

Intranet usability and redesign

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Executive summary

ENCOURAGING SIGNS that intranets are gradually being recognised, not just as a vital communications tool, but also as a potential source of competitive advantage, are slowly starting to emerge. Unfortunately, there is no standard blueprint for success. Intranets are as complex and diverse as the organisations they serve and highly reflective of the unique organisational culture in which they operate. They should have a significant role to play in the achievement of organisational objectives but few, despite recent progress, make the contribution they should. There is clear disparity between those few organisations for which the intranet is the 'digital lifeblood', and the many where it is peripheral to decision making.

The modern working environment is more challenging and competitive than ever before and requires tools that are fit for purpose and deliver results quickly. Organisations are increasingly complex and 'virtual' in nature with objectives being pursued by diverse and disparate cross-functional teams, often separated both geographically and culturally. Organisations are wrestling not only with rapidly growing volumes of information, but also with sharing knowledge to serve this globalised workforce in their efforts to attain their objectives. Vast repositories of information are, in fact, a threat to effective decision making; efficiently managed knowledge on the other hand is a source of competitive advantage.

Intranets are undergoing something of a paradigm shift, following the emergence

of the now ubiquitous Web 2.0, and are moving from a publication model to a democratised collaboration model, where the entire organisation – not just a central team or narrow band of content managers – assumes the responsibility for managing intranet content. This has a profound impact upon the way intranets are designed and managed and how the usability of the intranet is assessed.

Intranets are increasingly complex and suffer from a variety of usability issues, but the answer to their usability problems tends not to be as straightforward as for websites, where strategy and governance issues and content contribution are clearly contained within the responsibilities of a dedicated team. Intranets are a subtle blend of the appropriate combination and utilisation of people, process and technology, and usability issues rarely lie purely with the design of the intranet. A completely holistic approach to usability, which recognises the subtle blend of all of these inputs, is required to improve intranet usability.

The first chapter provides a largely theoretical introduction to the concept of usability before identifying the fundamental issues contemporary organisations are struggling with, such as managing knowledge, dealing with information overload, engaging employees and how the intranet may be used to assist them in addressing these issues. There follows, in Chapter 2, a practical discussion of the dimensions against which the usability of an intranet should be assessed.

The various approaches and techniques that can and should be used to evaluate the usability of an intranet are explored in Chapter 3. This crucially looks at how information can be used to further advance the impact and significance of the intranet.

An overview of the mechanics of redesigning an intranet, with full recognition of the need for a clear strategy and strong support and governance, is provided in Chapter 4. This chapter provides a full assessment of a range of options for redesign and improvement, ranging from simplistic and focused tweaking of an existing intranet, to the creation of an entirely new replacement intranet, hosted on new infrastructure and managed with new content management technology. The aim of this chapter is to assist intranet managers in avoiding the usual intranet redesign cycle, where a continual focus on the aesthetics of the intranet erodes its value over time.

The subject of measurement is covered in Chapter 5, which provides more evidence, should it be needed, that you cannot manage what you don't measure. The chapter examines the metrics which really matter, and how to use measurement to improve and then maintain the improved intranet.

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