

It goes without saying that an intranet is only successful if staff can easily find the information they need, when they need it.

Recognising this, the majority of intranet teams follow a ‘user-centred methodology’ when they redesign the intranet. This involves making use of core usability and information architecture (IA) techniques, such as card sorting and usability testing.

In many cases, intranet teams bring in external consultants or contractors to assist with the redesign project, relying on these individuals to provide the necessary usability and IA skills.

While there are many good reasons for doing this, what is often not recognised is that these skills will continue to be needed throughout the lifetime of the intranet.

For this reason, usability and IA are core areas of expertise for intranet teams, and all organisations should take steps to build this expertise internally.

More than just redesigns

The primary focus of usability and information architecture activities is normally on the major redesign of the intranet. Taking many months, this redesign should (and often does) follow best-practice user-centred design principles.

Beyond this major piece of work however, it is not as widely recognised that there is an ongoing need for usability and IA expertise relating to the intranet.

If nothing else, once the consultants have finished their work, it is left to the intranet team to actually put the designs into practice. Since there is a limit to what the delivered designs can cover every issue, there will be many small (and sometimes large) decisions yet to make.

These decisions will arise throughout the implementation phase, and will have a significant impact on the overall success of the redesign. If the intranet team does not have the necessary knowledge and skills, much of the value of the consultancy or contracting services may be lost.

This is just one example of where usability skills are needed, and it is worthwhile exploring some of the other situations where this arises.

Many ongoing tasks require strong usability and IA skills in order to deliver effective solutions, including:

- enhancing search
- creating additional intranet-based applications
- improving the staff directory
- redesigning individual sections of the site
- expanding the site to encompass new content or functionality
- developing appropriate intranet guidelines and standards
- working with authors to build their usability knowledge

Core knowledge

For this reason, it is not appropriate for intranet teams to rely solely on outsourced usability and design skills.

Instead, all intranet teams should have at least a strong base knowledge of the fields of usability and IA, including the key techniques and principles.

Intranet teams should also steadily grow these skills over time, to allow the team to deliver a progressively improved intranet.

Gaining these skills

Skills transfer is one way of gaining these skills, but will only get intranet teams so far. Instead, intranet teams should plan to get professional training in these areas, with the training selected on its ability to build internal skills.

Mentoring is another way that intranet teams can help to supplement their knowledge in these fields, and this can help to target assistance and training to key points of need.

Intranet teams should also be familiar with major sites such as Boxes and Arrows (www.boxe-sandarrows.com), Jared Spool’s site (www.uie.com) and Jakob Nielsen’s site (www.useit.com).

For more information and resources, see the earlier articles *What is usability?* and *What is Information Architecture?*