

Intranet solutions need a clear business focus. 'Providing staff with the right information to get their job done' is a good overarching objective, but is too vague to guide specific design and governance decisions that arise during the intranet life-cycle.

Making the need more specific often takes the form of solutions. While solutions thinking has its place in intranet upkeep and development, it should not be allowed to drive the process. Here are some typical examples of how solutions thinking misses the mark:

- Problem: 'Staff are getting too many emails'.
Solution: ban all-staff emails, or introduce a 'no email before noon' policy.
- Problem: 'We are too siloed'.
Solution: Introduce a collaboration suite or social media solution.
- Problem: 'Staff can't find what they are looking for'.
Solution: Put in a search appliance.

Valid though these solutions might appear, they are either dealing with the symptom or expecting technology to solve organisational problems. Furthermore, these problems exist within most organisations to some extent and if solutions to them were simple, the problems would not be so pervasive.

So, while most organisations have similar problems, the solutions should and will be unique to the organisation. By all means draw on the experience of others to help identify and ideate solutions, but beware of copying in the hope of similar results. A more nuanced business thinking approach is needed.



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Business thinking brings the root of issues into focus

Define the problem in business terms

Before determining the best approach to solving your issues, you need to understand the business environment within which they are happening. Only by knowing how the problem and the organisation interact can you begin to comprehensively answer the question of how to fix the problem.

For example, two banks may look very similar on the outside, but one could be progressive, with inspirational leadership, modern business systems and a well connected cross-division collaboration. The second could be conservative in its thinking, traditional in its ways of doing things and particularly risk-averse. Neither of these business approaches is wrong in itself, but solutions in these two companies will be hugely different.

Taking an approach where you are investigating the needs of the individual within the context of the organisational setting and broader environment, will help direct you to the most appropriate solutions.

A set of simple questions will help diagnose the issue, determine its importance and help identify the most workable solution.

Ask these key questions:

- What is the presenting issue?
- Why is this a problem? and repeat!
- Who is having the issue?
- What factors impact the solution?

Each of these is explored in the following sections. Also, to help you frame staff issues from a business perspective, examples are provided in the form of vignettes and a table that articulates some business-focused solutions. You are encouraged to use the questions in this article to develop similar guiding examples for your organisation.

What is the presenting issue?

Broad statements like 'I am overwhelmed by email' are an expression of staff frustration and represent one way that an information problem presents, but it would be a mistake to assume that the 'need' that staff have is to simply have less email. Tackling issues at this level can result in one-size-fits-all 'solutions', like those mentioned earlier, that do not directly help staff with their key needs.

What is much more valuable here is to understand the problem in the context of what staff are trying to achieve. How 'too much email' impacts staff day to day can vary.

Consider whether it's a problem because:

- staff are distracted by the volume of email
- staff cannot distinguish valuable messages from trivial (or unimportant to them)
- all the information is important but staff are unable to consume and process the volume of messages (and attachments)

But only consider these the beginning of the investigation, to which you need to bring an open mind, curiosity and the question 'Why is this a problem?'

Don't assume the staff need is self-evident

A critical piece of operational information for a financial institution is the interest rate of the day. At a specific bank, this was evaluated early each day and a provisional figure was posted on the intranet for all to see. However, an email was issued later by the same individual to 'confirm' the provisional figure. Knowing the need that staff have (to be able to reliably quote bank interest rates) cuts through the email issue and allows for more effective solutions such as a 'confirmation flag' alongside the rate on the intranet to remove any confusion about the validity of the information being consumed. Email volume was not the issue, fragmented information was.

Use staff frustration, but don't focus on it

Why is this a problem?

With the presenting issue identified use the energy of the frustration to drill down to where you can identify the need itself. It is important not to assume that the need is self-evident.

Examining this at the role level provides specifics about what the staff needs actually are. The focus should not be on making the frustration go away, but clarifying what has to happen to remove impediments to getting work done.

Initial responses to 'Why is this a problem?' will reveal more insight, such as staff being unable to:

- locate comprehensive product information
- get competitor information
- get a digest of market conditions
- easily complete a common task

Further questioning can help reveal the organisational impact and help prioritise the issue. Impacts might include:

- being unable to respond to a customer inquiry
- staff having to repeat work already completed
- confusion over multiple, competing sources of the same information

For the organisation these translate to reduced client satisfaction, increased risk and safety issues, loss of intellectual property, impaired capacity to innovate and compete in the marketplace. Overall, reduced productivity.

Persist with this line of questioning with individuals and across groups until you have mapped the needs-landscape and identified both the key needs and how they apply to different groups.

Note that even with a handful of people tremendous insights can emerge, as highlighted in our article *Insight is more important than numbers*.

Business thinking solutions

Solutions thinking	What staff actually need	Business thinking solutions
<p>Environment: Project centric organisation / division</p> <p>Problem: “We are too siloed, we need to collaborate more”</p> <p>Solution? Deliver a suite of collaboration tools.</p> <p>A suite of tools that help staff collaborate at the project level will not be enough here.</p>	<p>All project staff need access to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optimal project methodologies Visibility of past, current and planned projects categorised meaningfully such as project type, region or topic Reusable intellectual property Templates for starting, running, data-collection, delivering and capturing outcomes of their project 	<p>Solution: A mechanism for collating information across projects will be required</p> <p>Key organisational factors include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing and maintaining standards for how projects are conducted Strong responsible project leadership Ongoing resources and commitment
<p>Environment: National bank operating in a narrow industry sector. Selected staff summarise and distribute topical information daily, via multiple emails.</p> <p>Problem: “We get too many emails”</p> <p>Solution? More tightly control the email distribution lists.</p> <p>Since much of the information being distributed is operationally valuable, limiting email is not likely to help.</p>	<p>Back office operational need:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Daily summary of relevant financial market news <p>Customer facing staff need:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curated, timely industry sector research <p>All staff need:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Definitive bank rates and other internal reference figures 	<p>Solution: Single financial news section on the intranet where all topical financial information (internal and market) is summarised.</p> <p>Key organisational factors include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff will have to be weaned off personal email archives as a reference source An elegant and well managed publishing model, not required for email distributions, will be needed.
<p>Environment: National mobile communications provider</p> <p>Problem: “We don't know what the latest is on the products we are selling”</p> <p>Solution? A list of the latest product updates all located in a single, easily accessible location.</p> <p>This approach puts a significant burden on staff to remember, in order, all of the updates across multiple products and services.</p>	<p>Retail and call centre staff need:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To be able to answer customer questions about handsets and packaged services that are current and have been sold in the recent past 	<p>Solution: A products and services information area that is comprehensive, easy to use, containing current packages, pricing and specifications with the most recent updates with each product.</p> <p>Key organisational factors include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support staff (new products, marketing, sales, communications) need to align and integrate their information creation and sharing tools
<p>Environment: Heavy industry where safety practices are paramount</p> <p>Problem: “We can't find safety documents”</p> <p>Solution? A document management system (DMS).</p> <p>Since the DMS is focused on support staff rather than operational staff, it will only serve as part of the solution, if at all.</p>	<p>Maintenance, engineering, electrical and equipment operator staff need:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Immediate access to safety assessment sheets Simple way to complete and modify these sheets as the situation requires To be able to save and retrieve the same sheets again and again 	<p>Solution: Rather than a file-based interface, document access happens via a graphic interface on site locations and equipment familiar to staff.</p> <p>Key organisational factors include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of the importance of the need for operational groups to have design resources, dedicated DMS profiles, and other enablers made available

Retailing mobile communications products and services is a very rapidly changing and competitive environment with complex financial and technical systems supporting a very demanding customer-driven business. In one such organisation, central office staff were too focused on their small part of the operation and lost sight of the customer contact points - retail and call centre. Staff had to rely on fragmented information in multiple formats, sometimes having to recall scores of 'updates' to keep up to date with current offerings.

Ensure that readiness matches the desire for change

What staff groups are impacted?

It may be true that all staff have problems accessing information, and while the intranet will be aimed at helping 'all staff' with their needs, the more we focus on the specific problem, the more we find we are examining the needs of a narrower group within the organisation. We have to balance importance of issue with the breadth of impact a solution will have. Also, the environment for specific groups may well impact the way it is solved.

Ask the questions:

- do the issues impact all staff equally?
- what specific groups are having what issues?
- are we dealing with the same root problem, presenting in different ways for different groups of staff?

Make sure you are putting more emphasis on the 'operational' part of the business. These are generally closer to the client/customer - directly or indirectly:

- in the retail store
- at the call centre
- during the professional consultation
- where case-managers deal with clients
- at project-management central
- on the factory floor

The intranet will not solve every issue of every group, but being able to frame your needs and solutions in terms of target clusters is an essential intranet design ingredient.

A heavy industry organisation where adherence to safety practices was standard, but not easy. Prior to completing a task that might be considered to have elevated risk, maintenance crews, mechanical fitters, electrical engineers and machine operators were required to assess the situation, complete or create a new risk assessment sheet and ensure that the risk was minimised. Their existing document management system was used to house and access these sheets. This system was set up for and well suited to records management tasks, and worked well for the three records management staff. However the 60 per cent of staff who would regularly need risk assessment sheets, created new ones on a regular basis due to access difficulties.

What factors impact the solution?

Once you know who you are delivering to and the specific business need you are trying to solve, you can now start to consider organisational factors that might help determine the right solution. Knowing clearly at individual staff and organisational level what the problem is, gives you a way to envision the solution in an organisationally holistic manner.

Determine the degree of change appetite in the organisation and determine the most appropriate stretch in your solution. Sometimes it will take several steps to reach the desired destination. For example, going paperless is a great ambition, but will probably take multiple steps.

- step 1 – collate all forms in a single location
- step 2 – take the most appropriate forms paperless and automate as much as possible
- step 3 – move towards a completely paperless environment

The organisation might have very high levels of desire for change, but may still not be ready. Organisational readiness needs to be evaluated with questions like:

- Does the information/data/process exist to solve the problem?
- What has been tried in the past and what prevented that from working?
- Do business systems, processes, or other factors have to change first?
- Is there a single person responsible for the organisational outcomes of the solution?

- Is the organisation ready to explore changes to processes, other systems, and perhaps most importantly, roles?

Technology is of course another consideration, but it is less about what the technology can do, and more about how it does it.

Can it integrate with the existing business system? Sure. But how it does that can have significant impact on the practicality of the solution.

Use the scenarios and business issues identified in the investigative stage to model how the solution will work for staff.

At a systems level you might want to understand the practicalities of the solution:

- How will it impact other things that staff do?
- Are there any instances of your proposed solution operating so it can be examined for unexpected benefits or flaws? (Draw on peers in similar organisations for input.)
- Does the solution make things easier for the few who will manage the system or the many that have to use it daily?

Be particularly watchful with solutions that promise to be effortless. For example, social tools can be seen as naturally self-propelling but often these require significant effort to build the required level of momentum. Even then they may not be self-sustaining, instead requiring an 'invisible hand' such as a community manager. Also, naturally propelled solutions often lack direction and care needs to be taken that they do not inadvertently erode existing practices. A new system measured by usage might be a battle won, but taking a holistic view is required to know whether the war is going in your favour.

A research organisation with small research teams distributed throughout the developing world had some significant technology challenges to facilitate collaboration, but this was not their biggest hurdle. Independent project teams had developed their own methodologies in isolation from other teams. Not only did this make it difficult to collaborate on project activities, it also got in the way of collating and communicating what was happening across the globe. Without visibility of what staff might potentially collaborate on, they are more likely to remain focused on what's immediately in front of them, killing opportunities to collaborate before they begin.

Technology is a tool, not a solution

Additional benefits

Using business thinking to frame the needs to be addressed has benefits beyond well thought through solutions. It also allows for more compelling business cases that speak in terms of business outcomes increasing your capacity to quantify the outcomes. This makes it easier to quantify results, in terms of productivity gains, increases in customer satisfaction or risk reduction.

Furthermore, solutions communicated in terms of gigabytes, servers or software feature sets can be difficult for senior stakeholders to engage with. But business-focused language provides material from which compelling examples and tangible and easily understood arguments can be crafted.

The most innovative, creative and technically brilliant solutions will fail if they are not delivering business value in some way.



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