

Intranet searching: changes in searching behaviour. A case study by Maxine Armitage

Introduction

This case study analyses searching behaviour on a government agency intranet site. The agency is medium sized and employs over 1,000, mostly clerical, staff.

Intranet search logs were used to look at the number of searches for core business information compared to the number of searches for administrative information, over a two-year period. 'Business information' was defined as information required for the employee to do the job they were employed to do. For example, searches for 'penalties' or 'inspections' were classed as business searches because the agency exists to regulate certain business operations. Searches for 'flexi time' and 'mobile phones' were classed as 'administrative' because they support generic administrative functions within the organisation.

The purpose of the study was to see if there were changes in searching behaviour as intranet content developed from predominantly administrative information to more business based information.

Searches for core business information compared to searches for administrative information

This metric was identified as a measure of the uptake by staff of the intranet as a business tool. My theory was that the development of the intranet from being a provider of mainly administrative information to being the provider of core business information would be reflected in the search logs.

For example, as the intranet developed, searches for terms like 'sick leave' would constitute an increasingly smaller percentage of searches, while terms such as 'Land Sales Act' would increase.

I consider this metric to be a measure of success of the intranet because I consider the primary function of the intranet as being to support business functions and increase productivity. An intranet which mainly delivers administrative information is very much underutilized.

Observations

Over the two-year period searcher behaviour remained very much the same with 60% of search terms being administrative in nature, relating to topics such as finance, staffing, leave, etc, and 30% relating to core business activities. (The intent of 10% of searches was unknown.)

Behaviour remained consistent even though significant new areas of core business information were added to the intranet over the period of the study.

What might it all mean?

Perception

The intranet was not perceived as a platform or portal for delivering business information therefore users don't look for this type of information. Perhaps there is low expectation and little experience of finding what is needed to *do their work* in a shared environment. After all, siloed network drives are the tradition. Perceptions may need to be altered through such strategies as marketing the intranet as a business tool and designing web pages which give business information more emphasis.

Content

Although business content was added to the intranet it shouldn't be assumed that the intranet would automatically become the only source of this information. It would be worth investigating the use of parallel information delivery mechanisms such as network folders and 'undernets'.

Maybe important business content is missing and is known by staff to be missing. An information audit of the organisation is one way of identifying business information which might have been overlooked in the initial information architecture design process.

Conclusions

- Don't assume that user behaviour automatically changes as the intranet evolves
- Search logs are effective tools for monitoring whether the intranet is being used for the purposes you assume it is
- The intranet needs to be promoted as a business tool
- The intranet content needs further analysis for relevance to business processes.

For questions or comments on this case study please contact Maxine Armitage – maxine@finditim.com.au