transmissions take place over the Internet, and so are not secure. The Internet with such tunneling technology is known as a virtual private network (VPN) — see Figure 4.

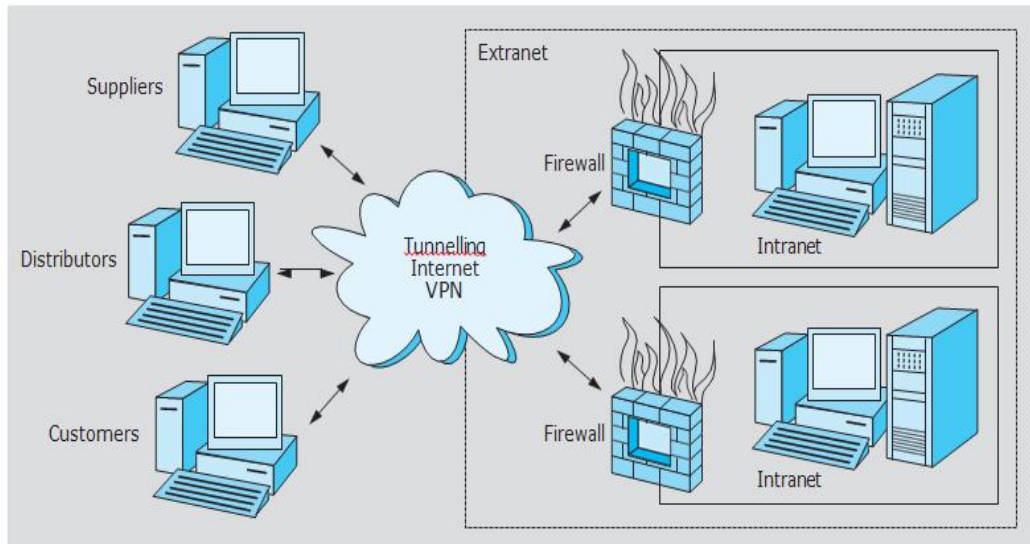


Figure 4. Diagrammatic contrast of the Internet, intranet and extranet

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Both systems and departmental managers have been quick to seize the advantages of a corporate intranet:

- easy navigation (internal home page provides links to information)
- ability to integrate a distributed computing strategy (localized web servers residing near the content author)
- rapid prototyping (can be measured in days or even hours in some cases)
- accessible via most computing platforms
- scalable (start small, build as requirements dictate)
- extensible to many media types (video, audio, interactive applications)
- can be tied to ‘legacy’ information sources (databases, existing word processed documents, groupware [software designed for group communication and shared group use]).

The potential business benefits of intranets are numerous (Fishenden,

1997):

- improved information flows between employees, customers and suppliers
- reduced geographical constraints: worldwide organizations can now communicate as a logical whole
- easy access to information through a common single interface
- better access to information = quicker and better decision making
= reduced cost
- reduced cost of IT operations: Internet-derived technology is a cheap way of improving communication and data flows

increasing an organization's profile on an international scale: selected components of an intranet can be shared via a public interface on the Internet.