

Search is broken on many websites and intranets. Search results pages are confusing and cluttered, and users can't easily find what they are looking for.

It is tempting to think that this is a technology problem. Certainly, if there is a very old or very limited search engine in place, this will need to be replaced with a modern solution.

The danger, however, is that it can be believed that simply purchasing and installing a new search engine will solve all these problems.

The reality is that search doesn't work 'out-of-the-box', and that there is a small (but vital) piece of work needed to design and tune the search engine to make it effective.

This briefing outlines some of the activities needed to make search effective, highlighting key steps that can be completed within just a few days.

### Not just a technology problem

Every site (website or intranet) is different, with a unique mix of documents, content and metadata. The nature of searches will also vary, depending on the tasks of site visitors.

For this reason, the search engine must be configured to match the characteristics of the site that is being searched. Only when this is done can the search engine return meaningful results.

For this reason, there is no single 'best' way to configure search. Instead, there are key aspects to be tested and refined on a case-by-case basis.

This work is required, regardless of how new or powerful the search engine is. Without this initial tuning and configuration, search doesn't work out-of-the-box, no matter how much money is spent on the technology.

### Search results

The most obvious aspect of a search engine to be configured is the results page. Out of the box, this is designed to showcase the power of the search engine, with almost all of the possible functionality enabled.

This is overwhelming for most users, and the first step should be to turn off 80% (or more) of the default options.

The results should be a clean and simple interface, with additional functionality only added once users have become familiar with the new search engine. (See the earlier article *What to include in intranet search results* for more on this.)

### Tuning the search engine

There are many behind-the-scenes aspects of the search engine to be tuned and configured. This includes:

- which content (and documents) to search
- use of metadata
- weighting and ranking algorithms
- spell-checking
- 'fuzzy matching' options
- synonyms and best bets

Each of these should be tested against the actual content, to determine which options improve the quality and relevance of the search results in practice.

(Note that each search engine will have its own jargon, functionality and options. The first step must therefore be to thoroughly read the manual to understand how to best use the chosen tool.)

### Spending a few days

Even just a few days spent on search will make a huge difference. Within this limited time, much can be done to refine and tune the out-of-the-box configuration of the search engine.

This tuning should be done by the web or intranet team (rather than IT), with a clear understanding of the site content and user needs.

To ensure that this work is done, build these design activities directly into the search engine project plan. This will set the expectation that the project is more than just selecting and implementing a new search tool.

### Further reading

The report *Improving Intranet Search* provides extensive information on how to design and configure search, including specific tips and screenshots. The key findings from this report were also summarised in the earlier article *Nine ways to fix intranet search*.