

Intranets

An intranet is like a private Internet, sealed off from users outside your business. It is a company network which shares information using the same point-and-click approach as the World Wide Web.

An intranet does not have to be large. It might simply link three people working for the same business in three different locations.

An intranet can give you better access to information, better co-ordination of people and resources, better customer handling and more cost effective ways of working.

This briefing covers:

- What an intranet can do for you.
- How to make it happen.
- How to exploit the potential.

1 What can it do?

An intranet can allow information sharing that was previously impractical. You can publish any amount of information internally at zero cost, except for management time.

1.1 All the 'live', **day-to-day information** that is needed to make your business run is likely to end up on your intranet.

- For example, information used in marketing, or in human resource management. (See box, page 2.)

1.2 An intranet can improve the way you **handle customers**, both face to face and on the phone.

- It will allow employees to see the right prices and discounts for each customer on the screen, while they are talking to them.
- Every PC will give immediate access to new or changed information.
- Emails, instead of handwritten notes, mean fewer messages from customers go astray, are ignored or become garbled.

1.3 Intranets can transform the effectiveness of in-house **training**.

- An intranet is ideal for leading new employees through an induction sequence — what your products are, who you sell to, who everyone is and what people do — because it is so easy to update.
- You can use customised 'just-in-time' learning packages.

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- You can create your own training material today and train with it tomorrow.
- You can keep an audit trail to check that people are using your interactive material.
- You can make the business's knowledge bank available to every employee. This provides access to specialist know-how when an expert is unavailable.

What goes on your intranet?

Everything that is not highly confidential and that people will either need or want can justify a place on the intranet.

A People will need **front-line information** for dealing with customers. For example:

- Customer details.
- Stock levels and parts lists.
- Service and repair advice.
- Help, glossaries and FAQs.

B They will need access to day-to-day **operational information**. For example:

- Internal phone, fax and email directory.
- Diary and scheduling information.
- Company news.
- What's new on the intranet?

C Some will need **marketing information** and materials. For example:

- Copies of current brochures and ads.
- Research data, slides and presentations.
- Information about competitors.

D People will also need **information about their jobs**. For example:

- Background facts for new employees.
- Details of HR processes and procedures.
- Health and safety information.
- Company newsletter or magazine.
- Suggestions and feedback forum.

E It is usually the **non-business content** that prompts employees to explore your intranet for themselves. For example:

- TV and weather guides and horoscopes.
 - Employees' classified ads.
 - Details of colleagues' work and interests.
 - Transport timetables, details of taxi companies, and other local information.
- Making this non-essential information attractive encourages all your employees to pick up basic PC and Internet skills.

1.4 The intranet can hold **diaries** for individuals and groups. This makes it easier to schedule people and facilities, such as meeting rooms.

1.5 Your intranet can easily be extended outwards to become an **extranet**, giving privileged access to parts of your system to valued customers or suppliers.

- Allowing customers to view stock levels and even place orders via your extranet will improve their view of your service, and could save you money.

2 Potential efficiency gains

2.1 Transferring data is quick and easy.

- Information can be exchanged electronically rather than on paper.

2.2 People in **different locations** can work together more effectively.

- The same information can be available to several sites and to sales people on the road.

2.3 An intranet can improve **access to information** in your business.

- Data expertise and project work can be easily shared.
- Links to FAQs, glossaries and other back-up resources can minimise mistakes.
- More flexible working arrangements as information is available 24 hours a day.
- Intranet statistics can be tracked and analysed to reveal information needs and work patterns.

2.4 You can use your **existing IT system** better.

- An intranet's unified approach can link incompatible systems and databases.
- People who have not routinely used computers soon become familiar with PC and Internet ways of working.

2.5 The intranet gives you flexible **control** over what is seen and by whom.

- You can achieve guaranteed viewing of 'must' messages on the home page.
- You can have message bars on key pages, with company news in tickertape form.
- Important information can be given direct to each individual involved.
- Where necessary, access can be restricted by using password-protected pages.

- Email address lists allow quick, selective distribution.
- You can publish short-life information and set the system to remind you to delete it on a certain date.

2.6 An intranet may offer direct **cost savings** on printing and on out-of-hours staffing.

3 How to do it

If you have a typical small-business LAN (local area network), with Ethernet cabling, running on Internet protocol (IP), an intranet may require little additional investment.

3.1 You can **do it yourself** (see 4).

- If you bought everything new, you would need to budget about £3,000 for a server, a router and all the necessary software.
- Set-up costs would be much lower if you used a spare PC, running the Unix or Linux operating systems, which are less resource-hungry than Windows. If you took this route, an old Pentium 90 PC with 32Mb RAM should be enough for a simple intranet linking up to 200 users.

3.2 Get a **packaged solution** (see 5).

What can you get at?

A major benefit of an intranet is the ability to access all kinds of information from many different systems and sources.

A In theory, you can **access everything**.

- Documents created in Word, Excel, Access and PowerPoint do not need to be changed. As long as you have the software on your machine, you can click on the file and it will open up in its native format.

B The drawback is that these documents are **not searchable**.

To get the most out of the intranet, it should have everything indexed.

- Windows servers come with built-in indexing software at no extra cost. Otherwise, you can buy indexing software from about £300 upwards.
- Putting documents into the web language HTML makes free-text searching possible.

- You can rent one for around £200 to £500 a month from your telecoms supplier.
- You can buy a plug-and-play package that just plugs into your LAN. This costs about £1,000, plus £100 to £200 monthly service charges.

3.3 Pay an **agency** (see 6).

- This can cost anything from £500 upwards.

Whichever route you take, set clear business objectives. Make them SMART — specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-limited — so you can measure your progress.

4 Doing it yourself

4.1 If you can run an office network, there will be **no technical barriers** to stop you setting up your own intranet.

4.2 It is **easy** to make simple, informative pages. Modern web page software is no more difficult to use than Microsoft Word.

- For example, MS FrontPage uses wizards and offers templates for creating the pages most intranets will need. These include an office directory, a search page, a feedback form and product and marketing materials pages.

4.3 The obvious **costs** will be at the beginning — for hardware, software, employee time and consultancy work.

You may need consultants for some programming tasks. For example, creating a live feed from your customer database.

- The continuing costs may be less obvious.

5 A packaged solution

The 'solution in a box' usually has a Windows or Unix server, intranet and mail server software, a router, firewall and virus protection. It will also offer remote access facilities.

5.1 This is an all-in **turnkey solution**, so it is quick and easy to use.

- Making it work and keeping it going are someone else's problem.
- Performance and faults can be checked and sometimes rectified remotely.

5.2 A packaged solution usually gives you both **intranet and Internet** facilities, including external and internal email.

5.3 If you **lease** the package, this approach requires no capital investment.

5.4 Templated applications mean you can set up staff directories or training exercises with no technical knowledge.

- You just delete dummy names and details and replace them with real information.

6 Paying an agency

6.1 Choose carefully (see *Going online* and *Designing your website*).

- Insist on seeing examples of previous intranet work for a company of your size.

6.2 You will need to brief very carefully, so that your **business objectives** stay to the fore.

- Design guidelines are important. An intranet must reflect the company's style.

6.3 Get **quotes** and set limits on cost and time.

You may want to use an agency to create a style and image but take over future updating and development yourself.

7 Who looks after the intranet?

Be realistic about the time and resources needed to keep material on the intranet fresh.

If out-of-date or contradictory information appears in different places on the intranet, people will quickly lose confidence in it.

7.1 Make sure **all users** feel responsible for keeping pages that affect them up to date.

- Put the date created and date due for review on every page.
- Software can flag up which pages are due for review within, say, 30 days. Information owners get 30 days to update their pages or the material is deleted.

7.2 The people who run your **existing network** will be able to handle the technical aspects.

7.3 Content should come from **all parts of the business**.

7.4 Some **policing** of the content will be necessary as the intranet grows.

8 Making it work

8.1 Make things on your intranet **easy to find**.

- The user should never be more than three clicks away from the information.
- Include a search page. Web tools such as FrontPage can create search forms.

8.2 Keep the technical aspects of your intranet as **simple** as possible.

- This means people dialling in will be able to download pages without long delays.

8.3 Include a **What's New?** page.

- For example, this can offer links to each page that has changed and automatically show the first two lines of the text.

8.4 Content management software is valuable, especially as your intranet grows.

- New content can be sent automatically by email to the right people for sign-off.
- The software can keep track of who entered what information, when.
- Content management packages can be expensive — from about £300 up to many thousands of pounds.

9 Get everyone involved

The more employees who use and contribute to your intranet, the more successful it will be.

9.1 Train **all employees** to use the intranet.

- Show people how they will benefit from it.
- Basic training sessions only need to be an hour or so long, just to get people started.
- If you are using an agency, make brief training for all employees part of the deal.

9.2 Train **non-IT people** to use the authoring tools — at least one person in each office.

- Contributors can write in Word and use the 'save as web page' option (Word 97 onwards).

9.3 Identify **enthusiasts** or champions who will help others to use the intranet and come up with ideas for developing it further.

- Find an 'intranet volunteer' to provide news and updates and be the local contact point.

Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name, such as *Going online*.

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