

All too often, intranets become a dumping ground for “second-hand documents”. Information is sent out via email, or other mechanisms, and then stored on the intranet as an afterthought.

Where this is the case, intranets deliver few real benefits, while still shouldering the full cost of maintaining an increasingly large collection of pages and documents.

This briefing explores the nature of the problem, and proposes what may be considered a radical solution.

Examining the situation

A common scenario for most corporate intranets is as follows:

A new corporate document is produced that needs to be communicated to all staff. An “all staff” email is sent out, containing the document as an attachment. Afterwards, the author needs to find somewhere to “store” the document, so they arrange for the intranet team to publish it to somewhere on the corporate intranet.

Over time, the intranet accumulates thousands of documents, acting as an “archive” for old or historical information.

While this is a very common situation, it is very damaging for both the intranet and the intranet team. Some of the issues include:

- The intranet delivers little real value, as most information has already been communicated to staff via other mechanisms such as email.
- Over time, the intranet becomes a “library” or “archive” for past information, rather than a valued “business tool”.
- Staff have no reason to access the intranet, as key documents have already been emailed.
- A perception is reinforced that “if the information is important, it’s emailed”.
- Staff can’t find information on the intranet, even if they think to look on the site.
- The intranet team bears the full load of maintaining an ever-increasing collection of documents, most of which are never accessed.

Setting a new policy

Over time, the problem becomes increasingly serious, with the intranet weighed down by unread documents, and the intranet team unable to find the resources to maintain it all.

The somewhat radical solution is to set a clear policy for the intranet, as follows:

Information *will not* be published to the intranet if it has already been communicated to a large number of staff via another mechanism (such as email). The intranet must be the first location that content is published to.

While it will not be possible to enforce this policy in all cases, it does convey a clear message that the intranet will be more than an archive for old documents.

It also gives the intranet teams (and decentralised authors) ammunition that can be used when changing the internal communications processes used within the organisation.

Delivering information

There is still a need to convey the new information to staff, beyond just publishing it to the intranet and hoping that staff will find it.

Email can still be used as a key mechanism for communicating to staff. Instead of attaching the actual document to the email, the message contains a link to the relevant page on the intranet.

This uses email to notify staff of new information, while still ensuring that documents and other content are stored in a central location.

It also reinforces the value of the intranet to staff, and gives them confidence that they can find the information again in the future when they need it, without having to save a personal copy.

The intranet news system can also be used as an effective mechanism for communicating information updates.

While this is a simple change, it will only become a reality if the core policy of not publishing “second-hand” to the intranet is enforced. This gives the impetus to change communications practices.