CM BRIEFING

Good search is knowledge management

One of the key goals of knowledge management is to ensure that staff have the information they need, at the time they need it.

What has often been overlooked is that effective search can play a key role in meeting this need, beyond just allowing staff to 'find stuff'.

Implementing a good search solution can help knowledge managers build their understanding of staff needs, can raise the visibility of key information, and can help staff to better understand what they are looking for.

These uses will be explored in this briefing, with the overall goal of prompting knowledge (and information) managers to take a second look at search.

Mundane search

Search is often implemented as a 'second thought' within organisations. First the intranet or document management system is installed, and then search is added to help users 'find stuff' within the growing repository of information.

In many cases, search is deployed out of the box, with little (or no) extra effort put into customising or improving its effectiveness. Worse, no attention is given to the search on a month-by-month basis.

This 'mundane' search provides only modest value to the organisation. Worse, poor search can be a major cause of staff frustration.

Search can provide much more. Instead of just serving as a simple mechanism for finding pages or documents, it can be a valuable tool to support knowledge management goals.

Understanding staff needs

The first step to realising the value of search as a knowledge management tool is to implement search engine reports. As discussed in the earlier article *Intranet search reports*, two key usage reports should be implemented:

- most popular terms
- failed searches (searches returning 0 hits)

Beyond allowing the intranet team to further refine and improve the search engine itself, these reports give considerable insight into the knowledge required by staff.

Monitoring these on a regular basis allows knowledge managers to track the changing priorities and needs of staff. With little or no extra effort, these reports can therefore supplement more active research into staff needs.

Search engine 'best bets'

The recently published article *Search engine 'best bets'* discussed the value of implementing a hand-created list of key pages (and documents) for common searches.

While the focus of this article was on improving the relevance of search results, this has broader knowledge management implications.

In particular, it allows key knowledge to be 'pushed' to staff at the point when they are looking for information, thereby promoting knowledge sharing across organisational boundaries.

Taxonomies and more

Beyond these simple approaches, more work can be done behind the scenes to enhance the value of search. For example, if a controlled-term thesaurus (taxonomy) is available, this can be integrated into the search engine.

This allows a mix of searching and 'guided navigation', helping staff to more quickly find desired information, as well as building a greater understanding of the available knowledge.

Keeping it simple

In all the approaches outlined above, the complexity of the search interface has not been substantially increased for staff. Any attempts to expose complex search features in the name of knowledge management will fail, unless search is being delivered to a specialised audience.

Instead, improvements should be made behind the scenes, keeping search as simple as possible while seamlessly meeting knowledge management goals.

This is also not a technology problem, and it is generally not necessary to purchase a new (more expensive) search tool to deliver these benefits.