

Intranets

An intranet is like a private Internet, sealed off from users outside your business. It shares information through web pages that only people in your company can see.

Even a basic intranet provides better access to information, better co-ordination of people and resources, improved customer handling and reduced costs.

This briefing covers:

- What an intranet can do for you.
- How to build an intranet.
- 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 virtually 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 HR management (see box, page 2).

1.2 Intranets can improve how you **deal with customers**.

- Every PC will give immediate access to new or changed information.
- You can use your intranet to log customer contacts. When a customer calls, whoever answers will be able to access the full history for that customer.

1.3 Intranets can help your 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 keep an audit trail to check that people are using your interactive material.
- You can make the business' general information available to every employee. This provides access to specialist know-how when an expert is unavailable.

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

1.5 Your intranet can become an **extranet**, giving access to customers or suppliers.

Directors' Briefing

a book in four pages

More than 160 briefings are now available.

If you need further information or help, ask the distributor of this briefing about the services available to you.

- An extranet is an intranet that selected external users can access, usually over the Internet.
- Allowing customers to view stock levels and 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.

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:

- 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.

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 procedures.
- Health and safety information.
- Company newsletter or magazine.
- Suggestions and feedback forum.

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

- Employees' classified ads.
- Details of colleagues' work and interests.
- Transport timetables and other local information.

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

- 'Workspaces' can be set up within your intranet. They allow several people to view and edit the same files and send each other feedback.

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.
- Information is available 24/7, making flexible working more practical.
- Intranet statistics can be analysed to reveal information about work patterns.

2.4 You can use **existing IT systems** efficiently.

- You can achieve guaranteed viewing of important documents (like new HR policies) by requiring employees to confirm through the intranet that they have read them.

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 out-of-hours staffing.

3 How to do it

If you have a typical small-business LAN (local area network), an intranet may require little extra investment.

3.1 You can **build an intranet from scratch** yourself (see 4).

- The technologies underlying an intranet are the same as those which power the web. This means you can build an intranet in the same way you build a website.
- You need a server to host the intranet. If

your business does not already have a server, this could cost less than £1,000.

3.2 Use an off-the-shelf **package** (see 5).

- Many software firms offer intranet software which you can install onto your server.
- The cost could be as little as a few hundred pounds, or even free if you use open source software. The more functions and users you have, the higher the cost.
- It is generally easier to buy a package than to start from scratch, but costs are higher and flexibility may be more limited.

3.3 Use a **hosted solution** (see 6).

- With a hosted solution, you pay a company to host your intranet on their servers.
- You log in to the system to view and edit content and create the structure.
- Hosted solutions are charged monthly. You will pay from £15 a month, depending on features and storage space.

3.4 Pay an **agency** (see 7).

- You can commission an agency to design and build your intranet from scratch.
- This can cost from £500 upwards.
- This is the best option if you need a highly customised intranet.

4 Building it from scratch

4.1 Setting up a simple intranet is similar to **building a website**. So if you run an office network and have web design expertise in-

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 You can **add anything** to your intranet.

- Documents created in Word, Excel, Access or 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 Be wary of **information overload**.

- Think carefully about the structure of your intranet.
- Information may not be searchable if it is in documents you have uploaded.

house, you should be able to create a basic intranet easily.

4.2 You can use **web design software** to build your intranet pages.

- For example, Adobe Dreamweaver or Microsoft Expression Web.

4.3 **Costs** may include buying hardware and software, plus the time of your employees.

- You may need help from a consultant to build more complex features, like creating a live feed from your customer database.
- Management costs can be significant, particularly if you need to keep a lot of information up-to-date.

5 Off the shelf packages

5.1 You can install an **off-the-shelf package** onto your own server.

Most off-the-shelf packages simplify the process of creating an intranet by including templates and a graphical interface which is easier to use.

5.2 Although an off-the-shelf package is **easier** to set up, you will still need some knowledge of how to install the package onto your server.

- If you lack the knowledge to do this, you can employ a consultant to set it up.

5.3 You may need to **budget** for technical support as well as for the software and hardware (if necessary).

6 Hosted solutions

6.1 With a **hosted solution**, your entire intranet resides on a server outside your business.

- The hosting company takes care of technical issues, security, support and maintenance.
- You log in to it to add pages, content and other elements to your intranet.

6.2 Many **web-hosting firms** offer hosted solutions.

Choose a reputable supplier — ask for recommendations and search the Internet for reviews before signing a contract.

- If a company already hosts your website, it may be best to use them for your intranet.

6.3 The main benefit of a hosted solution is that all the **technical issues** are dealt with by the hosting company.

- Look for a service agreement guaranteeing a fast response to technical problems.
- Remember that you may store customer details and confidential information on your intranet, so make sure the hosting firm is reliable and trustworthy.

6.4 Costs for a hosted solution are **predictable** and compare well with other options.

- You will probably pay a fixed monthly cost.
- Be wary of additional charges for support and data backups.
- You may be charged extra for additional users, or if usage exceeds set limits.

7 Using an agency

7.1 An **agency** can build an intranet to fit your precise requirements.

- Choose an agency carefully.
- Insist on seeing examples of previous intranet work for a company your size.

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

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

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

- You may want to bring in an agency to do the initial work, then take over future updating and development yourself.

8 Who looks after the intranet?

It is important to keep your intranet up-to-date, but be realistic about the resources required.

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

8.1 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.
- Intranet software can flag pages due for review. Be wary of using any features that delete old content automatically — this may alienate whoever wrote it.

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

- Encourage employees with writing skills to produce interesting material.

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

9 Making it work

9.1 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, so people can find what they want quickly. Most off-the-shelf packages and hosted solutions will include search as standard.

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

- Look for the solution which is easiest to use while providing what you need.

9.3 Look for a solution with good **content management** features.

- If it is easy to change content, your staff will be more likely to use the intranet.

10 Get everyone involved

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

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

- Demonstrate the benefits. Your staff must understand these.
- Basic training only needs to be an hour long to get people started.
- If you are using an agency, ask them to provide training as part of the deal.

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

- Most packages include a simple editing option similar to a word processor.

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

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

© BHP Information Solutions Ltd 2009. ISSN 1469-0470. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted without the written permission of the publisher. This publication is for general guidance only. The publisher, expert contributors and distributor disclaim all liability for any errors or omissions. Consult your local business support organisation or your professional adviser for help and advice.