

# What Executives Need to Know for a Successful Web Project— Part Two

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*Bicycle mechanics don't build airplanes anymore. Successful Web sites aren't built by dilettantes.*

In part one of this paper I discussed two things critical for project success: setting business objectives and measuring the success of those objectives. In part two, I will discuss the staff and skill sets needed for a Web project and how those projects are typically organized.

In addition to goals and measurement, executives should understand the skills and disciplines involved and something about the project methodology. Web sites are very complex systems. You must be sure the right people are assigned to the right jobs and with the appropriate level of authority. This will help everyone to understand who should be making which decisions and when.

## Define Skills and Responsibilities

Web sites operate like shopping malls. In a shopping mall you have a number of independent stores that have come together in one place. Malls work because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>1</sup> The mall owner has set rules about signs and merchandising and store operations by which the stores must abide. In general, the mall owner determines the appropriate mix of stores and where they will go. The mall's purpose is to create an environment that will attract the intended audience. There is a part-to-whole relationship that is carefully managed by the mall owner. The customer is as likely to go to the mall as to the Sears store, which is in the mall. All stores, not just Sears, benefit from the customers attracted to the mall.

The same is true of Web sites and their components, which might include a mix of online services, e-commerce applications, information dissemination, marketing activities, etc. The difficult part is getting the part-to-whole relationships right.

What has this got to do with creating a Web site team? Internally, some companies tend to see the Web as a communication channel, like a print catalog or e-mail or the telephone. Other companies tend to see the Web site as a product, as the customer does. If it is seen as a channel, then a distribution of responsibility and decision-making is natural. If the Web is seen as a product, centralized responsibility and decision making is usual. How the Web site is viewed internally will significantly affect how decision-making authority is assigned, and that, in turn, will affect the Web site and the Web team. If responsibility for the Web site is distributed, then very careful management will be required to balance those part-to-whole relationships of the site. The tendency is for the

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<sup>1</sup> One could also use a state vs. federalist metaphor. Part-to-whole relationships and the issues that go with them are fundamental to our culture.

separate business units to look to their own needs and to lose sight of the bigger picture, often described as “siloeing.” If the Web site is centralized, balance is easier to achieve, but management’s role shifts to managing the company’s internal relationships. Centralized Web operations can appear autocratic and unresponsive to the needs of other departments.

Regardless of how your organization will structure decision making, you will need to determine who is responsible for deciding various levels of technical, business, and design issues, either directly or by delegation. There should always be group input, but decision-making should not be by committee. Rather, create a defined “decision tree” where responsibility and authority are clearly delineated. Ongoing responsibility for every page, application, and project must be clearly assigned. The people responsible for the decisions should also be held responsible for the performance.

Several areas of expertise go into a Web project. Depending on the company’s resources, the same person may provide more than one of these functions:

*Business Developer or Analyst:* If decision-making is centralized, the Business Developer determines the business goals and needs for the project. The Developer (sometimes called a Producer) determines the overall functionality and content required to meet the business objectives. If decision-making is distributed, a Business Analyst works with the business units to develop and articulate the business goals and needs for the project. The Analyst represents the needs of the organization and balances those needs against the realities of the implementation budget and timeline.

*Information Architect:* Balances the needs of the organization and the needs of the user. Determines the overall content and functionality of the site. Specifies the organization, navigation, labeling, and searching systems. Determines the site taxonomy. Responsible for providing an expandable site structure that can grow and change over time.

*Interaction Designer/Usability Engineer:* Is concerned with the interaction design, the tasks and processes that users encounter at the interface level. Looks at the ability of the user to perform tasks such as filling out a form, finding information, etc. Sometimes has overall responsibility for the design of the customer experience, which includes information architecture, graphic design, etc. The focus is on helping users to easily achieve goals and complete tasks.

*Software Developer:* Helps us to understand what is and isn’t reasonably possible from the technology perspective. Their input often modifies the functionality to take advantage of technical efficiencies.

*HTML Developer:* Is responsible for setting code standards and structure of the Web site and for making it maintainable. Determines when and where to use *include* files, how to code navigation elements, how to implement styles, etc.

*Graphic Designer:* Is traditionally responsible for the visual communication, such as the design of the corporate logo or the color palette of the site. Graphic designers are

primarily responsible for the site's look and feel. Their work is highly dependent on the requirements of the information architect and usability engineer.

*Writer/Editor:* Responsible for providing the basic content copy of the site. Are concerned that copy is well written, concise, and correct, and in a form that is maximized for the Web media. The writer may be a marketer or copywriter with training in writing for the Web.

*Project Manager:* Obtains and manages the internal and external resources required to complete the project. Responsible for meeting the timetables and budgets and creates the project documentation.

These specialties are the core skills of your project team. Perhaps because Web sites are so accessible, there is often the conception that they are also easy to create. Wrong. Web sites are complex systems. The average person has neither the training nor experience to make informed judgments about Web projects. In today's world, it takes both to achieve results. In other words, be sure your Web team members have the necessary capabilities. Bicycle mechanics don't build airplanes anymore. Successful Web sites aren't built by dilettantes.

*"We are continually amazed by the scale of business blunders caused by the false assumption that anybody can do this work." – Lou Rosenfeld & Peter Morville, Information Architecture.*

In part one of this article, I discussed the continuous improvement approach for Web projects. In effect, the project never ends. The skill sets listed above will be needed on an ongoing basis.

### **Standard Model for a Web Development Project**

The following six steps are typical of a Web project. The degree to which each is involved will depend on the type of project, project size, and budget. While most executives are not directly engaged on projects at this level, they should be broadly aware of what is involved. You will see how setting objectives and creating a responsibility tree fit into the project life cycle and where the various skills and competencies come into play.

#### *1. Requirements Analysis*

- Articulate the strategic goals for the project from the business perspective.
- Determine the tactical goals for the project from the perspective of the business.
- Perform a competitive analysis and compare with business goals.
- Determine target audiences for the site or application (which may not be the same as for the business as a whole). Evaluate the attributes for each group. Prioritize groups.

- Evaluate existing versions of the site or application, including customer behaviors. This is to identify both strengths and weaknesses and their causes. Relies heavily on existing site data and user interviews/surveys.
- Perform baseline user interviews and surveys with users (for each audience group). These are also used to identify areas for further research into functionality and usability of the new site or application.
- Determine the user needs and target usability requirements based on research.
- Determine the tactical goals for the Web site from the perspective of the user.
- Determine the methods and metrics to measure the project.
- Determine who is responsible for deciding various levels of technical, business, and design issues.

## 2. *Conceptual Design*

- Conduct a content inventory and identify what content is to be used on the site or in the application.
- Sketch out the design and architecture at an abstract level based on the full scope of the requirements analysis.
- Conduct a task analysis to find critical features for new site.
- Build user scenarios with internal business units, and evaluate those scenarios using existing user/site data.
- Flowchart initial information architecture of the site or application.
- Create the functionality requirements for search functions, if any.
- Repeat steps 1 and 2 until the requirements and conceptual architecture are done.

## 3. *Prototypes*

- Create the detailed site architecture and the navigation system, both global and local.
- Create the server folder structure and naming conventions.
- Create standard page structure. For example, where will the navigation header go? will there be one side bar or two?
- Create the labeling system and taxonomies, including conventions for titles.
- Create the visual representations (wire frames) of the site. These do not include the graphics, colors, or other artistic elements, just layout and placeholders.

- Create the search interface, if any.
- Evaluate the prototype usability through focus groups, user tests, and heuristic evaluations.
- Use the evaluation results to create more mockups and improve the prototypes.
- Repeat this process until the design and usability goals are met.

#### 4. *Mockups*

- Determine page-coding structure (for efficient maintenance, for example).
- Create major graphics and prototype the look and feel of the site for key page types.
- Determine style guides for major features and widgets of the site. (What will the submit buttons look like?)
- Determine final labeling and design.
- Evaluate usability through testing of functional prototype pages.
- Use the evaluation results to improve the product.
- Repeat this process until the design and usability goals are met.

#### 5. *Production*

- Create programming for Web applications.
- Create Web application templates.
- Create individual HTML pages.
- Check browser compatibility and download times.
- Check content: spelling, grammar, mechanics; presence of all critical information; correctly labeled titles, headers, and navigation.
- Check layout and graphics: image quality, text layout, alignment of elements, appropriate colors and color placement.
- Evaluate functionality and continuity through testing, quality assurance, usability testing, and field testing.
- Use the evaluation results to improve the product.
- Repeat this process until the design and usability goals are met.

## 6. *Launch and Maintenance*

- Launch the Web site.
- Evaluate user feedback and activity based on metrics determined in process 1.
- Conduct a “results” meeting with business units to evaluate post launch conditions.
- Based on user feedback, create new requirements and begin the consideration of design improvements.
- Repeat this process from step one.

Executives can lay the groundwork for their staff to succeed by insuring that the project’s business goals and objectives are defined and that there is a plan to track and measure the results. In addition to goals and measurement, executives should understand the skills and disciplines involved and the project methodology. If you've laid a sound foundation of identifying achievable business goals, setting up the right measurements framework, and tightly aligning those objectives with the design methodology and design team skills, then your staff has a solid chance of achieving their goals.

### **Resources**

The following will tell you more about Web objectives, analytics, Web projects, and project skill sets:

[\*Call to Action: Secret Formulas To Improve Online Results\*](#), Bryan Eisenberg, Jeffery Eisenberg, Future Now, Inc., 2005. ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

[\*Collaborative Web Development: Strategies and Best Practices for Web Teams\*](#), Jessica Burdman, 1999. ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

[\*Don't Make Me Think\*](#), Steve Krug, 2005. ([www.sensible.com/](http://www.sensible.com/))

[\*Ease of Use Web Design Guidelines\*](#): IBM’s project standards based on their extensive research.. ([www-306.ibm.com/ibm/easy/eou\\_ext.nsf/publish/572](http://www-306.ibm.com/ibm/easy/eou_ext.nsf/publish/572))

[\*Information Architecture for the World Wide Web\*](#), 2nd Edition, Lou Rosenfield, Peter Morville, 2002. ([www.oreilly.com/catalog/infotecture2](http://www.oreilly.com/catalog/infotecture2))

[\*Real Web Project Management: Case Studies and Best Practices from the Trenches\*](#), Thomas J. Shelford, Gregory A. Remillard, 2002. ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

[\*Web Analytics Demystified\*](#), Eric T. Peterson, 2004. ([www.webanalyticedemystified.com/](http://www.webanalyticedemystified.com/))

[\*Web Metrics: Proven Methods of Measuring Web Site Success\*](#), Jim Sterne, 2002. ([targeting.com/books.html](http://targeting.com/books.html))

*Web Project Management: Delivering Successful Commercial Web Sites*, Ashley Friedlein, 2000. ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

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