

Much can be done to improve the quality of search results. No amount of tweaking of metadata or search configuration will, however, ensure that the most relevant results *always* appear at the beginning of the list.

This is where search engine ‘best bets’ come in. These are a hand-created list of key resources for common queries, and they can dramatically improve the search experience, particularly on information-rich sites such as intranets.

Presenting best bets

In the screenshot shown, the staff member has searched for ‘organisational structure’. The first section highlights the intranet page ‘CSIRO organisational structure’. Below that, the rest of the 4821 matching search results are presented, most of which just include the words ‘organisational structure’ somewhere in the page.

This initial featured page is not listed by chance. Instead, the intranet team specifically marked it in the search engine for the phrase ‘organisational structure’.

The value of best bets

As the size of the site grows, so does the number of matching search results. The challenge is then to ensure that the most useful pages are listed right at the beginning of the list.

In most cases, however, users are only ever looking for a few key pages. For example, users entering ‘annual leave’ are either looking for the leave form itself, or the leave policy.

Recognising this, search engine ‘best bets’ provides a hand-created list of key matches for common searches. These are presented prominently at the beginning of the search results, followed by the rest of the matching pages.

Implementing ‘best bets’ is one of the most effective ways of improving the quality of search results, as well as allowing the web team to raise awareness and visibility of key corporate documents and policies.

The screenshot shows the CSIRO Intranet search interface. At the top, it says 'CSIRO Intranet' and 'Staff Services & Information'. Below that is a navigation bar with links: 'Intranet Home', 'About the Intranet', 'Intranet Site Index', 'Intranet Help', and 'Contact Us'. A search bar contains the text 'organisation structure' and a search button. Below the search bar, it says 'P@NOPTIC S E A R C H' and 'Advanced Search | Search Help | New Search'. The search results show 'You searched for structure organisation within www.csiro.au/intranet, www.csiro... -- Search all of CSIRO -- There were 1156 full matches and 3665 partial matches.' Below this, there are two sections: 'Featured pages' and 'Fully matching documents'. The 'Featured pages' section lists 'CSIRO Organisational Structure' with a description and a URL. The 'Fully matching documents' section lists '1. CSIRO Executive Management Council and Executive Team - Staff and Structure' with a description and a URL.

Screenshot provided courtesy of CSIRO

Creating and managing best bets

Search engine ‘best bets’ are implemented using a simple database that contains search terms, and matching best bets.

Efforts in creating best bets are then targeted by reviewing the ‘most popular searches’ report (see the earlier article *Intranet search reports*). Starting with the most popular searches ensures that the greatest value is initially delivered.

Ongoing effort should then be set aside on a monthly basis to review and add entries. This allows the effectiveness of the search to be steadily enhanced over time.

Technology options

Ideally, the ability to enter and manage ‘best bets’ is built directly into the search engine. A simple interface should then be provided to create new entries.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, few search engines provide support for ‘best bets’ out of the box. If a new search tool is being purchased, this should therefore be a selection criteria for the chosen product.

When working with an existing search product, it may be necessary to custom-develop the ‘best bets’ capability. Experience has shown that this is generally not a major piece of coding. It should then be fairly straightforward to implement this as an extra ‘layer’ on top of the normal search engine results.