CM BRIEFING

Improving your intranet, task by task

When faced with an out-dated and ineffective intranet, a common response is to launch a redesign project. This can involve spending the next three to six months researching staff needs, creating a new information architecture, and authoring new content.

If redesign efforts are based on a solid analysis of business and user needs, this can be an effective way to improve an intranet. However, it takes considerable time and resources, and does not result in a measurable payoff for several months. For some organisations, a full redesign is therefore out of the question.

If a redesign is not feasible, what are the alternatives? There are a number of ways to incrementally improve an intranet, such as redesigning a particular section of the site, or adding a new 'killer application'.

One method that is certain to provide immediate business benefit is to improve the way the intranet supports key tasks. In fact, by selecting only one task at a time, improvements can be made in a manageable and cost-effective manner.

The value of task support

Staff come to an intranet with a particular task in mind, and look for content and functionality that will help them to complete that task. This could be as simple as finding the phone number of a colleague, or as complex as researching, completing and submitting next year's budgets.

The value of an intranet therefore lies in how well it supports common and critical tasks, with successful task support achieved through a combination of:

- providing the *right* content and functionality

- authoring content so it answers common staff questions and can be easily scanned

- designing the information architecture so content and functionality can be found

- providing clear links between content needed to support different aspects of the task

Selecting the right tasks

When improving an intranet task by task, select tasks that are completed frequently, or performed at critical times for the organisation. For example:

- Budgets are typically completed annually, and requires staff to know when and how to compile their budget submissions.

- Performance reviews are an annual, and sometimes bi-annual, task for the majority of staff. Staff need to look for key dates to submit their appraisal forms, and the correct templates to use.

- Staff frequently complete administration tasks, such as filling out timesheets, leave forms, and expense reimbursements.

Although there are many opportunities to improve task support, work on only one task at a time. This will focus the efforts of the intranet team and provide time to measure the impact of improving one task before moving onto the next.

Identifying weaknesses in task support

Once you have selected a task, there are a number of ways to identify improvements to the current level of intranet support. Here are a few suggestions:

- Ask for 10–15 minutes from a few staff who regularly perform the task, or may need to perform the task in the near future. Sit with each staff person in turn and watch them as they try to perform the task using the current intranet. Ask them to 'think aloud', and note down any problems they have completing the task.

- At a meeting of the intranet team, or the broader intranet community of practice, collectively walk through a task. Project the intranet on the wall, ask one person to control the mouse, and ask all the other attendees to stand in the users' shoes and try to complete the task.

Use the results of these activities to make changes to the intranet. Where possible, find ways to measure the improvements or receive feedback from the intranet user base.