

Numerous surveys across a diverse range of IT projects have identified that the lack of support from senior management (project sponsorship) is one of the biggest causes of project failure.

The demand for effective project sponsorship is even greater for an intranet, where decisions will affect many business units and staff across the organisation.

This briefing explores the need for a project sponsor, the role they need to play, and how to choose one.

### Needing a project sponsor

While the development (and maintenance) of an intranet should ideally be by consensus, there are also many situations in which decisions must be enforced (such as ensuring a consistent layout across all pages).

Within many organisations, this runs directly into internal politics, often between IT and business units. The larger and more distributed the organisation, the greater the challenges in managing differences in opinion and direction.

When it comes to increasing use of the intranet, it must be recognised that fundamentally, no staff report to the intranet team. This means that the intranet team has no power to *enforce* changes in practice or policy.

What is needed is a project sponsor who can take on the responsibility for resolving some of these challenges.

### Project sponsor's role

The project sponsor has a key role to play in developing and maintaining an intranet, including:

- providing overall strategic direction (note that detailed decisions may be made by the intranet team or a steering committee)
- ensuring the intranet is adopted and used by staff
- promoting the intranet throughout the organisation
- acting as the source for key internal communications regarding the intranet
- raising awareness of the intranet at senior management level

- ensuring the intranet is managed as a strategic corporate asset
- resolving differences and conflicts between intranet stakeholders
- giving sufficient mandate (and power) to the intranet team to enforce key decisions
- obtaining sufficient funding for the intranet

Note that the project sponsor essentially plays a supporting (not decision-making) role regarding the intranet. While the intranet team should deeply involve the sponsor in all planning, the vision and design of the intranet must originate from within the intranet team.

### Choosing a project sponsor

First off, it must be recognised that you may not have any choice over the project sponsor, instead being at the whim of organisational politics.

That being said, you may have an opportunity to provide input, to guide the process, or at least to attempt to replace the current sponsor (if they are not proving suitable).

When choosing a project sponsor, look for these characteristics:

- must be sufficiently senior and be in a management role
- must have an interest (and ideally a passion) for the role of the intranet
- should see the intranet as a strategic asset
- must have sufficient time to devote to the intranet
- should have good internal political skills
- key user groups should report directly to the project sponsor

As a final word, perhaps the best way of gaining the involvement of a project sponsor is to first generate the “vision” for the intranet, and to take that to the senior manager. This is much more effective than expecting the leadership to first come from above, from someone new to the intranet.