

An intranet can help your business use information more effectively to create a more flexible and efficient organisation.

WHAT IS AN INTRANET?

An intranet lets its users communicate with each other, share information and resources and even share software programmes. It is, in effect, a scaled down version of the internet: it has a restricted group of users the staff in your organisation and contains only the content that you choose to make available.

Intranets have enjoyed a steady growth in popularity because they are both relatively simple and relatively inexpensive (compared to dedicated Local Area Networks or LANs) to set up.

All you need to get your intranet started is:

- a few computers cabled together
- an internet browser on each machine
- a computer designated as the server, which holds the operating software and system information.

As they use web browser technology, intranets are platform independent, ie both PC and Mac users can happily access and share information securely on the same network.

It may seem tempting to get your intranet up and running as quickly as possible, but time spent considering its projected usage will pay dividends both in terms of the functionality you finally achieve and the amount you end up spending.

Read on to find out how your business could benefit from an intranet and how you can go about building one.

The benefits

Intranets can benefit all kinds of organisations from businesses with only a handful of

employees to large international enterprises.

Research carried out by Cranfield University for consultants Cap Gemini found that intranets generally develop in three stages:

- Firstly, they become an electronic replacement for existing paperbased information such as internal telephone directories.
- Next, they become more intuitive, with staff comfortably completing timesheets or expense reports on the intranet.
- Finally, a mature intranet sees staff sharing knowledge seamlessly, collaborating online, and managing projects and workflow electronically.

The specific advantages will depend on the type of solution you choose to implement, but the primary benefits generally include:

- Reduced costs thanks to decreased printing and paper requirements, improved communication, shared software and more efficient utilisation of staff time arising from quicker access to information.
- Improved productivity through access to a single central repository of data, reducing duplication and improving accuracy when dealing with customers and suppliers.
- Increased security due to information sharing and e-mail traffic over an internal private network, rather than the public channel of the internet.
- Better customer service thanks to quicker more accurate access to customer account details and pricing and product information.
- Scalability because of the flexible nature of intranets it's easy to add additional users and increased capacity, at a relatively modest cost.

As your organisation grows more comfortable with its intranet you can also expect to enjoy:

- More cost-effective IT spend by developing your existing, flexible infrastructure rather than replacing it.
- Increased competitiveness thanks to better information access, improved customer service, knowledge sharing and being quicker to market.
- Streamlined administration with many standard tasks such as expense reports, timesheets and calendar sharing becoming largely self-administered.
- Virtual networking as the staff in your office, on the road and at home can all access and update the same core data.
- Easier training of new employees intranets are well suited to carrying induction programmes.
- Calendar and diary sharing your intranet can carry individual diaries, schedules for workgroups and bookable resources such as meeting rooms for efficient working.
- Extranet-ready open up your intranet so that it becomes an extranet, allowing trading partners access to some or all of the information you hold. Not all of your intranet information needs to be on your extranet you can control access to commercially sensitive information by passwords.

WHAT SOLUTIONS ARE AVAILABLE?

The basic concept of the intranet as a network of computers using web tools as the interface is economical and easy to implement. But intranet solutions with greater levels of functionality such as document sharing, database access, etc demand correspondingly greater investment and are more complex to implement.

The options divide up into:

- Simple DIY solutions
- Intermediate solutions
- Advanced solutions

Simple DIY solutions

For a business with a few computers that are internet compatible, setting up an intranet presents few technical or financial challenges.

Costs

The initial costs involved will mostly be for staff time, any new hardware and software you may need and any external programming that may be required. A do-it-yourself route using new equipment could cost around £3,000 for:

- a server (the computer that hosts and runs the network)
- the network cabling to link your machines
- a router
- the necessary software.

Costs could be even less if you use existing equipment an old PC with 32Mb of RAM can make an adequate server for a simple intranet supporting up to 200 users.

Requirements

You will probably need web page software to create the pages for your intranet. For example, programmes like Microsoft Front Page (£135), Adobe GoLive (£350) or Macromedia Dreamweaver (£360) are easy to use and come complete with templates for many of the pages you'll want such as a staff directory, a search feature and product information and marketing pages.

Considerations

There is also an issue of integration: if your business depends heavily on your website or database, it makes sense to build an intranet that dovetails with them. In this case, you'd be well advised to consult an IT professional at the planning stage.

Despite their modest start-up costs, intranets should not be regarded as a cheap option. If

your intranet is successful, it can rapidly become the backbone of your company. As with anything integral to the functioning of your business, you've got to plan for scalability and set aside budget for maintenance and upgrades.

INTERMEDIATE SOLUTIONS

If you are a more technically advanced business you may look to your intranet to provide greater functionality in the form of document management, discussion boards, or facilities for workgroup publishing and project management tools.

Off-the-shelf intranet solutions offering this range of functionality are available in one of two ways:

Buying

- Costs can range from about £500 for CMSsite's Intranet Package to upwards of £1,000 for Solaris from Sun Microsystems.
- Requirements none: the package simply plugs into your existing LAN.
- Considerations some of these packages include a charge of between £100 and £200 a month for service and support.

Leasing

- Costs available from your ISP (Internet Service Provider), BT or from a third party supplier like Blue Fusion or Dynamic Intranet for between £200 and £300 per month.
- Requirements as with buying, the package simply plugs into your existing LAN.
- Considerations includes maintenance and support charges as part of package.

Whichever option you choose, the package is likely to consist of:

- a Windows or Unix server
- the software to run your intranet and e-mail system - a firewall to protect your intranet

from unauthorised access

- virus protection software
- a router that handles how information is transferred across your network.

Most package solutions also allow for external access, so mobile or homeworking staff can use the intranet.

There is little to choose between outright purchase and leasing leasing means no capital investment is required, though service charges are higher. Both options should provide upgrade paths as part of the package.

ADVANCED SOLUTIONS

Companies with many employees, widely distributed offices or complex internal systems, may decide that they wish to migrate the lion's share of their business processes to their intranet. Such a solution has a lot in common with creating a bespoke corporate network software can be removed from individual machines, and everything run remotely from a powerful central server.

This can allow sophisticated activities such as online project management and collaborative working. It could also mean an end to paper-based administration with document management, discussion boards and form submission. Effectively every action and business process from finding telephone numbers to how your internal purchasing process works would run through one co-ordinated system.

For many companies, such an intranet becomes a tool for re-engineering the business. An advanced intranet solution can be purchased, leased or outsourced through a software provider or a specialist agency. Because a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work for projects of this importance, every advanced intranet package has a degree of tailoring. Many large software suppliers have suites of software which

they configure to your needs. Agencies, meanwhile, may write software themselves to create a bespoke solution.

Costs

Due to the potential variation in size, functionality and technical complexity, solutions providers like IBM, Plumtree, Novell or Logica don't give indicative prices they prefer to discuss your needs first. However, even at the lower end, costs are likely to be a matter of tens of thousands of pounds.

Requirements

You may have to upgrade your infrastructure. This could include:

- a faster web server
- greater storage capacity
- more bandwidth
- additional support staff.

Considerations

A full feasibility and return on investment (ROI) study will be needed if you go down this route. You will also have to budget for the time and cost of issuing tenders and scoping the project with your chosen provider.

STRATEGIC ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Approach your intranet in the same way you would any other project that could have profound long-term implications for your business.

There are three key issues to consider when setting up an intranet:

- What information and functionality do you want your intranet to contain?
- How should the content on your intranet be organised?
- How will you persuade staff to adopt the new system?

What information do you want your intranet to contain?

Intranets can easily accommodate almost every item of data your company deals in. But too much information can be counter-productive. So all the information on your intranet should be:

- Relevant such as commonly-used documents or features like timesheets, expense reports and calendars. Project work may also be stored on your intranet, though you may wish to limit access to specific folders by password permission.
- Current research shows that some 18% of corporate printed material is outdated within as little as 30 days of its publication. Designated individuals or teams need to take responsibility for ensuring intranet content is updated. In large organisations or businesses with an information-rich intranet, this can be a full-time job.
- Compelling your intranet may have to give reluctant staff reasons to visit it, aside from the obvious work-related ones. Some companies include weather forecasts, or even recipes to encourage traffic.

HOW SHOULD THE CONTENT ON YOUR INTRANET BE ORGANISED?

Research from web usability group Nielsen Norman found that completing routine tasks can take twice as long on a poorly designed intranet compared with a well-designed one. Your intranet content should always be:

- Accessible a good rule of thumb is that any desired document or function should never be more than three clicks from the home page.
- Simple try to make the technical attributes of your intranet as simple as possible, so staff have no trouble gaining access and won't experience any confusion about procedures they are expected to follow.

- Searchable this is increasingly important as the amount of information on your intranet grows. Indexing is the key here. If you opt for a Windows server this comes supplied with indexing software included in the price. If you have opted for a Unix or another server you'll need to buy indexing software you can find freeware and shareware programmes, such as <http://www.htdig.org/> on the internet. Your other options are to buy an indexing programme from a company like Datagold for about £300 or to subscribe to an indexing service like Webglimpse for around £15 per month.
- Manageable as the volume of information on your intranet grows, content management becomes increasingly important. A good content management software package, which starts from around £500, provides audit trails to track which person entered what information and when. Content management software also allows for new content to be automatically distributed to the appropriate people for sign-off before it is published.

HOW WILL YOU PERSUADE STAFF TO ADOPT THE NEW SYSTEM?

An intranet is reckoned to have achieved 'critical mass' when around 40% of the staff are using it in sessions of ten minutes or longer. Once other staff notice the benefits their fellows are enjoying they will soon follow suit.

- Appoint champions starting with a small group of users and using them as evangelists is one approach that can work well.
- Include 'quick wins' simple but useful things that everyone can quickly use and appreciate, like leave forms, are great for helping staff feel comfortable with an intranet.
- Set up a steering committee the decision to build an intranet needs to be taken at the highest level, but getting a cross-section of

staff involved in content generation and selection will help it become a tool that belongs to everyone.

- Ongoing marketing support to remind people of functionality and future developments.
- Training technology is only as radical as its users. Show staff exactly how the intranet works, what's in it for them and why it's important for the future of the business.

IMPLEMENTATION CHECKLIST

Research & analyse

Set targets

- Set goals for your intranet such as improving customer service, information sharing and efficiency or handling administration online.
- Agree specific, measurable objectives for example, the number of users, the number of processes transferred online or cost savings.

Cost benefit analysis

- Compare the costs of software, hardware, maintenance and training with benefits like cost savings, improved efficiency and increased job satisfaction.

Consult

Internally

The most successful intranets balance strategic process changes with staff-focused content and functionality that tackles the niggling aspects of work like form filling. By involving staff at all levels in your intranet you stand a better chance of producing an end product that staff will embrace and use willingly.

Professional advice

If you lack the skills in-house, contact a Business Link adviser (or equivalent if you are in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland), in the first instance, for help on how best to:

- outline your requirements - establish how much you can afford to pay
- scope the project
- advise on implementation
- provide training and software support.

Plan & test

Evaluate options

- Examine your needs will a DIY intranet be enough or do you need an off-the-shelf package or the bespoke approach of an advanced solution?
- Examine your current skills and infrastructure can you create a pilot intranet in-house? If not, what upgrades will you need?
- If you go for an off-the-shelf solution, do you want to lease or buy a package?
- How much after-sales support will you need?

Plan the roll-out phase

- Are you going to migrate content and processes to your intranet gradually or go for a 'big bang' approach?
- Look at training implications what will the cost be?
- Decide which staff will require training and allow time for them to adjust to the new system.

ACT

Implement the intranet

- Launch the intranet you will need to market it to staff and provide ongoing training and encouragement to achieve critical mass.
- In the transition phase, consider running old systems in tandem.
- Encourage staff involvement and feedback. This will help smooth implementation, as staff buy-in can make or break a technology project.

Evaluate

- Monitor and review the impact on your business and how this measures against your objectives.
- Conduct user testing to see how easy it is for people to find what they need on the intranet, and seek advice on how to improve it.
- Evaluate the impact after 6 months and 1 year. Have you achieved your objectives? Establish how you could improve things further.
- Continue to develop the intranet to deliver the best results, an intranet has to change with your business.

FURTHER HELP AND ADVICE

General information

<http://www.intranets.com> a web-based intranet hosting service, with lots of useful information.

<http://www.bcentral.co.uk> Microsoft's business portal, with help and advice on aspects of running a small business.

Simple DIY solutions

<http://www.datagold.com> Datagold offers indexing software to help manage access to intranet content.

<http://www.microsoft.com/frontpage/evaluation> a guide to Microsoft's web page creation program that also supports intranets.

Intermediate solutions

http://www.btignitesolutions.com/ebusiness/managed_intranets.htm a guide to BT's hosted intranet services.

<http://www.microsoft.com/sharepoint/> Microsoft's information sharing and management software with a free trial download.

<http://www.sun.com> supplier of software solutions including intranet package Solaris.

Advanced solutions

<http://www.ibm.com> IBM offers a comprehensive suite of interconnecting e-business applications under the banner WebSphere.

<http://www.novell.com> Novell, a provider of bespoke software solutions.

<http://www.plumtree.com> Plumtree, a software company offering a suite of intranet applications.

GENERAL BUSINESS ADVICE

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