

GUIDE

The complete buyers guide to intranets



What goes on an intranet buyer's checklist?

An intranet has the power to transform how your organization communicates, connects, and innovates. Combining strategy, the right software, and compelling design, you can build a virtual space dedicated to nurturing your culture, internal brand, personable connections, sense of belonging, and purpose.

But to get to this stage requires a substantial investment of time, money, and effort. If you're at the beginning of your intranet journey, you may have already realized how much work is needed: not just to build the site but also to choose who to partner with.

Of course, this effort is rewarded by owning software that can connect your enterprise regardless of its size, locations, and dispersal of staff. However, for this to happen, you must arm yourself with as much information as possible when planning your intranet, choosing your vendor, and creating the vision of what your new software will look like. There are many intranet software vendors on the market - but they do not all offer the same product and supporting services. Each provider carries a particular set of strengths. As the person in charge

of leading the intranet project, it's your responsibility to find which one is the best fit for your organization.

Some will be more suited to SMEs, others to enterprise level. Some products will rely on SharePoint; others are independent packaged solutions. Some products will have simple, basic functionality; others provide richer features. Some vendors will be relatively new to the market, others will have a rich proven history.

This guide has been created to help you find this best fit. Questions will be posed to help you examine your own unique set of circumstances, requirements, and objectives. The end goal is for you to have a clear idea of what exactly it is that you need your prospective intranet to look like - and what you should look out for when choosing your vendor.

Where is your organization at right now?

A successful business has ways of connecting and communicating with their workforce. This helps to empower and inform the employee, increasing knowledge and productivity.

Most companies have some version of a communications platform. This can range from a redundant legacy intranet to a SharePoint site that acts as a file repository. There are many reasons why businesses choose to look at a new intranet solution. A common motivating factor is simply to improve on a platform that isn't fulfilling its requirements to enhance employee communication. This can be triggered by a variety of factors, including mergers and acquisitions, a new CEO, end of life for an existing product, or communications receiving poor feedback on recent employee surveys.

What is the intranet situation at your organization: is it non-existent? Are you merging two sites together? Replacing multiple










intranets acquired over time from acquisitions? Every organization has unique circumstances that require consideration and a coming together of comms, HR, and IT to work out what their current tech and tools are doing and how they could be improved. This "consideration stage" also allows you to identify the weak spots within your organization that a new intranet could fulfill. What areas in your business are underperforming?

Where are employees becoming unstuck or having to figure out workarounds to overcome a common workplace challenge? These are the areas to focus on and examine what features within an intranet product can help.



Is an intranet the right solution for your business?

While a new intranet system might look like the answer to your workplace challenges, you may need to prove its requirement to your stakeholders. To determine if it's the right move for your organization – and if the returns justify the cost – there are some key questions you need to ask.

-  Are our employees engaged and satisfied in their roles and with the organization overall?
-  Can our employees access the right information, when and where they need it?
-  Do our current tools or platforms meet our internal communication – and user – needs?
-  Do employees understand – and believe in – who we are, what we do, our mission and values?
-  Do we have a strong employer brand?
-  Do our employees know who their leaders are?
-  Are our employees as productive and efficient as they should be?
-  Are we delivering a positive customer experience?
-  Can we reach our employees and give them the information they need in an emergency or crisis situation?

If you find yourself answering 'no' to even one or two of the questions above, it's likely an intranet will more than deliver a return on investment and play a critical role in transforming how your organization operates.

However, perhaps the best way to determine if an intranet will have value is to ask those who stand to benefit.

Speaking with your staff can throw up business challenges or niggles you never even knew existed – and ones that a successful intranet could solve, to the long-term benefit of your organization. During this stage, ensure you also involve your C-suite. These are the people who could immediately improve your chances of approval for the new project.

Preparing for pushback

And it's at this stage that you'll start experiencing pushbacks from key figures in your business who don't (yet) perceive the value of an intranet. Prepare to receive objections along the lines of:



- We already have a DMS, Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Workday. Why would we need to add another tool into the mix?
- Can't we utilize the same CMS we're running our corporate website on for continuity?
- We've got SharePoint, isn't that an intranet?
- We don't have the budget.

These are just some of the objections that tend to come up when considering the need for an intranet. And they're valid considerations: an intranet is an investment for any organization, both in terms of cost and resource.

However, the returns and advantages of a successful intranet are significant – and extend much further than many often realize. The starting point is for the C-suite to believe in employee comms from a strategic perspective. When they do, they will start to see the business value of an intranet.



SharePoint or intranet package solution?

Leading on from the objections, you may need to decide whether to opt for a SharePoint-based intranet or an intranet packaged solution (otherwise known as an out-of-the-box product).

Both options offer certain advantages; it's up to your organization to ascertain which offers the most benefits to your unique business needs.

- SharePoint is a Document Management System (DMS) from Microsoft and part of the Microsoft 365 suite. While there is a cost associated with the licenses, some stakeholders may regard it as a cost-effective decision to use the SharePoint option as a business intranet. Despite already having these licenses, many businesses are unaware of the long-term support costs (time and effort), which can place an unnecessary burden on IT.
- It's available to use. Microsoft 365 is ubiquitous in the workplace and will be used by most desk-based employees. Many business leaders see this as a convenient solution that skips the process of shopping around for a new intranet.
- For many, especially IT, it is regarded as a type of intranet. Although limited in its flexible communication features and essentially a file depository, SharePoint can be used to direct employees to vital information, if little else.



However, many organizations prefer the rich features and flexibility of packaged intranet software products, which are built to respond to the complexities of a business and offer much quicker time to value.

- Out-of-box intranets have faster processes, less administrative burden, and much less reliance on IT, meaning the intranet team has more control and management, with lower overheads.
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- Design, branding, and creating customizable content are made a lot easier on intranet packaged solutions. SharePoint users often have difficulty with this type of functionality, which they find limited and onerous.
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- SharePoint is famously unwieldy, and while there is an argument for 'everyone has access to it,' this is only applicable to those who are desk-based. If you want to provide workers who are front-line, or even offline, with an exceptional user experience, an out-of-the-box provider that supports a customized mobile experience will be a much better option.
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- Navigation on out-of-the-box intranets makes it easy for employees to move across sites and access the information needed. Despite SharePoint's best efforts to join sites together, navigation can be flat and limited.
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- The services needed to successfully maintain a company intranet – the strategic support, the training, the lifetime support – are generally provided alongside an intranet packaged solution. However, these would all be added extra costs with a SharePoint Online product.
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- Agility to react to new features and technologies. Packaged intranet solutions, with no reliance on any underlying technologies, are less restrained in future decisions around new product features and directions This offers limited risk when underlying technology changes.

What is your intranet strategy?

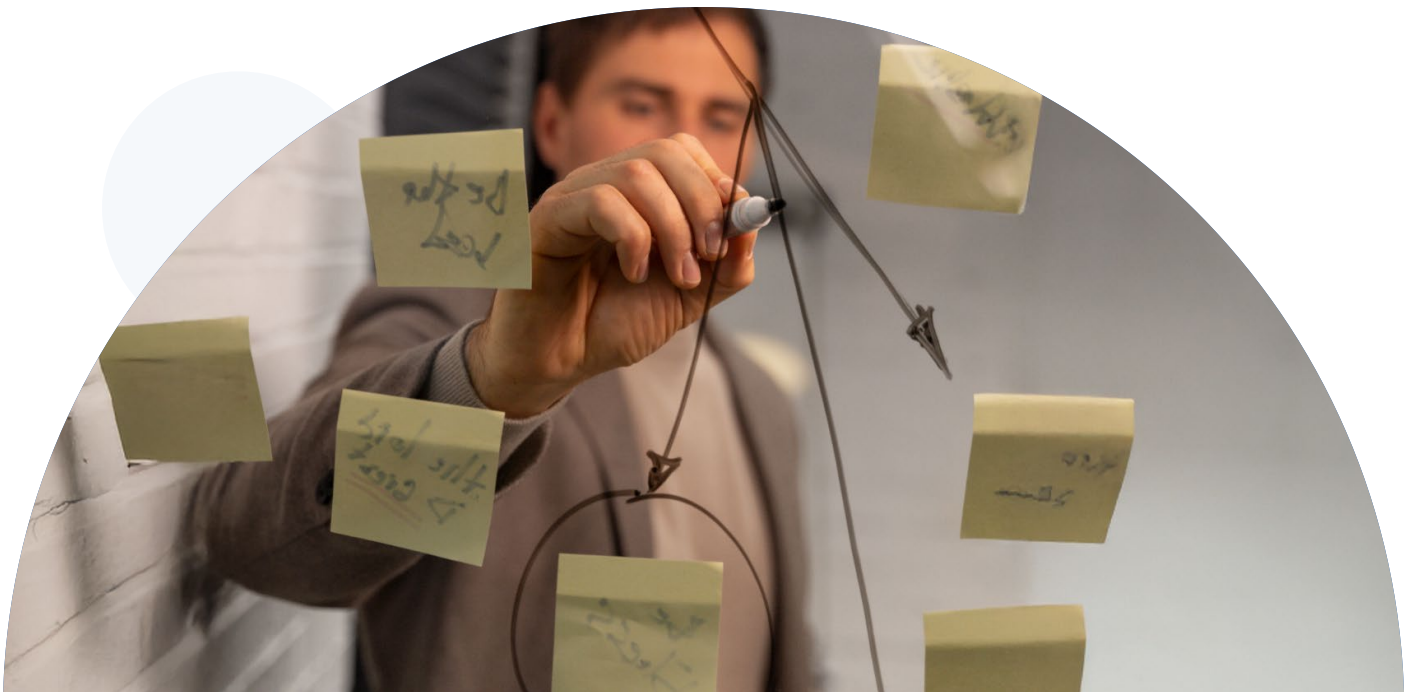
Your next priority is to determine how a new intranet aligns with your organizational goals. What is it that you want to achieve, and how will it sit within your digital workplace? This needs careful consideration.

This question is pivotal to your whole project. What is it that you want the new software to do? What gaps do you need it to fill? And have you separated the 'must-haves' from the 'nice-to-haves'?

It's important to remember that an intranet will fulfill only some digital workplace requirements, and there may be other tools within your organization that do the job better. Slack, for example, may be kept

for messaging between teams. Maybe you prefer Asana for task management. Your HR department will probably still want to hang on to their tried-and-tested tools.

Make a list of the essential tasks your intranet needs to provide and those that are non-essential. That way, you're not swayed by an impressive but irrelevant feature list when an intranet software provider pitches you.



Vendor credentials

The relationship you have with your intranet provider should ideally last a long time. As a result, your choice needs to consider many different aspects, not least, the provider's credentials.

Vetting your prospective provider is all about risk removal. This isn't a one-off purchase. It's a relationship that will grow as your business evolves: one that should offer stability, strategy, direction. As such, when you're looking around at intranet

providers, it's important to pay attention to the individual histories of each business. Is your preferred intranet company a new kid on the block, or do they have a long record of service, innovation, and experience with customers in a range of industries?

Industry recognition

The older the company, the more business know-how, experience, and industry recognition they will have garnered. Looking at your shortlist, you should be able to research the individual timelines of each one; the industry awards won, any big-name customers, and client testimonials, as well as independent analyst reviews. Each of these will give you some insight into the strength and benchmark of the business within their industry and provide credibility.

Stability

With the idea that your intranet will grow with your business, you need to ensure your provider has the stability it needs to sustain an excellent service throughout the lifetime of your intranet. Working out how stable your provider is requires you to monitor how it is funded, its trading history, its safety regarding debt, its liquidity, profitability, and efficiency.

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Employee needs

As your intranet should be designed for every worker in your organization, it needs to have an employee-first approach.

Every aspect, from features to usability, should be designed around the end-user. Does it add value to the employee experience? Is it easy to use? Is it enough to make people want to come back?

There are ways of promoting the intranet to staff, but the ultimate test is what features you include and how you make it business-critical and engaging to your people.

News and publishing

An intranet should be simple to use, and decentralized content management enables authoring to various people around the business. An intranet with high adoption rates will provide the tools that allow any author to easily generate useful and interesting content for the benefit of everyone through features like blogging, forums, timelines, and online teams.

Social tools

Successful intranets are generally platforms that have high interaction between distributed co-workers, beyond just those within the same team. To enable this, your intranet should have a host of rich, social features which employees will use intuitively. These can be something simple such as 'like and share' functions, @-mentioning, employee blogs, recognition programs, and profile badges. These features help remove traditional workplace barriers of familiarity, location, and time zones and help dispersed employees connect more easily.

Search

Search can make a profound difference in how your employees work, how your intranet functions, and the workload on departments. Good search capabilities can find the right results, save time and money, boost productivity, decrease frustration and reduce the burden on other departments. If you have poor Search on your intranet, you risk a decrease in the numbers of employees using the system, getting the right information, and being effective in their jobs.

Mobile support

If your employees are dispersed, non-desk-based, or customer-facing, there is an urgent need to have them as connected as their desk-based co-workers. Mobile apps are a great way of connecting them to their organization via their cell phone or handheld device, meaning that they can access all the information and knowledge needed to do their jobs efficiently.

Admin needs

As admin of the site, you will oversee a long list of things: giving permissions to other users, monitoring usage of the site, checking content, carrying out change, and continually improving the user experience.

To this end, you need ease of functionality and a set of features that define your particular governance of the site.

Content management

Internal communicators and intranet managers need software that removes technical barriers to both publishing and consuming content. This means that when they need to create, edit and find content, it's simple and easy to do. In order to get more user-generated and fresh content on your intranet, you need software that can offer these types of features and will help you and others to publish professional-looking content with zero technical knowledge.

Content distribution

The bigger your organization, the more critical it is to have a handle on the control and distribution of content. Connecting with offline workers, making sure only relevant information is sent to the right people (e.g., countries or departments), customizing content, and creating dynamic groups to target particular personas - this all requires an intranet that provides channel options and measurement.

Languages

Are your offices spread out across the globe? Are your employees inhibited by language barriers? Having English as the default language may work for many people, but it doesn't provide a great user experience for people whose first language isn't English. Communication platforms need to address this problem and enable users to read, write, and translate all content into their native language. This may include right to left writing systems like Arabic and Hebrew.

Analytics

Every action your users make on your intranet tells you something, and back-end analytics can help put those engagements into the right models. In turn, these build a bigger picture that can unearth valuable insights, connections, trends: all of which can support your organization in being more efficient, productive, and innovative.

Integrations

Make sure your intranet provider has a good record of providing built-in integrations to all your business platforms and applications (e.g., Microsoft 365, Google Workspace, SAP Concur, ServiceNow, etc.). Integration functionality allows a corporate intranet to become the 'go-to' location for staff, who can then access all their essential tools, applications, and platforms from one place, using a single login. If your shortlist of intranet providers does not have this functionality with third-party applications, it might be an indicator that they are not the right fit for your business.



IT

Most organizations want to implement an intranet without heavy reliance on IT. However, there will be mandatory requirements that need to be met.

CIOs or CTOs will require technical support from the vendor, who should be able to answer any questions or considerations around technical elements such as security, integration, authentication, or account provisioning. This type of specialist support will ensure everything comes together, reduce risk, and ensure your intranet performs the way it should.

Stack solution

Does your vendor connect natively with standard enterprise applications such as Microsoft 365, Google Workspace, ServiceNow, SAP Concur, or Workday?

Authentication

Does your vendor offer multiple authentication options, including single sign-on (e.g., ADFS, Okta, OneLogin)?

Security

The security of your intranet, and the data that resides within it, must be of utmost importance to your vendor. Confirm they use the latest technology and processes to ensure your intranet is secure.

Compliance

Ensure your vendor's cloud infrastructure is designed and managed according to security best practices, including ISO 27001, HIPAA, and a variety of IT security standards, including SOC1, SOC2, and SOC3.

API

When discussing packaged intranet solutions, there can be a perception from IT that the product is a closed shop offering little to no interoperability with other systems. Besides native integrations such as Microsoft 365 or Google Workspace, a robust API should be available, providing an additional level of agility that provides your IT Team flexibility for future options.

HR needs

When considering strategic objectives for your organization, technology plays an increasingly important role.

Connecting employees and ensuring they have the tools, resources, and information they require is a growing challenge. On top of this, businesses need to ensure that all these can work seamlessly and

efficiently together. With the support of a communication-focused intranet, many business-critical HR objectives can be addressed.

Crisis communication

Internal communicators are always looking at ways to engage their employees. But when an urgent message needs to be relayed, there is a real need to contact these hard-to-reach workers. When important news hits your organization, what communication channels have you got to rely on? Through your intranet, you can send crisis communications to multiple channels to ensure you reach every individual in your business.

Employee feedback

Many businesses overlook the simple need to ask their workforce for their thoughts and feedback. Those organizations that do not offer workers the opportunity to use their voice to put forward suggestions and opinions are more likely to experience employee dissatisfaction, staff churn, and low engagement rates. Implementing tools like a pulse survey can make a profound difference in measuring how employees value themselves within the organization, as well as allow businesses to learn from those on the floor.

Employee lifecycle management

HR may be looking for support in nurturing and developing their employees, from onboarding to offboarding. While there are specific HR tools that can provide this, it's a good idea to look at how the software can support these processes throughout the organization, from training and development to employee recognition.

Design

For any intranet manager, the concept of design can feel overwhelming. However, you don't need to have a college degree to create compelling, beautiful, engaging intranet designs that wow your users.

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Branding

How customizable is your intranet design? It's recommended that you are at least given the option to roll out internal branding throughout your software. Internal branding is about connecting employees with your external brand, showing them what that brand means to them, and ensuring they understand and really live the company mission. From this perspective, it's one of the most powerful design tools at your disposal, and a necessity for most organizations who prioritize their brand's identity.

Accessibility

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UX

The small things can make a huge accumulative difference. Maximizing efficiency and productivity are key objectives for any organization; UX design has a powerful role to play in supporting those goals. Choose intranet software that provides well-designed, user-focused tools that will streamline work-tasks, remove usability roadblocks, and empower staff to work the way they want.

Procurement

When you've chosen your vendor and reached an agreement, your procurement team will want to know the terms of the contract and the circumstances surrounding the contract.

Identify the key conditions of completing, or even breaking the contact. Make sure you are able to reduce as much liability as possible.

Reverse out options

Like with any significant purchase, if you decide that the product isn't right after all, you should be able to have a reverse-out option and retrieve your data. Even years down the line, you should make sure that if you do exit your contract, that all data belongs to you and will be returned to you safely and securely. Ensure this is an option provided by your intranet provider of choice, before you sign on the dotted line.

Multi-year discounts

Your vendor focuses on customer retention and should be making every effort to keep you happy. Make sure your loyalty is rewarded with discounts based on the length of your contract. This can be negotiated again when it comes to renewing your agreement.



Onboarding

A successful intranet will transform the way your organization connects, communicates, and innovates.

Successfully rolling out that degree of change often calls for strategic thinking, specialist knowledge, and previous experience. It also takes a considerable amount of time and resource to get your intranet up and running, which can be a

challenge for small in-house teams. Support during the planning and implementation phases, as well as ongoing input as you launch, can make a significant, measurable impact on the overall success of your intranet.

Deployment timescales

The question of how long an intranet will take is always high on the priority list for senior stakeholders. To plan towards the launch day where you'll be able to show off your new platform to your organization, you need to have a good idea of how long things will take. Your vendor should be able to work with you in committing to a date. Of course, the more complex a project, the longer the timescale. However, it is essential that both your project team and your intranet provider have a joint responsibility in meeting deadlines.

Strategic support

For software that can create such positive change within your organization, you will require support and advice from strategists who understand your unique set of challenges. Good intranet strategy can help you with planning and governance, structure, content, awareness, launch, and engagement to provide you with a roadmap for your intranet. Ensure your chosen vendor has experience of your business's size and vertical and can lend their expertise to ensure your intranet has the maximum chance of success.

Training

To roll out an intranet to the entire workforce, you need to be fully versed in your software's workings. A reputable vendor will be able to provide training to help upskill administrators, content authors, intranet champions, and your users to instill confidence, drive adoption, and ensure everyone can get the most out of their new platform.

Post-launch

Your relationship with your vendor doesn't finish on the day of your intranet launch.

As your organization grows, you need your platform to evolve with you, and a strong relationship between you and your vendor needs to be in place. It's essential to check there are several provisions in place to ensure that your intranet continues to develop post-launch.

Tech support

Bugs, glitches, extra add-ons – in order for you to manage the maintenance of an intranet, you need expert help on hand. When you're choosing your intranet provider, make sure they provide robust global tech support that covers a multitude of time zones with self-service options, and capacity to help you whenever an issue – big or small – arises.

Customer success

The success of your intranet will in no small part be down to the relationship between you and your vendor. Will your vendor provide you with an Account Manager? Is there the provision for continual reviews, developments, and insights from an expert customer success specialist? Will you be offered the chance to network with peers and learn from others at free customer meetups? A dedicated customer success manager can help you achieve your objectives and is an essential primary contact for your organization.

Update frequency

As an essential part of your digital workplace, your intranet should be subject to regular updates. These take place to improve performance, fix bugs, and add new features. A sign of a good vendor is one that makes sure it provides regular, documented releases that don't cause downtime. This shows innovation and confidence that it's adapting to new technologies and committed to software that runs smoothly.

User community

Many vendors provide a third space where customers go to share stories and get tips from other users of the same software. This is a great place to expand your knowledge and be inspired by other companies and how they use their intranets.

Extra features

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Extranet

An extranet can drive engagement with your business partnerships and build connections with your supply chain, your volunteers, your board members, or your contractors. Whether this is a pressing requirement or something to plan later, ensuring your vendor can provide an extranet can be a very convenient, attractive additional feature.

Customer community

Creating a community for your customers is an effective method of improving their experience and driving loyalty and trust to your products or services. With the onus of your intranet build out of the way, creating this type of space should be given strong consideration as a way of strengthening your brand and customer relationships.



Conclusion

Great software alone is not enough to guarantee success. In a crowded marketplace, you may also find that many intranet solutions seem pretty similar in terms of their core features and functionality.

To deliver value, you need to go beyond flicking the 'on' switch: you need a strategic approach and the right support to deliver on your vision.

When you are choosing to partner with a vendor, it's important to remember that they play a vital role in ensuring the success of your project, not only during delivery and launch but for the lifetime of your platform.

Executed and managed correctly, an intranet can transform how your business connects, communicates, and informs. It will encourage higher levels of employee engagement and create bottom-line benefits that span everything from increased retention to higher profitability.

But like any major business project, it's also a process that can present challenges or hurdles along the way.

Creating and following a structured plan and enlisting the support of dedicated specialists can help to manage that journey, ensuring you see the results you're looking for. This guide covers the areas you need to be looking out for in the software you examine – a checklist to ensure your intranet fulfills every requirement unique to your business.

If you are considering a new intranet project for your organization, why not speak to a member of our team to understand how Interact can partner with you to deliver a tailored intranet project that will meet your needs?

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