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# Structuring Intranet Discovery & Design Research

**Summary:** Commonwealth Care Alliance began its intranet redesign with discovery research that continued into detailed design and development. Involving employees early generated excitement and contributed to the new intranet's success.

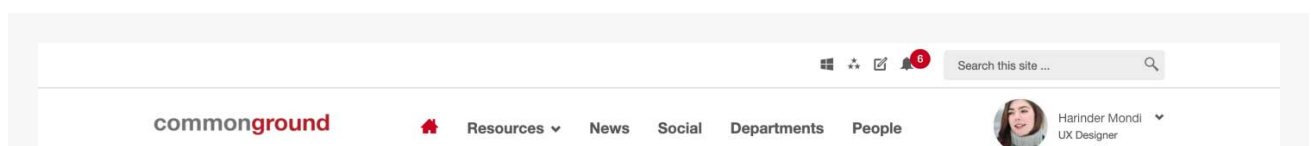
By [Anna Kaley](#) on September 5, 2021

Topics: [Intranets](#)


Commonwealth Care Alliance (CCA) is a nonprofit healthcare organization. Its recently redesigned intranet, **CommonGround**, is available any time and from any device to its 1,400 employees who provide patient care.

## Discovery Research Before the Intranet's Redesign


Deciding [where to start](#) with an [intranet redesign](#) can be daunting. The team at Commonwealth Care Alliance knew that [discovery research](#) was needed to understand the problems employees faced and address them in the new intranet. The team used a combination of methods to collect employee feedback, observe behaviors, and review quantitative data.




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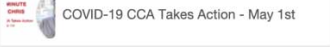
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Wednesday	59 °F	47 °F
Thursday	72 °F	46 °F
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Saturday	61 °F	50 °F
Sunday	57 °F	46 °F
Monday	58 °F	43 °F



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CommonGround 2.0 is best experienced on [Google Chrome](#).



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CCA's new intranet supports employees' top tasks including finding a colleague,

*referencing the interactive organizational chart, and accessing clinical tools and documents.*

The team divided its intranet discovery research into several steps and [used multiple methods](#) to understand needs from different perspectives. This approach increased confidence in design and prioritization decisions. For intranet projects under constrained timelines, even using only 2-3 methods is far better than conducting no discovery research at all. These were the research methods used by the CCA team:

1. **Checking server logs and usage stats:** The team used this information to prioritize the migration of the content, resources, and tools employees used most and also generally assess the importance of existing sites and files.
2. **[Contextual inquiry](#):** The team wanted to learn how the nearly 1,000 clinical employees in different roles used the intranet in the clinic, field, and remotely. It conducted a series of [contextual inquiries](#) to observe the daily work of employees. By narrowing in on select [processes and tasks](#), the team learned that one of biggest challenges for field-based employees was connecting to VPN to access documents and clinical tools. This step heavily interfered with their productivity and caused unnecessary delays. To solve this critical issue, the team chose a cloud-based intranet solution that didn't require VPN.
3. **[Heuristic evaluations](#):** To assess for usability flaws, the team conducted a [heuristic evaluation](#) on the existing intranet and uncovered three major issues:
  - An unstructured site map caused navigation issues and decreased findability.
  - Lack of search functionality made it difficult to find resources and pages.
  - A complicated governance model prevented site owners from updating content without administrator support.

These findings prompted further investigation before ideating solutions for the new intranet.

4. **Employee interviews:** To understand employee preferences, attitudes, and

opinions, the team conducted 14 in-person [employee interviews](#).

Interviewees' intranet usage ranged from 3 times a week to daily. The findings from the interviews helped the team identify and clarify several needs and [pain points](#). This data also informed the [visual design](#) and [content strategy](#) for the new intranet.

5. **Surveys:** To collect insights from a large pool of employees, the intranet team [surveyed](#) 152 people from different departments:

- 24% were from clinical departments, 13% were from the call center, and 11% were from the IT department.
- 80% of the participants worked for CCA for over a year.
- 66% of the participants used the intranet on daily basis.

Survey participants shared that the intranet:

- was difficult to navigate
- made it impossible to find what they were looking for
- did not support the task of finding other team members

The intranet team used these findings to support design decisions and prioritize project resources.

6. **Focus groups:** In addition to the interviews and surveys, the intranet team worked with a third-party research firm to conduct five [focus groups](#). Each focus group consisted of eight employees, [screened](#) for a mix of roles, levels, and tenures at CCA. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand what employees wanted from the new intranet. The knowledge gleaned from the focus groups helped the team secure leadership buy-in, support, and resources. The intranet-discovery research resulted in a concrete plan to help the organization envision and ideate around future outcomes.

## Research and Testing During Design and Development

The discovery research established that one of the primary goals of the new intranet should be to empower site owners to control their own content so they could maintain, update, and retire it when needed. To accomplish this goal, the team interviewed stakeholders and content owners and held cocreation sessions. This process helped content owners learn how to use the content-management system to begin owning their content.

The intranet team also leveraged these sessions to influence how content looked in the design. As content owners shared ideas, designers consulted on the best layouts and design approaches to support the message. This collaboration optimized the user experience for all employees.

## Design Evaluation & Validation

Continued research and testing are critical components of good intranet design. The CCA team conducted several types of [formative research](#) during the design phase:

1. **Comparative analysis:** The team conducted a comparative analysis on four different intranets to understand industry standards, branding strategies, landing-page designs, and social features. The team also studied previous [Intranet Design Annual winners](#) to conceptualize the preliminary [information architecture](#). The analysis revealed five navigational categories that organizations frequently used, and the team was inspired by seeing others' design approaches.
2. **Card sorting:** The information from the comparative analysis and stakeholder interviews revealed 26 items that the team believed belonged in the new intranet's navigation. The team conducted an online [open card sort](#) to find the best way to categorize them. The results suggested that the items could be categorized into six groups, and they implemented the navigational structure accordingly.
3. **Tree testing:** To test the [information architecture \[RB5\]](#) (IA) that emerged from the card sort, the team used [tree testing](#).

A major finding was that the preliminary IA was misleading and hard to navigate.

The team reworked the IA and recruited more employees to test the subsequent iterations. Based on the studies, the design team restructured the site map and created a department menu, which clearly listed all departments and team sites. This research-based, iterative approach increased team's confidence in its final design solution.

4. **Beta testing:** A month before launch, the intranet team conducted beta testing with 90 randomly selected employees. A few of the beta participants were also interviewed after the beta testing concluded. This phase revealed that the search function was not working as expected and had a few bugs across different browsers. The engineering team solved these issues prior to fully launching the new intranet.
5. **Usability testing:** After the new intranet launched, the team hosted a scavenger hunt where participants were asked to find specific items (documents, pages, people, etc.) on the intranet. This unmoderated activity was used as a pseudo-usability test. The team analyzed the participants' behavior to test the information architecture. The results indicated that the new intranet was efficient and easy to for employees to use.

## Conclusion

When the new intranet launched, employees were excited. Because of their involvement, many already saw some of the intranet's new capabilities and were eager to try more. Employees and content managers felt a sense of ownership and investment in the new intranet's success.

To explore the full case study and review the library of screenshots depicting Commonwealth Care Alliance's winning design details, see our [2021 Intranet Design Annual](#).

To hear more from the [winners from Commonwealth Care Alliance](#), join us at our new [Intranet and Employee Experience Symposium 2-day virtual event](#).

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