

Web Operations Management: A Primer

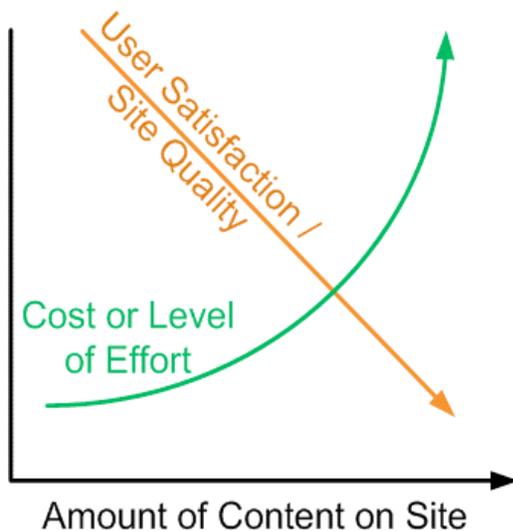
Lisa Welchman
Christine Pierpoint

WelchmanPierpoint
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The Problem

As the broad use of the World Wide Web enters the middle of its second decade, it is becoming increasingly essential for organizations to gain better operational control of their online products and services. Traditionally, organizations of all sizes have managed their Web properties in a largely ad-hoc manner—usually leveraging the expertise of a few highly skilled knowledge workers and technical resources to maintain basic Web site production, editorial, and transactional control. This control extends to such tasks as Web server maintenance, content maintenance, search engine integration, and the establishment of applications that facilitate the perceived mission and/or commerce goals of the organization. This tactical approach to Web management has proven effective to a certain degree, as most organizations have managed to establish and maintain a Web presence when desired.

However, after ten or more years of ad-hoc management, many of these public-facing Web sites do not reflect a high-quality standard. Some sites are even an outright embarrassment or legal liability to organizations as they may contain out-of-date, misleading, or otherwise inaccurate content and broken or poorly architected applications. Currently, few organizations can claim to have or execute effectively on a multi-year Web strategic plan. Sometimes these risks and limitations stem from technical constraints but, more than not, it is due to the lack of consideration given to the Internet and Web within an organization's overall strategic planning process. The Web is managed as if it were a less important version of a traditional business artifact, i.e., a technically rich brochure or a virtual storefront, rather than being managed as if it were one of the most powerful business tools an organization has to leverage.



Despite the lack of strategic planning, the pervasiveness of the Web as an organizational communications, collaboration, and transactional tool continues and Web content and applications continue to proliferate—with or without senior management and strategic oversight. However, under the guidance of sophomoric management efforts waste runs rampant:

- Purchased but unimplemented or poorly implemented Web-related software (content management, search engines, portal, enterprise content management, etc.);
- A large commitment of financial and human resources to the development and maintenance of Web products that may or may not be meeting the organization's strategic objectives; and
- Stove-piped and redundant content and applications development.

Outside of the enterprise, there are very few articulated Web management best practices. In particular, there are no best practices in place for learning how to discern:

- How well an organization's Web properties support and promote an organization's overall strategic objectives
- The appropriate framework with which to govern Web properties in order to reduce organizational waste and liability
- The correct way to form and staff a Web division responsible for daily Web product management
- The best mechanisms to measure the effectiveness and quality of Web products

Some quality attention has been paid to certain aspects related to these concerns. Tactical projects related to software application deployment, graphical user interface design, and search engine optimization most likely are in play, along with many others. But, for the most part, these efforts relate directly to the Web site itself and have less to do with the dynamics and management of personnel and programs within the organizations that are supporting and managing the Web as a product. This lack of emphasis on product management and operations is readily apparent in the general low quality of Web sites and in the pervasive dissatisfaction and frustration of operational Web personnel we see in our consulting practice, across the board in every vertical market.

Largely missing in the arena of Web operations are basic business practices such as business process management, governance, strategic planning, product management and the calculation of return on investment—activities that are the foundation of most other mature product development processes. It is vital that organizations put these basic operational mechanisms into place in order to control and manage their Web products with better quality content and applications, strategic aims, and fiscal control. While the Web and other Internet-based technologies will continue to be prevalent, we believe that organizations that are able to establish operational control and accountability mechanisms for their Web products will have a competitive advantage over organizations that continue to operate what is sometimes a key business asset with little or no strategic intent. That's because businesses with operational control of their Web products will be able to react more effectively to new, relevant technologies and market demands and opportunities.



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Web Operations Management (WOM) is based on the principle that the Web is not a project with a clear beginning and end, but rather is an integral component of an organization's business operations. Depending on the organization, the Web serves many functions, with marketing, product support, recruitment, customer relationship management, commerce, supply chain management, distribution, and knowledge management being among the most common. WOM as a practice takes Web management out of the arena of daily management, mini-projects, and silo'd technology implementations and moves it into the more mature operations arena. It is here where an organization understands what resources it is investing in its Web products and is allowed to manage those products in a less reactionary and more strategic manner through the application of traditional business planning and budgeting processes.

An effective Web Operations Management approach addresses four separate but interrelated dimensions:

- WOM Strategy
- Web Governance
- Web Execution
- Web Measurement

When examined as a set, the range of these four dimensions allows for strategic and operational planning as well as the specific tactics required for the proper development of quality Web products.



Evidence of sound WOM Strategy includes:

WOM Strategy

The translation of high-level organizational mission into actionable and measurable guiding principles for the management of Web properties.

- Guiding Principles
- Metrics
- Formalization of Authority



Evidence of sound Web Governance includes:

Web Governance

How decisions are made and implemented with respect to the content, data, and applications associated with organization's Web properties.

- Governance Framework
- Web Policy
- Web Standards



Evidence of strong Web Execution includes:

Web Execution

The day-to-day management of the Web product; in particular, the organization of Web teams, the distribution of Web functions and the allocation of resources in support of Web initiatives.

- The existence of a Web Division with:
 - Administrative Program Management
 - Product Management
 - Project Management
 - Support and Training
 - Editorial & Technical Infrastructure Teams
 - Managed Publishing



Evidence of sound Web Measurement practices includes:

Measurement

Ongoing evaluation of the quality, value and strategic success of your Web products.

- Web Usability Program
- Strategic Business Metrics
- Web Site Analytics

Getting Started with WOM

Addressing each of the four dimensions of Web Operations Management in a comprehensive manner will ensure that an organization is actually managing its Web products strategically and is not just “counting hits” and “keeping the site up.” A good place to start is to develop key milestones and objectives for each of the four Web operations dimensions. Here are a few key points to remember when embarking on the development of a Web operations strategy:

Charge Senior Managers with Participation and Guidance –The development and execution of a Web Operations Management Strategy is not a function to be taken on by a first-line manager or individual contributor. Developing a WOM Strategy requires a high-level understanding of the organization’s objectives as well as the managerial authority or influence to effect sweeping process and organizational change across the entire enterprise. Therefore, such tasks should be initiated at the highest level of an organization required to effect real change.

Expect Significant Change – The development and implementation of a WOM Strategy is not a simple undertaking. While understanding the longer-term strategy for Web operational success is crucial before embarking on change, the execution of that full strategy will most likely occur over a number of years. It will also likely include the development of new organizational programs and processes or, at the very least, require the significant modification of existing organizational programs and processes.

Be Prepared for Cultural Backlash – Some effective, mature business practices run counter to “Web culture”—a culture that fosters and promotes constant innovation and a lack of repeatable processes. Senior managers should be prepared for some resistance to the standardization of certain Web functions in their organization. They should also anticipate the need for putting in place mechanisms that will help retain high-value personnel who may be dissatisfied with the installation of more structured Web-related business processes.

WelchmanPierpoint LLC is a strategic web operations consultancy based in Baltimore, Maryland. Since 1999, WelchmanPierpoint has pioneered emerging web operations management principles and defined best practices for public, non-profit, and commercial organizations worldwide. For more information, visit www.welchmanpierpoint.com or contact info@welchmanpierpoint.com.