

Full site redesign? Start by addressing the home page

When an intranet isn't working effectively, many organisations attempt to tackle the problem with a full-scale redesign of the site or the implementation of a content management system. But these major projects can create as many issues as they resolve:

- they are time-consuming to specify and implement
- they often involve the acquisition of new technology
- there is no guarantee they will address the real issues
- major IT projects don't have a good track record of being successful

Rather than embarking on a major project at the first sign of trouble, consider tactical solutions such as the redesign of the home page.

Most home pages don't work

The main purpose of an intranet home page is:

- to provide staff with a starting point from which they can intuitively and confidently step towards the content they require
- to present a clear and consistent intranet brand that is discrete from, yet in keeping with, the parent brand of the organisation
- to provide staff with a daily snapshot of the most important news and updates
- to provide staff with a quick way of getting to the most visited/useful content

Many intranets fail because the home page ignores these objectives or over-emphasizes one at the expense of the others.

Don't over-prioritise newness or usefulness

Many intranet home pages emphasize new and 'most useful' content at the expense of the other purposes of a homepage.

This often results in the home page being divided into indistinguishable headings such as:

- useful links
- recent updates
- hotlinks

This approach is successful in getting a large number of content links on the home page, but it in no way guarantees that related content will be grouped together. Thus, staff can find it difficult to locate the specific content they require even if there is a link to it on the home page.

Both new and the 'most useful' content have a place on the home page, but this should be kept in proportion. As well as being able to get a snapshot of the most important news and the most frequently visited links, the home page must also provide a gateway to the other content on the site.

Reserve space for introducing the navigational areas

Besides the site search, the navigation headings are likely to be the primary way that staff will navigate around the site. As discussed in the earlier article *Information scent: helping people find the content they want*, navigation headings alone often don't provide a clear distinction between the different areas of the site. Thus it is important to reserve space on the home page to introduce the navigational areas of the site.

Rather than including a description of the navigational areas, it is much more effective to include links to a number of the main categories or content pages within each area of the site. Even if the specific information a staff member is looking for isn't highlighted on the page, this shapes expectations and thus enables staff to select the correct option much more intuitively.

Present a clear and consistent brand

Failure to introduce a clear and consistent intranet brand on the home page of a site can result in confusion and loss of trust in information presented on other pages of the site.

Staff instinctively trust information that comes from a recognised authoritative source. In the absence of a strong intranet brand, staff can become confused as to whether or not sub-pages are endorsed by the intranet. The home page must establish a strong brand and this should be reflected throughout the rest of the site.