

# Searching: the key to successful knowledge management

Most civil engineering organisations rely on intranets for corporate knowledge management, but finding what you need is not always easy. **Nicky Iddon**, group knowledge manager of Halcrow, reports on the dramatic improvements made possible with a new search system.

Over the last few years, the author's firm Halcrow—an international engineering consultancy—has grown both organically and through acquisition. It now has some 7600 employees worldwide and a global network of over 70 offices.

As a result the firm relies more than ever on its information technology (IT) systems to deliver projects and key business processes. The systems help the business tackle the corporate challenges of managing intellectual property and creating an environment to motivate and encourage collaboration among its global workforce.

At the heart of the knowledge-management process is Halnet, the company's global intranet. With several thousand pages and links to over 120 000 documents, the ability to share, re-use and distill knowledge across employees is critical to the smooth running of the business.

## New search system needed

The intranet includes a wealth of core business information, from company policies and background to detailed design standards and

project- and business-development information. The growing volume of data and the requirement for employees to find exactly what they need, and quickly, meant the original search system no longer delivered the accuracy needed.

To reduce the time taken by employees to find the right documents, it was clear the company's knowledge-management team would need to research new ways of classifying and retrieving files amid a growing and increasingly complex knowledge base.

The first step was to engage with colleagues. Representatives of business groups including water, transport and maritime stated they needed a more effective search solution on the corporate intranet. The challenge was to find a knowledge-management solution to retrieve information quickly and easily from the different repositories within the intranet, but without exceeding a relatively modest budget.

Market research indicated that a system that could accurately rank and provide a relevant weighting when undertaking Halnet searches would unlock the intranet's potential and save employees a considerable amount of time.

## Initial thematic analysis

UK information management solutions company Active Navigation<sup>1</sup> was identified as the best match after reviewing a number of alternative data-management and search systems. The company had a solution that was a perfect fit with Halcrow's existing IT architecture and also enabled the company to match the user inter-

face to its requirements.

Initially, Active Navigation was used to run a 'thematic analysis' process to identify the precise nature of the documents on the intranet. The system uses linguistic and statistical analysis of the data in documents to extract key themes and to produce relevant rankings.

It also performs a contextual analysis of the content of documents, which ensures that the themes have meaning, rather than just being words that exist close together. Ultimately, the new system provides a more accurate list of results.

Following initial pilots, the new search system was introduced to the entire intranet.

## Search times reduced 40%

In terms of improving employees' access to corporate information, the results of the new search system have been dramatic. Since the system was introduced globally, a benchmark exercise has shown a 40% reduction in the time it takes for employees to find what they need.

Further improvement in this figure is expected as the business works to refine intranet content. In the future Halcrow aims to review its document files and to remove duplicates and redundant information. This will have the added benefit of reducing storage costs.

The introduction of the new search system has been an important piece in our knowledge-management jigsaw. Halcrow now has a much better way to manage its information that adds value to its business.

Harnessing 'cleverness' within the organisation through introducing content management and collaboration tools is just one of the initiatives being used to promote the flow of information and knowledge throughout the business.

## Reference

1. See <http://www.activenavigation.com> (last accessed June 2008).

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT

Garry Whitaker  
 TEL +44 1793 812479  
 EMAIL whitakerga@halcrow.com



Halcrow staff can now find information on the company's intranet 40% quicker thanks to installation of a new data-management and search system

The introduction of the new search system has been an important piece in our knowledge-management jigsaw