

Every organisation has a unique mix of culture, business processes, history, technology and strategic directions (to name but a few factors).

When it comes to intranets, it can then be said that they *hold up a mirror to the organisation*. To put it another way: the most successful intranets are those that directly reflect the unique nature of the organisations they serve.

One of the most immediate consequences of this is that we need to abandon the naive idea of the ‘best’ intranet.

There can be no absolute measure of intranet quality and effectiveness, and the success of the intranet is only meaningfully measured within the local environment.

Organisations are unique

Even within a single industry sector, such as the insurance industry, the public sector, or health-care, organisations are very different.

These differences are generated by many factors, including:

- size
- geographic spread
- technology
- resources
- culture (staff and organisational)
- staff skills and experience
- history
- services offered
- strategic direction

The result is that every organisation has a unique environment, which strongly influences the direction and role of the intranet.

Intranets can’t be transplanted

As outlined earlier, there can be no single concept of the ‘best’ intranet when organisations vary so greatly. Instead, the most effective intranet mirrors the organisation that it serves.

This means is meaningless (and generally dangerous) to attempt to ‘transplant’ the design of one successful intranet directly into another organisation.

Instead, the lessons learnt from one intranet must be adapted to fit the unique conditions of the organisation. Approaches that have been wildly successful in one organisation may completely fail in another; intranet ‘killer apps’ are similarly variable from one organisation to another.

Borrowing an idea or two

The upside of the unique nature of every organisation is that almost every intranet has at least a few outstanding features, whether they relate to content, applications, management or strategy.

This leaves much to be gained by examining other intranets for the ideas that can be ‘borrowed’ for use, selecting the ideas or approaches that are a good fit with the organisation’s culture and processes.

In this way, organisations can do much to help each other to further build the practice of intranets, without having to resort to the concept of the ‘best’ (or even ‘better’) intranet. We can also use this approach to guide which elements to draw on from successful intranet case studies.

Understanding the organisation

In light of the differences between organisations, a critical success factor is clearly to understand the staff and working environment that the intranet serves. This understanding can then be used to develop a strategy and roadmap for delivering a more effective intranet.

There are a range of practical techniques that can be used by intranet teams to build this understanding, and these are outlined in the earlier article *Conducting intranet needs analysis*.

Learning from the intranet

As a final note, if the intranet holds up a mirror to the organisation, perhaps it can be used to learn more about the organisation’s culture, its strengths and weaknesses.

In this way, we can potentially use the intranet to identify that the organisation is highly siloed, or that communication is ineffective. While this has not be widely explored, there is the clear potential to use the state of the intranet as a ‘barometer’ for the organisation itself.