

Staff in geographically isolated locations are most reliant on information sources such as intranets. In practical terms, however, these staff are the hardest to reach.

This is a central paradox for intranets, and while there are no easy answers, there are some practical steps that can be taken to better meet the needs of these isolated staff.

The need

Staff located in 'head office' or other central locations have many ways of obtaining information, and hearing what is happening in the organisation.

If nothing else, they can walk down the corridor to chat to other staff, or are well-placed to attend key meetings and presentations.

News also naturally travels 'out from the centre' in organisations. The net effect of this is that news directly related to the needs of head-office staff is generally over-represented on the intranet.

Centrally-placed groups are generally also better resourced, and this means that they can be most active and most visible.

This is not to say that nothing important happens at the periphery of organisations: quite the opposite. In many cases, it is the staff who are located in regional offices, or out in the field, who are key deliverers of the organisation's services.

For example, branch staff in the bank are the 'front line' that interacts directly with customers. Sales staff in the field, or engineers at plants are similarly critical.

The challenge is to meet the information needs of these staff. Due to their lack of proximity to core services, they are much more reliant on non face-to-face communications, such as the intranet, emails and phone calls.

In many cases, these staff feel very isolated from the organisation, with little idea of what is happening. They often perceive that all news is 'head office' news, with little having direct relevance to their daily operation. This has a heavy impact on their morale and ultimately, on their productivity.

The challenge

While the first step is to recognise the needs of these isolated staff, the challenge is how to deliver the information and tools they need.

There are a number of practical barriers that stand in the way, including:

- slow internet connections
- poor IT infrastructure, including a basic lack of PC access
- limited IT skills and exposure
- little visibility of these staff in head office

This is the paradox: while meeting the needs of these staff is often a key goal of the intranet, they are the hardest to deliver information to.

Practical approaches

While these barriers are not easy to overcome, there are some practical approaches that can be taken, including:

- Spending time 'in the field' gaining a first-hand understanding of the environment, and staff needs.
- Creating a coordinated communications strategy that delivers via many channels, not just electronically (such as placing news on noticeboards for field staff).
- Building on existing mechanisms used by isolated staff (instead of attempting to simply replace them).
- Providing mechanisms for local (person-to-person) information sharing, in addition to centrally-driven news sources.
- Allocating IT budgets for improving the communications links to these remote locations.
- Appointing local 'intranet coordinators' with the responsibility of identifying and publishing information that is relevant to their local audience.

While it will never be possible to overcome the paradox of delivering to isolated staff in a single step, incremental improvements can always be made. Over time, these can have a dramatic effect on the services delivered to these frontline staff.