

If the board doesn't think I.T. infrastructure is important...



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Strategy: HR & Skills

Cut intranet costs by factoring in usability

by [Hazel Ward](#)

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Businesses could halve training costs of intranets if they paid more attention to usability, according to a leading user-interface design expert.

Jakob Nielsen, a director of the think-tank Nielsen Norman Group, said intranets were not being treated as a productivity tool at the design stage. This meant they were often over-complex and did not deliver what end-users needed to do their job.

Taking user experience into account at the design stage could have a dramatic effect, saving the implementation costs of redundant features and slashing training costs by up to half, Nielsen said. "If you make it simpler to user, you can cut training costs in half," he added.

"The past approach to systems development had failed. Intranet projects never deliver what people need and tend to end up with very costly retro-fits," he said.

"You typically have management saying 'These are our business needs', then the IT department goes away and builds something, which invariably fails," Nielsen said.

He explained that the cost of bad usability, through wasted time or effort, often ran into several millions of pounds for larger organisations. "You get a lot of top managers or sales people dialling-in from hotel rooms or from home that get frustrated to death by slow download speeds because of big images. The intranet is not being treated as a productivity tool," he said.

Chief information officers (CIOs) needed to look at usability issues before giving the go-ahead to intranet projects, Nielsen said. "CIOs need a back-to-basics focus on usability and productivity. They need to study users' real needs as opposed to their claimed needs and get user feedback before they waste the programmers' time."

IT executives should make usability issues a matter of policy, he added. "It's a matter of setting policies for how product development is done in a company otherwise it will always be a rush job which can end up being very expensive.

"It is the CIO's job to make IT projects more productive and cost effective," he said.

Common mistakes in intranet design

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- Not having a well-structured, co-ordinated intranet policy - just having an array of disparate services randomly available to users
- Not enforcing the intranet policy - each department has its own "little fiefdom" and there is no consistency of interface for the user, with a consequent proliferation of expenses
- Navigation around the site is limited to how the company is structured, ie by department, rather than having multiple structures, such as being able to search by job or task.

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