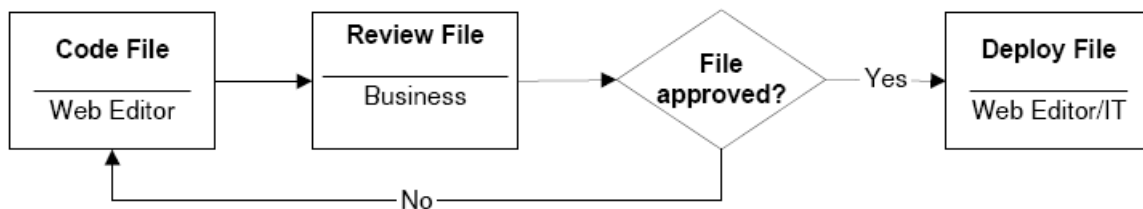


Understanding the Complete Web Lifecycle

By Lisa Welchman

The amount of time that Web production groups spend **not** producing is high. A lot of production personnel's time is spent running interference or solving problems that have occurred as a result of a lack of standardized workflow in the pre and post-production business and IT environments. This article defines the full Web workflow and explains why it is necessary for Web teams to help create standardized workflow in the business and IT partner groups.

In my consulting practice, I am often asked to help document a Web organization's publishing workflow. In these cases, my goals are to pinpoint the problem areas and to help the Web organization run more efficiently. Invariably, my first step is to ask the client if they already have something documented. In smaller organizations, the answer is frequently no. In larger organizations, there is usually at least one person in the Web workgroup who has a fascination with such workflow tools as Visio™ and who has created a basic workflow diagram. The first box in the diagram usually contains a description like "edit file" or "code file." The workflow then goes through some twists and turns, something like this:

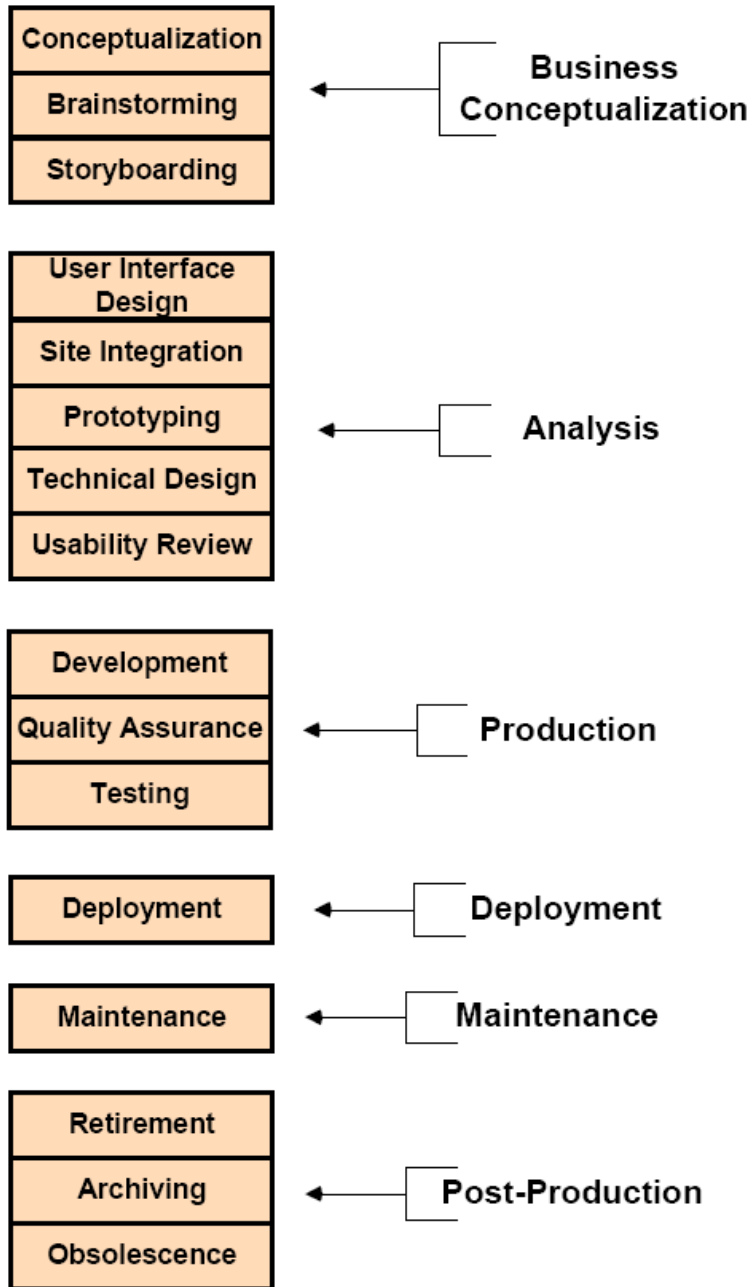


This is a very simplified workflow but I usually see something along these lines (or some slightly more in-depth variation of it). This is a linear, controlled, simple process. Unfortunately, it accounts for only about 1/4 of a business' Web publishing workflow. Before a business can document, analyze and effect positive changes in its Web publishing workflow, the business needs to understand the full scope of that workflow.

There is a **reason** why a lot of emphasis is placed on the production segment of Web publishing workflow. Production puts out a tangible, measurable product: Web pages and applications. Businesses like measurable results. When production is complete, important corporate figures and the end user can actually access and use all of the work that has been created. That's a significant milestone for a business.

But, if a Web team defines their publishing workflow this narrowly, they will be missing most of the problem areas. Think about it. The actual coding of the files isn't the problem. Deploying the files isn't usually that problematic either. It's what happens (or doesn't happen) before and after these events that usually causes all of the fires and stress.

Take a look at this diagram:



This diagram represents a full Web publishing lifecycle.

As you can see, the actual **production** of Web content and applications is a very small portion of what is going on in the total Web workflow. Frequently, it is the production team who is coming to me asking for assistance in “fixing” their workflow. But, it’s usually not the Web production team processes that need fixing. There are not too many ways to accomplish the actual development of content and applications—you code, you test, you code, you test until it is done.

It is the processes that these coding teams connect with which are problematic: processes that the production team shares with the business content creators or processes that the production team shares

with the IT folks who manage the Web server. Usually, the problem is that the Web production and IT expertise has entered into the publishing process too late.

If you look at the diagram above, you can see how much trouble a group of business folks can get into prior to the actual creation of the files—particularly if they are taking all of these preproduction steps on their own with no Web technical or Web design expertise. Yet this type of uninformed development happens so frequently that it is the norm.

The lack of Web expertise in pre-production has a tendency to create a multitude of problems that have to be worked out where? Right. They have to get worked out in production. Ill thought out business applications and systems integration issues are frequently the types of large objects that get swept under the carpet. The production team is then tasked with smoothing it all out at the eleventh hour. As the eleventh hour approaches, the only types of fixes that are available are quick and non-strategic. This is how the production team becomes a team of Web site fire fighters.

Now, let's take a look at the other side of production. Your file is deployed and on the server. It's a great success. Suddenly, a businessperson wants to make a change to that file. Do you have processes and workflows in place so that the business can have their changes implemented quickly and without distress to the Web site? Do you know how to find all the files and applications that may be affected by this change? You do if you have a viable Web maintenance strategy.

Defining a maintenance strategy and a workflow prior to deployment is crucial. Maintenance needs to be taken into account during the development of the content and/or application. For example, if you know that you are creating content that needs to be changed or updated daily, you better have an easy way of making that change —preferably a change the content owner (usually a businessperson) can make himself or herself. You have to think about this as you are designing and coding the application, not after you've already placed it on the Web server.

OK, so pretend you've got a nice, easy to maintain page on the Web server and now you want to replace it, along with its siblings and cousins, with another application. Do you know how to get it off of the server? Does your business have standards about how long to hold Web content and in what form? What would happen if a year from now the CEO asked the Web group to show her all the "News" that had been posted on the site for the last three quarters? How easy would it be to meet that business need? Your Web site needs retirement, archiving and obsolescence strategies and processes so that content can be removed from the site effectively and retained in the business knowledge base for an appropriate amount of time.

It is clear that, when defining a Web publishing workflow, it is important to remember that Web content and development team members need to be involved in the process from the beginning of the publishing cycle through the end—not just in the middle. Those who maintain the servers and understand the limitations of that environment also need to be involved in the publishing process early on so that content creators and developers are creating content that can be maintained in an easy and timely manner and which is compatible with the particular constraints of your business' Web infrastructure environment.

A workflow that covers the full scope of the Web publishing cycle and the business' standards needn't be complex or difficult to execute, but it should be clearly defined and well supported by tools and systems as needed. When the Web team is involved in the publishing process early and often, Web production team members spend less time fighting fires and more time producing.