

Intranets often focus on one or two key aspects, depending on who is running the site. The intranet may be established as a communications channel, or as a repository for corporate content.

When tackled in this narrow way, intranets often struggle to be sustainable and successful in the longer term.

To be truly effective, intranets need to address three fundamental purposes:

- content
- communication
- activity

This briefing will explore each of these purposes, and will outline how all three elements are required if the intranet is to be effective.

Content

The intranet's role as a repository for corporate information is well understood. Disciplines such as usability and information architecture have done much to improve the ability of staff to find required information on corporate intranets.

Considerable effort is put into maintaining the intranet as a content repository, including implementing a content management system, establishing authoring processes and defining intranet governance policies.

While the intranet will always play an important role in delivering content, this is not the aspect that will drive the success of the site. As a 'place for reading things', the intranet is only accessed when needed, often only every week, month or quarter.

For this reason, organisations have found that intranets solely focusing on content struggle to succeed, with the ongoing maintenance effort potentially outweighing the corporate benefits.

Communication

The intranet can also play a valuable role as a communications channel, one that reaches all (or the majority) of staff.

This is typified by the news section on the intranet home page, which is used to communicate key corporate news items and updates.

The intranet is not, however, an effective *push medium*. Staff do not come to the intranet just to check whether news items have been added to the home page.

As discussed in the earlier article *Intranets as a news channel*, the intranet is most effective as a communications medium when the site itself is useful for staff.

When managed in isolation as a corporate news channel, intranets do not work. Without a clear reason for staff to go to the site, intranets fail to get the necessary traffic to ensure that all staff see the updated news items.

Activity

More than just a dumping ground for documents, the intranet can be a place for 'doing things'.

This focus on *activities* — on helping staff complete tasks — can include many things:

- major online applications, such as HR self-service
- smaller tools, such as travel bookings
- online forms
- collaborative tools, and much more

These tools allow staff to do more than just read what the policies are, they allow staff to conduct some of their day-to-day work on the site.

The applications and tools cannot be managed in isolation. As discussed in the article *The "all together" rule for intranets*, there is a need to integrate content and applications, to ensure that staff can complete end-to-end tasks in an effective way.

Bringing it all together

Organisations should judge for themselves whether their intranet is meeting all three of these fundamental purposes: content, communication and activity.

If the site is only focusing on one or two of these, it will not be successful. The challenge is therefore to grow the site to encompass all three purposes, and to start a dialogue within the organisation about how best to coordinate and integrate them in practice.