

Intranet Design

Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, November 25, 2001

The best intranets of 2001 emphasize iterative design and standardized navigation, and feature collaboration tools and content management systems. On average, companies saw intranet use increase by 98% following their winning usability redesigns.

In the 1990s, corporate intranets were severely under funded and viewed more as a playground than as a serious business tool that could drive employee productivity. As a result, intranets were an utter mess in most companies - lacking interface design standards, unified information architecture, and task support for collaboration and other activities - and employees wasted hours every time they tried to find something. Employees did not gain the intranet's potential benefits of improved communication, collaboration, and awareness, because they were not very motivated to locate information on poorly designed and confusing intranet pages.

In 2001, intranets are generally not much better. But, we have seen a greater emphasis on increasing productivity and on making technology pay for itself. Most marketing-oriented websites have now abandoned "cool design" and embraced simplicity as a goal (though they don't always achieve it in practice). By comparison, intranets have been slower to improve. The main reasons are that intranets continue to be poorly managed and lack the budgets required for a redesign that would let them reach the entire company and properly accommodate its applications and mass of online content.

1.1 Design Process: Fast and Iterative

The good news is that it's possible to do a good job and pay attention to usability on a small budget. The bad news is that even our 10 winning intranets had resource constraints that prevented them from devoting enough attention to the full user-centered design process that we recommend. Shortcuts were frequent, and many of the steps we recommend (such as up-front field studies) were often skipped or abbreviated.

As the case studies show, iterative design offers clear benefits, as do even the shortest and cheapest usability activities. Many project teams showed great resourcefulness at getting user input in multiple phases of the design process, even when deadlines were tight or budgets were limited.

For example, ISSAIC conducted 10-minute user tests that let them get fast data from employees who couldn't leave their jobs for the traditional, hour-long studies. BC Hydro organized a scavenger hunt to get early feedback from employees. Several project teams also went the extra mile to collect data from employees at remote locations, who often have different needs than headquarter-based staff. As a simple example, many off-site employees stressed the importance of having a design that works over slow modem connections.

1.2 Design Trends: Simplification and Standardization

In our 2001 design annual, two important trends in the case studies stand out: Good intranet projects focused on simplification, and on creating unified navigation and user-interface design across multiple business units or departments.

To highlight the most important fields, designers cut forms that were a hassle in previous intranet versions. They simplified Search and featured it prominently. They reduced or moved features that didn't apply to most users to secondary screens. They also toned down graphics and aimed for clean design in the general look and feel.

1.3 Intranet as Collaboration and Communication Tool

We saw a greatly increased emphasis on the intranet as a collaboration tool that lets employees exchange information through discussion groups and other features. The intranets also emphasize communication by encouraging departments to post news and other information of interest to different groups.

In the past, people without specific technical skills often found it very difficult to post information on intranets. Several of our top 10 projects introduced easier ways to let employees contribute.

It's also been common practice in the past for employees or departments to place information on the intranet in unstructured ways, and thus nobody else could find it. Many of the profiled projects have introduced ways to integrate this valuable information into the intranet and make it easier to find.

1.4 Content Management

One of the key ways to make it easier for average employees to contribute to the intranet is to use a good content management system (CMS). Instead of having everybody design their own web pages, a CMS handles the mechanics of posting and lets people focus on their content and message.

In addition to making collaboration easier, these solutions also enforce design standards and thus enhance user-interface consistency and reduce confusion and training costs. If everyone has to design and build their own pages, you can be sure that the pages will be very different and confusing. Plus, they'll often be poorly designed, since most employees don't know much about designing for online interactive media.

1.5 98% Increased Use

It is very hard to assess the business value of the improved intranet designs described in this report. Most of the value probably comes from better and more informed decisions, which result from increased knowledge dissemination through the collaboration features and news areas. Productivity gains can also be huge from streamlined applications, such as the Cisco intranet's sales force tool. If every sales person can save a few minutes on every lead they enter into the system, then the annual savings will be in the multi-million-dollar range. Even so, the gains from better management of the sales process and more informed deals could easily be even bigger. Unfortunately, exact numbers and measurements to quantify these gains are not available, and would be somewhat costly to collect with any degree of accuracy.

We do have one data set that offers an estimate of improved usability: the usage statistics reported by several of the intranets. On average, use increased by 98% after redesigning the intranets to make them more usable. In other words, companies can approximately double the benefits from their intranet investment if they spend a small amount of that investment improving the design's usability.