

In the past, many sites were redesigned solely on the basis of the vision of a designer. Some of these sites worked well for users, most did not.

Thankfully, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of usability and information architecture techniques in the redesign of sites, whether websites or intranets.

These are not sufficient however. Instead, it must be recognised that a site can be perfectly designed, but still *useless*.

Fundamentally, a site is not effective if it doesn't provide the information and tools that users need, regardless of how well structured and implemented it is.

To ensure a site is useful, time must be spent identifying user needs, and there are a range of practical techniques for doing so.

### Usability and information architecture

In practice, usability activities focus on whether a site can be quickly and easily used and understood (although the formal definition of usability is much wider than this).

Information architecture is the complementary discipline that concentrates on site structure, navigation and search engine design (as well as other related areas).

Together, these disciplines provide an invaluable toolbox of practical techniques that can be used to ensure a site can be used, including:

- card sorting
- prototypes
- usability testing
- heuristic evaluation

These are useful techniques that should be used as part of all site redevelopments. In practice, though, they are not enough.

Consider the following scenario:

*The corporate intranet is a mess, with little order, consistency or structure. Staff have considerable difficulty in finding information, and while most have struggled with the site in the past, they try not to use it now unless they have to. As a result, overall site usage is very low.*

*A usability consultant is brought in, and they conduct an initial expert review of the site to identify problems.*

*This is followed up with multiple card sorting sessions in the lead-up to determining a meaningful site structure. Prototype designs are developed, and these are usability tested.*

*The process runs smoothly, and the new site is deployed. It is tremendously easy to use, with consistent navigation and an effective search engine.*

*Yet, after an initial surge in usage, the site drops back down to negligible levels of use.*

The source of the problem? In this scenario, the intranet simply doesn't provide the information or tools that staff need. All that has been done is to redesign the *current* content, without stepping back to identify staff needs. Usage therefore remains low.

### Identifying needs

The way to avoid this problem is to conduct a thorough *needs analysis* before starting the redesign process.

There is a range of practical techniques that can be used to do this, including:

- stakeholder interviews (see the article *Stakeholder interviews as simple knowledge mapping*)
- workplace observation
- task analysis
- search engine usage
- process mapping

Through the use of these techniques, staff information needs can be determined. Important cultural and organisational issues will also be identified.

Using the results of this research ensures that the site is more than just usable: it is actually *useful*. This will ensure that the site is used by staff once it has been redesigned.

The needs analysis will also provide the basis for an intranet strategy, as well as identifying a range of required supporting activities.