

Intranet search often fails to meet the needs or expectations of users, with confusing and complex results provided for even the simplest searches.

While there is much that can be done to improve the effectiveness of intranet search, a good starting point is to improve the design of search results pages. The first question to ask is: what to include (and what not to include) in search results?

This briefing is designed to provide a simple checklist that can be used to assess (and then re-design) intranet search results pages.

Principles of good design

Since it is not possible to train users or substantially change their behaviour, the search results pages should be designed with an understanding of current user practices.

While additional or advanced features may seem useful, experience has clearly shown that most users fail to use anything beyond the simplest features of search tools.

The search results pages should therefore be clean, easy to understand and quick to scan. The general principle is that if it's not needed, don't display it.

Sadly, the 'out of the box' design of search results pages is generally designed to highlight *all* of the features offered by the search tool, rather than follow good design principles. Much 'stripping out' is therefore required...

What to include

There are two elements of the search results that need to be considered: the search results page as a whole, and the details listed for each search 'hit'. Each of these are discussed below:

Search results page

- ✓ Listing of the search terms used
- ✓ Number of matching documents
- ✓ Mechanism for browsing through the search results pages
- ✓ Field for entering a new search
- ✓ Numbered list of search 'hits'

Details for each search 'hit'

- ✓ Title of the page/document, displayed as a link
- ✓ Meaningful description (precis)
- ✓ Relevance as a star rating (1 to 5 stars)
- ✓ Type of the file (ideally displayed as an icon)
- ✓ Section of the site the file is located in

What not to include

There is much that should be stripped out of search results, as outlined in the following sections.

Search results page

- ✗ Time to run search query (why is this important or relevant?)
- ✗ 'Search within results' option (this is often confusing for users)
- ✗ Other advanced search options (list these on a separate page)
- ✗ 'Hide summaries' or other options to control how the results are displayed (too complex)
- ✗ Option to change the number of results displayed on each page (rarely used)

Details for each search 'hit'

- ✗ Relevance as a percentage (what does this actually mean?)
- ✗ URL (better to display 'human readable' location information, as listed above)
- ✗ Size of the file (rarely read or relevant)
- ✗ 'Find similar documents' or equivalent (too complex)
- ✗ Last updated date (rarely read)

Understanding users

This article lists general principles that apply to most intranet searches, recognising that staff typically want a simple search that is easy to use.

Take the time to understand your users, as specialist users (such as researchers) may require different or more advanced tools. General guidelines such as these should always be assessed in practice, to ensure their relevance.