CM BRIEFING

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Use good interview techniques

Successful intranets are delivered on the back of an in-depth understanding of staff needs and issues. This involves getting out from behind the desk and spending time with operational and frontline staff.

The earlier article *Conducting intranet needs analysis* outlined a structured approach to conducting user research to improve intranets.

A range of approaches can be used, but the core research technique is one-on-one staff interviews. These quickly provide a huge body of knowledge on day-to-day issues, roadblocks, needs and opportunities.

These interviews must be run well, however, if they are to deliver the greatest depth of information.

The fundamentals of interviewing

To be effective, follow some basic guidelines on interview technique:

- *Find a quiet place.* Interviews should be conducted in a quiet, private location free of distractions or interruptions. (The alternative is to conduct interviews at people's desks, which can provide other advantages.)
- *Prepare some questions in advance.* This will help ensure no major topics are missed, but don't use the questions as a rigid checklist.
- *Be friendly.* Put participants at ease as quickly as possible by being friendly and engaging. This is particularly important for staff who are unused to being interviewed.
- *Listen rather than talk.* Staff interviews aren't a two-way conversation, and the interviewer should avoid talking whenever possible.
- *Provide good non-verbal feedback.* Participants should be encouraged to talk through good use of the typical non-specific feedback used in day-to-day conversations ('mmm', 'yes', 'really?', 'interesting!').
- *Use open body language.* Set up the seating arrangements to avoid the impression of a formal interview (or interrogation!), and take a relaxed posture throughout the session.
- *Express interest.* Go into sessions with a genuine level of curiosity about people's jobs and issues, and participants will naturally pick this up.
- *Explore topics.* When an interesting point is raised, follow up with additional questions to obtain more information. When that topic is exhausted, move onto the next point.
- *Don't mix with training.* Staff will often say 'if only there was a way to do x'. If the interviewer knows there is such a way, they must still refrain from using the session to provide training, because the fact that the staff member doesn't know the capability exists is a key piece of information.

Obtain training

Facilitating these types of interviews does not come naturally to many people, and there may be benefits in gaining some training before conducting staff interviews.

While external training can be beneficial, it may be equally effective to sit in on an interview conducted by a more experienced team member. This will quickly demonstrate how the interviews can be run, as well as building confidence.

If in doubt, get out there and give it a go! Not every interview needs to be perfect, simply keep going until you have the information you need.

Getting a fresh perspective

Also note that intranet teams need to take particular care when conducting their own research. If staff perceive that team members have a vested interest in the project, this will influence their answers. They may also be more likely to ask questions or request help, which can derail the interviews.

For this reason, there may be value in getting an outside party to conduct the research. This could be a suitable external consultant or contractor, or someone from elsewhere within the organisation. This can help to shed fresh light on the situation, giving a different perspective on the future direction for the intranet.