

What intranet content should be in PDF format?

The typical corporate intranet will consist of a mix of HTML-based web pages and a variety of PDF-based content available for download. PDFs can be derived from word processing documents, a document management system and/or similar software. It's not uncommon for an intranet to house thousands of PDFs alongside its standard web pages.

So what's the difference between PDF and HTML, and when should each format be used?

PDFs versus HTML

The 'Portable Document Format' (PDF) was primarily designed to present documents in an easily readable, easily printed and common digital document format that will display as its creator intended (no matter which computer it's opened with). This hasn't changed and PDFs remain fantastic for displaying detailed and in-depth information that's difficult to digest on screen, as manuals and policies, for example.

Alternatively, as an easily interpreted, scaled, read and copied from format, HTML web pages are the standard for web browser-based content. HTML loads quickly, is searchable, can be updated quickly and easily and adapts to a computer's screen size and resolution.

These different characteristics mark the overall difference between the two formats: HTML is designed to be read on screen, while PDFs are really designed to be printed out.

Evaluating PDF use

The pros of PDFs include:

- traditionally suitable format for documents and forms
- easily printed
- easily downloaded and stored
- easily shared (via email, or stored on a network drive)

And the cons:

- requires a PDF reader to read
- requires a PDF creator to produce
- time-consuming to update

- can be unwieldy to open and navigate in a browser if incorrectly produced
- can be slow to find what you're looking for within a PDF
- poor copy and paste results to other formats (email, word documents etc)

Use a PDF when:

- uploading a policy, manual, report, document or similar that's finalised before digital distribution
- the information contained within the PDF will not be changing regularly
- a document is designed to be distributed before being printed on an individual basis (e.g. an internal newsletter)

Use an HTML page when:

- information on a page will change regularly
- the information contains hyperlinks to other online content
- the content is unlikely to need printing

Also don't forget that most modern content management systems offer 'print page' functionality, just in case a user needs to see the page in hard copy. This is a far more fluid and practical system than creating PDFs solely for the purpose of printing web-based information.

PDFs for forms

One of the most popular uses for PDFs in organisations is for forms. Yet, a modern intranet should be moving away from using PDFs for this purpose, and instead using fully-developed online forms (because intranets should be places for doing things, not just finding and downloading material to be printed).

In one organisation recently, with 14,000 employees, transferring just the 'Room/Venue booking' form from a PDF to an actual online form saved over 40,000 emails a year in support and administration – just for one process.

Progressively transferring all PDF forms to online forms is a sound improvement, and many organisations have made the transition successfully.