Avanade helps ITOCHU digitize its workplace with DesignOps

New user experience with refreshed intranet and new mobile apps bring efficiency and productivity

avanade

ITOCHU

"With the new intranet optimized for mobile, I expect the Corporate Communications Division to deliver information and messages more out of the box with new ideas, and change the way we use the new platform. I am confident that the new platform can handle it."
Takashi Kitano
Manager
Corporate IT Architecture Department / ITCCERT, IT Planning Division
ITOCHU

ITOCHU Corporation was considering restructuring its old intranet to improve employee productivity and modernize its workplace. Avanade, a leading digital innovator, supported ITOCHU in updating its intranet to a secure, scalable and multi-device accessible platform. Avanade's design-led agile methodology, "DesignOps", enabled the teams to bring real workplace transformation based on user feedback from the very outset of the project.

Client Background

Founded in 1858, one of the top *sogo shosha* (general trading companies) in Japan, with approximately 120 bases in 63 countries, ITOCHU is a leading business focused mainly on domestic trading, import/export, overseas trading and its business investments in Japan and overseas. ITOCHU aimed to improve business efficiency and bring a workplace innovation to open the door to future business requirements.

Situation: Prioritize usability improvement rather than content enrichment

ITOCHU's legacy intranet was created in 1998 as a Java-based web server with Servlet. ITOCHU then implemented a portal service developed by an affiliate company in 2003, which it expanded and operated until 2016. The legacy system required HTML coding to update content, causing inefficient operations.

"It had been a while since the initial intranet was implemented. We did necessary changes to keep up with the times, but this aging platform was impacting our operations. Specifically, keeping up with Office products after Office 2007, optimizing smart devices, enhancing search function, reducing content updating efforts, and refining access rights set-up/management were major challenges," said Takashi Kitano, Manager, Corporate IT Architecture Department / ITCCERT, IT Planning Division, ITOCHU.

Management's priority was usability improvement. ITOCHU wanted to enhance user viewing experience on mobile and smart devices by developing mobile apps, while keeping existing content unchanged. After reviewing various solutions, ITOCHU selected Microsoft SharePoint as the new platform and chose Avanade as a partner.

"We found Avanade to be a skillful technology group that could drive the project comprehensively with the latest Microsoft technologies and a unique delivery method," said Kitano. "We see not only on-premises and private cloud on data center but also public clouds like Microsoft Azure and Amazon Web Services as our own IT infrastructure at macro perspective. Since our new intranet uses IaaS and PaaS on Azure, and operates on SharePoint with Office 365 and Active Directory, it was very natural to partner with Avanade to take advantage of their deep Microsoft knowledge."

Avanade Solution: DesignOps enabled short-term delivery with high user satisfaction

The new intranet was developed using a combination of waterfall and Agile methods, as well as leveraging Avanade offshore teams to ensure cost management and quick turnarounds.

To enable employees to access content on the intranet easily and quickly, ITOCHU decided to release an original, smartphone-native application called ITOCHU Channel ("ItoChan"), which utilizes responsive design for UI and UX. In total, Avanade and ITOCHU released three apps:

- **Phone directory "Itodenwa"** - Access to employee information through Azure Active Directory on Office 365 to make calls to both direct number/extension and mobile, and email through a data network from everywhere. It helps to reduce communication costs by linking with existing PBX services.
- **Map navigation "Itraveller"** - By linking with Google Maps, the app enables employees to search directions from where they are to subsidiary companies.
- **IT guidebook "How to run through ITOCHU (Itorun)"** - Access to IT-related manuals available on the intranet.

Hitoshi Tanaka
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"We recognized through their prompt proof of concept that we can rely on Avanade not only for Microsoft solutions," said Hitoshi Tanaka, Corporate IT Architecture Department, IT Planning Division, ITOCHU. "We are the first Japanese company to implement "Good Mobility Suite[1] (Good). Avanade developed an application with Good SDK by using Xamarin[2], and proved that it works well even under our secure container environment for BYOD."

In the system development process, development methods such as Agile and DevOps have been popular due to their agility and speed. Avanade added another layer to the process covering customer-centric design thinking in a design-led method called "DesignOps". With this method, developers and UI/UX designers can review on the same screen and brush up the system continuously to develop a prototype. The apps were developed by Azure App Service and Xamarin to fit with ITOCHU's cross-platform. Avanade suggested both the Agile method and Scrum development for efficiencies. ITOCHU released systems periodically in order of backlog priority, and intends to deliver results iteratively every two weeks. Additionally, ITOCHU and Avanade have brief daily update meetings to share progress and to reflect on feedback.

Shiro Saito
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"DesignOps made the project very effective and as result, we were able to develop very satisfactory apps in a short period of time. We are planning to expand the platform from only iOS to include Android in the near future. We are also planning to expand the services to internal news and management news as well." said Shiro Saito, Corporate IT Architecture Department, IT Planning, ITOCHU.

Results: Think outside the box

The upgraded intranet platform based on SharePoint provided enhanced search functionality, reduced workload for updating content, and allowed for easier access rights management under a hybrid cloud environment. This provides scalability and security for Azure and Office 365 for on-premises and public cloud environments. Additionally, responsive design drove UI/UX optimization.

"We wanted to deliver a message to employees that the new intranet and mobile apps could change their perspective of the world," said Kitano. "For ITOCHU, the intranet is a very important place to deliver messages, so we feel we can leverage it for various uses."

Kitano said that since its release, the new intranet has received much positive feedback. The intranet is not only for communications from CXOs, it is used for daily updates, such as important notices, news related to ITOCHU and partner companies, internal communication, stock information, and overseas safety information. The new design is optimized for smartphones and provides a visual way for employees to find the latest information quickly.

Asami Shimizu
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"We have received lots of great feedback from employees in terms of the new mobile-friendly design. They like how easy it is to find the latest information. And administrators told us that business operations got easier and they feel comfortable updating content more frequently." said Asami Shimizu, Corporate IT Architecture Department, IT Planning Division, ITOCHU.

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1 Good Mobility Suite is a mobile security software provided by Good Technology which is currently owned by BlackBerry
2 Xamarin: cross-platform development tool which enables developers to deliver native iOS, Android, and Windows apps in C# and .Net.

ITOCHU's new mobile-friendly intranet also helps improve employee work efficiencies. "Coming to the office in the morning and turning on the PC to check the intranet – it was regular routine back then. Now, we are utilizing our spare time such as on the way to the office or traveling time to check the intranet whenever and wherever. This could help reduce overtime work and make it easier to encourage employees to leave work on time," said Tanaka.

ITOCHU has been evolving workstyle innovation for decades to improve employee productivity and customer experience, and to reduce overtime, by providing a morning-focused working system and child support systems. The new intranet and mobile apps Avanade provided are huge benefits in helping the company accomplish these goals.

ITOCHU Corporation

ITOCHU Corporation was founded as linen trading company by Chubei Itoh in 1858. Since then, ITOCHU has evolved and grown over 150 years. With approximately 120 bases in 63 countries, ITOCHU, one of the leading sogo shosha, is engaging in domestic trading, import/export, and overseas trading of various products such as textile, machinery, metals, minerals, energy, chemicals, food, general products, realty, information and communications technology, and finance, as well as business investment in Japan and overseas.

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