

A range of statistics are typically gathered on intranet usage, but of these, search engine reports are by far the most useful.

This briefing explores two key search engine reports that should be implemented on all intranets, and looks at how they can be used to improve the effectiveness of the site.

Beyond usage statistics

Most intranet sites gather at least basic usage statistics: most popular pages, overall usage, and the like. More advanced packages can also be used to drill-down to the usage of specific pages, or to look at the paths users take through the site.

In all these situations, however, it must be realised that these reports only identify where users went, not what they were looking for.

For example, one page might have considerable use due to how it ranks in the search engine, and not because it is a useful page. As a result, usage statistics can sometimes be more misleading, than useful.

Search usage provides much better information: if a user types in “leave form” into the search engine, they are looking for the leave form. This gives concrete details on what information staff are looking for, more than just what they found.

Search engine reports

There are two reports that should be implemented on all intranets:

- most popular search terms
- failed search terms

Each of these are described in the following sections.

Most popular terms

These obviously reflect the information that is of greatest value to staff, and the relevant sections of the intranet should be further developed and enhanced. This also gives a good indication of what items should be listed on the home page of the intranet.

Failed search terms

Failed searches (those that returned zero hits) can be caused by a number of reasons:

- **No information is available:** the intranet doesn't currently provide any content on the topic that is being searched for. These items then form the basis of a “hit list” of information that should be gathered together and published.
- **Different terminology:** in many large organisations a range of terminology is used, which can make it difficult to find information. This is useful information in itself (it will assist in the development of effective navigation and labels), and the problem can be resolved by implementing search engine synonyms (lists of equivalent terms).
- **Technical problems:** even though information does exist, it is not being returned by the search engine (metadata issues are a common cause). Find, and correct the problems.
- **Users can't spell:** typos and spelling mistakes are a common cause of search failure. Since it isn't possible train staff to spell any better, this can be more effectively resolved by either search synonyms (see above), or with the spell-checking capability within the search engine itself.

Implementing the reports

Almost all search tools generate at least a log file containing the raw details on searches conducted by users.

In many cases, however, it will be necessary to develop some additional code to convert this raw information into the two reports required.

This should not be difficult. In our experience, it requires only a few hours of coding by a skilled developer, in any of a number of languages (whether PHP, ASP, Perl or even Visual Basic).

It is strongly recommended that these reports be implemented as soon as possible, and certainly before any redesign is started. This will then provide a wealth of additional information on which to base the site redevelopment.