

There are many staff that have little (or no) access to a computer during work hours, let alone the intranet.

To name but a few, these staff include: nurses, factory workers, construction engineers, parking inspectors, mobile salespeople, community centre staff, truck drivers and pilots.

In some organisations, the proportion of staff without ready access to a computer might be quite small, while in others it may dominate.

In either case, it is important that all staff have access to the information and tools that they need. The migration of content and services to the intranet must also not disenfranchise staff; stated more strongly, all staff should directly benefit from intranet improvements.

The challenge then becomes how best to provide access to the intranet for these off-line staff. The option first considered is often to install 'kiosks' (computers with intranet access) in key locations throughout the working environment.

While this is potentially useful, a more effective approach may be to provide remote access to the intranet for all staff, so that it can be used from home (or elsewhere).

Providing access

A strategic goal for many intranets is to improve the efficiency of key business processes, such as applying for leave.

There are many benefits to moving these traditionally paper-based activities onto the intranet, and this can generate significant (and quantifiable) cost savings.

To get adoption of these systems, however, it is often necessary to eliminate the paper forms and processes. This forces the use of the intranet, thereby driving organisational change.

What can stand in the way of these efforts, however, is the proportion of staff that don't have easy access to a computer during working hours. How are these staff to make use of the online-only leave process?

This in turn drives the provision of more widespread access to the intranet, via the installation of kiosks in key locations, or through the establishment of remote access to the intranet.

Intranet kiosks

A long-standing approach to providing intranet access to field staff, and other similar roles, is to install 'kiosks' in key locations throughout the workplace. These may range from standard PCs connected to the network, through to robust 'hardened' machines (such as those typically found in airports and shopping centres).

The purpose of installing these machines is to allow staff to access the intranet (and to apply for leave) during their work breaks.

In practice, it may be impractical (or prohibitively expensive) to reach all staff using just kiosks. Staff may also be reluctant or unable to make effective use of the kiosks during their work breaks.

Remote access

A much less explored approach is to provide remote access to the intranet for all staff. This then allows them to make use of the intranet when at home, or from other off-site locations (such as libraries, etc).

This is now technically easy to achieve, although steps must be taken to ensure that access is as simple (and usable) as possible for staff.

Remote access can be useful even for those without computers at home, and can better match the way staff want to complete some of the common tasks, such as planning holiday dates in consultation with their spouses.

This remote access also benefits office-based staff, such as allowing consultants to access the intranet when working at client sites.

As an example, one major international airline focused primarily on providing remote access to the intranet for key HR activities, even though a significant percentage of staff had no access to computers in the workplace (pilots, cabin staff, maintenance engineers, etc).

Despite initial concerns, it proved possible to achieve online rates of 90% or more, versus paper-based processes. This target was met without installing any significant number of kiosks, or equivalent.

Similar benefits can be gained by many organisations, both public and private.