

ComputerWeekly.com

Guide to sourcing Web developers



**How to source the right
Web developer for your business**

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WEB DEVELOPERS: A BUYER'S GUIDE

Web development has generally come to be known as a broad term used to describe all the areas of developing a website for the World Wide Web. This can include the graphical content, coding, backend programming and Web server configuration – everything that's involved in the creation of a web site.

This buyer's guide explains the key concepts of web development and demystifies some of the technology and jargon involved, and will help you find the best web developer for your business.

WEB DESIGN AND WEB DEVELOPMENT

Amongst web professionals web development is used more specifically to refer to the non-design aspects of building web pages, for example writing mark-up languages and coding. Web design is more concerned with the look and design of the final product, whereas development deals more with how a web site functions behind the scenes.

You can think of your website as being like a car. In this case, the web design is all the parts of the car that look and feel a certain way - the bodywork, the dashboard, the steering wheel. The web development is concerned with how things work, so in a car this would be the engine, the sensors which feed the dashboard display, and the power steering under the bonnet. This also highlights an important overlap between design and development – the speedometer looks a certain way but this is inextricably linked to how it works, for example if it is analogue or digital. This is the same for web design and development, since some development or programming may be required to achieve certain visual effects.

WEB TECHNOLOGIES

The World Wide Web started out with little more functionality than text with simple formatting and hyperlinks between pages, but today web pages offer a rich interactive experience of graphics, animation, audio and video. These features have all been built on top of the basics, which preserves compatibility across a wide range of devices and web browsers, with the result that creating a modern web site involves a number of different technologies.

HTML

HyperText Markup Language, or HTML, is the basis for all web pages and the core technology of the web. HTML describes how a web page should look by using plain text, marked up with tags. You can see the HTML behind any web page using the ‘view source’ option of your web browser or by saving the web page and opening it in a text editor. The HTML of a very simple web page might look like this:

```
<HTML>
<H1>This is my web page</H1>
Hello World!
</HTML>
```

The tags (e.g. `<HTML>`) mark up what is inside of them. The outermost tags, `<HTML>` and `</HTML>` state that what is inside of them is HTML code and the `<H1>` and `</H1>` tags define that the text inside should be displayed in ‘Heading 1’ format. A web browser would display this HTML as shown below:

This is my web page

Hello World!

There are a huge number of HTML tags for different text formatting, tables, graphics and links to other web pages. Some tags have been

superceded by others or combinations. There are a number of agreed standards for what HTML is acceptable and support for different tags, standard and non-standard HTML varies between browsers, so for anything but the simplest web pages, there is a considerable amount of work to be done to ensure the pages look good and the same (or as close as possible) in different browsers.

Images

Images can be included in web pages by using (among other things) the `` tag. Using images opens up a wealth of possibilities for web page design. An image file can serve as a hyperlink (a 'button') or a background to the whole page. Clever use of images enables interesting designs, beyond simple table-based layouts. Animated images (essentially a set of images which display in turn) can be used to add movement and draw attention. It is possible to create a graphical web site designs with image editing software, then cut the resulting image into 'slices' which are laid out in HTML tables. This is a somewhat outdated technique, however, as using lots of image files makes web pages slow to load and it is possible to create visually pleasing web designs without images, using newer technologies like CSS.

CSS

Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) are a way of separating the styling of a web page from its HTML structure. Using a style sheet, a designer can define a wide range of visual attributes of HTML elements, and keep all these style definitions in a separate file. In the simple HTML example above, the 'Heading 1' denoted by the `<H1>` tag could be given attributes like font, size and colour. Keeping styles separated means that, in order to change all of the `<H1>` headings for an entire web site, all that needs to be done is to change the style sheet, rather than changing each web page.

CSS suffers from the same kind of problems as HTML, as support for CSS and its different styles vary between browser types and

versions. As a result, web development using CSS can involve considerable work to achieve a consistent look in as many browsers as possible.

JavaScript

JavaScript is a programming language which is used to manipulate elements of a web page. A traditional use is to swap an image when the mouse pointer is hovered over it (known as a rollover), for example to give the impression of a button being pressed. In combination with other technologies, JavaScript can be used to achieve functionality such as drop-down menus and photo slideshows and to check which browser software a user has in order to provide the best experience. It is also of fundamental importance in the newest tools on the web, such as online word processing, web-based email and interactive mapping services (see AJAX below).

Flash

The Flash Player is an add-on which is available for virtually all personal computer web browsers (e.g. Internet Explorer, Firefox) and an increasing number of portable devices such as mobile phones. Flash enables the display of multimedia content such as animations and videos – way beyond what is possible on ordinary web pages. By using a proprietary technology, Flash designs can be guaranteed to look and work the same on any device that has a Flash Player, whereas standard web pages will be displayed differently on different devices. A Flash design can be loaded on its own by a web browser or (more usually) inserted into an existing web page just like an image file, allowing a hybrid of HTML and Flash web design.

Server-side processing

The processing by which the above technologies generate web pages all occurs within the user's web browser. This is referred to as the client side. The computers which store web pages and send

them to the user's browser are called web servers, and any processing that occurs on the web server before the web page is sent to the user is referred to as server-side processing. For example, when you log in to a web site with a username and password, processing occurs on the server side to check that your details are correct, usually by accessing data in a database. Code for server-side processing can be written in virtually any programming language, and developers usually specialise in one or a small number of languages. The technology used on the server side will not usually affect a user's experience, and most server-side programming languages are as capable as any other.

Almost all web applications make use of a server-side database, for example to store user information. Again there are many different databases in use and available, but from a buyer's point of view they are essentially interchangeable. Most developers will have a preferred database, particularly as some databases integrate particularly well with some server-side programming languages. The exception to this rule is when a web-based system is required to integrate with an existing corporate database. The details will depend upon the particular database but some database development may be required.

AJAX

AJAX stands for Asynchronous JavaScript And XML, and is based around the ability to communicate with a web server from within a web page without having to reload the entire page. For example, if a web page allowed you to post a comment on an article, using AJAX your comment could be posted, added to a database on the server side and displayed to you without reloading the page. Aside from aesthetics, AJAX enables rich internet applications like mapping services, where you can move around and zoom in and out of the map, with the appropriate images which make up the map loaded from the server only as they are needed.

OVERVIEW OF A WEB APPLICATION

To understand some of what's involved in web development it may help to look at some of the features and functionality of a common web application. Our example is a web forum, also known as a bulletin board or message board. With this application, many different users can create their own user accounts in order to post messages. A message and replies to it ('posts') are grouped together as threads or topics. Additional features may also be available, such as detailed profile pages for users or voting/opinion polls.

When a user visits a page on a web site, the computer on which the site is physically stored (the web server) responds by sending the requested page to the user's web browser. In web applications, some kind of processing occurs in order to send the appropriate web page to the user, for example when you log in and are taken to your personalised profile or home page. This interactive functionality of the application is provided by programming in one or sometimes several programming languages.

Since most web applications involve storing, retrieving and manipulating data, some kind of database system is almost always used, and the processing behind the web application will access the appropriate data.

Returning to our example, the web forum necessarily distinguishes between different users with user accounts. In order to use the forum, users must create an account – commonly referred to as registering. On the registration page there is a form where the user enters their personal details, their desired username for the forum and a password. They then submit the form and hopefully create their account. It is at this point that web development comes into play. Certain parts of the form may be mandatory so the web application should check that they have been entered. Usually users

must enter their password twice (to ensure they remember it!) so the system must check the two password entered match.

When the user submits their registration form (by clicking a button) the web application will perform any necessary checks and store the user's information in the database. User registration generally requires a valid email address, and web application will commonly send an email to the user's supplied address to check it is valid. This confirmation email will contain a unique code or special hyperlink to the web application which enables the system to confirm that the email was received (and that the user has access to it; i.e. has not registered with someone else's email address).

Now the user is registered they can log in to the forum by entering their username and password. The application will check that the details match what is stored in the database and then log the user in. Each logged-in user of the forum (there may be many at any one time) must be distinguished by the web application so as return the appropriate content and keep track of a user's actions. This is done by sending a 'cookie' to the user's web browser, which is a bit like a ticket saying who the user is and that they're allowed entry.

Once logged in, the user may wish to announce themselves with an introductory message. This will be done with a web form with a box for the user to type their message. There may also be the ability to format the message with different fonts or insert pictures or icon, for example smiley faces, and this functionality requires a considerable amount of programming. When the user submits their post, it will be stored in the application's database, along with which user wrote it (thanks to the cookie) and the time it was posted. Now, when users browse the topics in the forum, the application retrieves the messages from the database, and if they browse to a particular post, its text is retrieved and displayed in the correct format. If a different user writes a reply, it is also stored in the database with the additional information of which post it is a reply to. Then, when a post is retrieved, the application can also retrieve all the replies,

forming a topic or thread. It also means that a list of threads can include information on how many replies are in each topic, and when the last message was posted.

As you can see, there is usually a lot going on behind the scenes of a web application in order to provide useful, interactive functionality. Thankfully, most common web applications such as forums are available as off-the-shelf products which can be installed and customised without having to be developed from scratch.

READY-MADE OR CUSTOM BUILT?

In the majority of cases, your web development project's needs could be met by existing, off-the-shelf software. For most common web based applications (for example, online shops) there is a variety of commercial and free software available. Unless there are good reasons, using an established product that gives you all the functionality that you need makes more sense than paying for a similar system to be built from scratch.

If the information on your web site is likely to change or be added to frequently then you should consider a Content Management System (CMS). These enable you to edit and add to your site without the need for a web designer. Again, there are many off-the-shelf CMS systems available, so it is less likely that you will need a full CMS system to be built for you from nothing.

In terms of the graphic design of your web site, there are pre-built templates available which can be adapted to your needs, though if customisation will involved a lot of a work, a custom web design is preferable.

SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT LIFECYCLE

The development of a web site, particularly a dynamic, interactive web site, is essentially a software development project. Software development is a well-studied topic and it is useful to understand the different phases of software development. Though the steps below should always be followed in order, a more contemporary process is iterative development. This breaks down a large project into smaller parts. This may be done in relation to time (e.g. two week iterations) or features of the project (where each iteration involves a subset of features of the final product). Each iteration is effectively a project in its own right and should also follow the below steps within the context of the time or features for that iteration. Following an iterative development cycle means that a development project can be completed in stages and that requirements and design are revisited frequently to ensure that the project is built up from a solid core. It also means that potential problems should only affect one particular iteration and not disrupt the overall project.

Requirements

The start of any software project should be some kind of requirements analysis. For a web development project, you will probably have a good idea of what you want your website to do. To help define your requirements, it is useful to ask a number of questions about the project.

- How big will the site be, i.e. how much information will it contain?
- Will it be the online equivalent of a brochure about my business?
- Will it have a catalogue displaying products which the user could purchase online?

- Will the content need to be updated regularly?
- Will it be a long term or short term site?
- Will I want interactive features such as a search function or user registration?

It is advisable to rank the required functions according to priority. This means that, in an iterative cycle, the core functions can be implemented in the first iteration with the less necessary functions being implemented in later iterations, or even dropped altogether if your schedule or budget demands it.

It is important that requirements are specified precisely and that you and your developers both understand what they mean and what is expected. This can be difficult as developers will generally prefer more technical specifications whereas you will probably prefer them to be in plain English. It is important that all parties agree, otherwise a requirement could be implemented technically but bear little relation to the practical use that you intended.

Design & Prototyping

With clear requirements in place, the next phase is design. This is where the requirements are translated into a plan of how the project will be structured and constructed as well as the graphic design of your web site. While you shouldn't need to contribute much to the software design, you should still be kept up to date in case you find that the design doesn't match the requirements. Prototyping means constructing a sort of working model of the finish product and is very useful as it gives developers a base to work from as well as giving you a good idea of what the end product will be like.

Implementation

This phase is where the main development takes place. Using the prototype as a base, the rest of the project is coded and constructed by the developers. Implementation will mainly be a very technical process, though developers may still refer to you with questions.

User testing

With the project implementation complete it is time to test the product. You will obviously want to test it yourself, but it is well worth finding people with no prior knowledge to test the system, as your familiarity with the project makes it harder to assess the usability of the product or highlight any missing information.

Going Live

Now that the project or iteration is complete, it is ready to be launched. This also serves as further testing, since some issues will only come to light when a web site is up and running and in use by multiple users. You will want to stay in close contact with your developers during this stage, as you will want to solve any problems as quickly as possible and with the minimum disruption to users.

Maintenance

There are very few web sites that do not need some degree of maintenance. Apart from anything, a site with frequently updated content will encourage users to return and will be ranked higher on search engines' results pages, resulting in more traffic to your site. If you intend to make regular updates, you should consider a Content Management System (see above) as this allows modification of the site's content without technical expertise. Ideally you should plan any likely maintenance tasks into the project's requirements, for example the ability to change product prices.

If your site is not going to change very much over time, then you may not need a Content Management System, but bear in mind that web developers will charge for even minor changes, and most will have a minimum fee.

PRICE GUIDE

It is hard to estimate a price for your web development project, simply because the scope of web development ranges from relatively simple sites including standard functionality up to complex, fully bespoke systems. As such, the below is a very rough guide and you should remember that the price you pay will depend on the amount and complexity of development required for your project.

At the bottom end, an absolute minimum of £500 will buy you some simple web development, for example a web site with a small number of pages and some simple functions like an email contact form. At this end of the market, a template-driven site can be cost effective since the template is effectively designed and developed only once, and used to display similar information.

For a major, complex project, required a large amount of customisation or programming from the ground up, you should expect to pay anything from £3,000 to £5,000. This of course will rise for the most innovation, complicated or labour-intensive projects.

Some developers may offer a different pricing structure, with a lower initial cost, and a monthly fee of, say, £100. If you expect your project to evolve over a period of time and require continual maintenance and development, then this sort of structure may be right for you. Be sure to check what services are included and excluded in the contract.

CHOOSING A DEVELOPER

Now that you have a good idea of what's involved in web development you will be in a good position to find a developer or development company. This is where the Approved Index, the UK's leading online business to business referral service, proves invaluable, with a list of established, proven web development companies on its books for you to contact. You can complete a simple form on our website and receive up to six free quotes from web developers and companies. You will still have to choose one company to work with, so here are some things to consider.

Assessing a portfolio

The greatest resource available for researching a web developer's aptitude and suitability for the kind of work you have in mind is the portfolio of jobs they have done in the past. Qualities to look for include variety, originality and whether you consider the style of the designs appropriate for the sites in question. Be sure to give consideration to the functional and practical aspects of the sites under review as much as their visual impact. Does the site load quickly? Does it require any plug-ins or software downloads to operate effectively? It is well worth your time entering the site using different web browsers and connection speeds to test compatibility and adaptability, because these issues can make or break a web site and you'll want to see how well the developer accommodates them.

Technical ability

Be sure to read any descriptions of the projects to get an idea of what was involved. Though you may not fully understand some technical aspects of what's involved, this guide should give you a firm enough grounding to appreciate when a difficult problem has been solved in a particularly elegant or innovative way. It may also be helpful to see if any of their past work is similar to your project.

SEO

SEO – Search Engine Optimisation – is of vital importance if your website is to receive large numbers of visitors. Look to see if SEO was a part of any projects in the portfolio. You can easily assess how effective a developer's SEO abilities are by performing a few searches yourself and noting how easy it is to find the sites in the portfolio.

Getting references

Any web developer should be happy to provide you with a list of satisfied clients as references. This is possibly the most important step in choosing the right company to work with as talking to past clients will give you an idea what the company is like to work with in practice.

There are a number of questions worth asking referees. How well did the developer communicate with the clients? Did they deliver what was required within budget and to schedule? Has the project stood the test of time or presented any technical problems and is it dynamic and adaptable enough that alterations to the content can be made without difficulty?

Size of the organisation

You will likely find that there are all sizes of organisations available for your project, from freelance individuals to multinational corporations. Which is best depends on you and your project and there are advantages and disadvantages to either. While a freelancer will probably give you a very high level of personal service, they may not personally be able to take on all of your tasks, and employ a third party, losing the personal touch. Large companies offer stability, capacity and guarantees, but you may not receive such personal service, especially if you are a relatively small client. Additionally, a larger organisation is likely to be more stable. Ultimately, you should be confident that the individual or company you choose can provide you with high quality work and the level service you want.

A good relationship

It may seem obvious, but having a good working relationship with your developer is vital. You will inevitably need to communicate a lot and effectively in order to achieve the result you want, so you must feel comfortable with them. It's no good having the world's most sought-after developer working for you unless you feel able to tell them that they've done something wrong or that you don't like something they've created. A developer should be able to take constructive criticism and suggestions and be generally personable. Compatibility between client and designer is key to generating the best possible end result.

Stability

In this current climate, it is important to make sure that a company is solvent and has the ability to survive. You don't want a company going bust midway through your website development. Our recommendation is to view the latest accounts to ensure they have made no significant losses recently. It is also worth considering using Equifax or Experian for company credit worthiness checks.

GLOSSARY

Accessibility Accessibility refers to the **usability** of a website in the context of users with disabilities or impairments. It covers a range of matters: the visuals being clear to people with colour blindness; correctly ordering the HTML so that visually impaired users can use screen readers effectively; or making the buttons and link hit zones big enough that users with impaired motor skills can successfully click where they intend.

Bandwidth Bandwidth is used to measure the speed of your internet connection. It refers to the amount of data that can be transferred at any given time (usually measured in kilobits and megabits per second). A broadband internet connection is therefore a high speed connection, usually offering a minimum of 256 kb/s. A dial-up internet connection – the predecessor to broadband (remember that loveable screeching ringtone?) – is only capable of 56 kb/s.

Blog Abridgement of “Web Log”. Your blog is a section of your website (or can be a site in itself) where you can regularly publish news, comment, diary entries – almost anything you want your users to read. It’s different from a news page in that it can be written with a personal voice. Corporate blogs have become popular for being able to give a company a more accessible, personal tone.

Breadcrumbs Breadcrumbs, or **breadcrumb trails**, are navigation features of a website that improves its usability. They allow the user to see the structure of the site as they progress through it, and retrace their steps if they find themselves lost in its murky recesses. For example, an online store might display breadcrumbs at the top of its page as follows:

Home > Music and Videos > CDs > Jazz

In fact, you can find a breadcrumb trail at the top of most Approved Index web pages.

- Browser** Your web browser is the software that allows you to view web pages. The most common browsers are Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox.
- CMS** Abbreviation of **Content Management System**. CMS software allows the owners of a website to easily organise and edit its content (text, images, media files) without having to delve into a site's code. It's also useful for allowing staff to update the site from different locations.
- Cookies** Web cookies are little bits of text sent between a **server** and your **browser**. When you visit a website again, these pieces of text are sent back to the server so it can recognise who you are. When a site remembers your password, preferences or the items in your shopping basket, this is all thanks to cookies. They also allow pages you revisit to load faster.
- CSS** Abbreviation of **Cascading Style Sheets**. CSS is a language that allows you to shape the style and appearance of a web page. While **HTML** (or a similar mark up language) is used to create the content of a page, CSS determines its presentation (colours, fonts, layout, skins etc.)
- Domain** Your domain name is the name that appears before the extension (.co.uk, .com, .net) of your web address. It is basically an **IP address** that is easier to read and remember, identifying your computer, or your **host's** computer, on the web. So in the same way that your friend's phone number is 07123 456 789, but you have them in your mobile as Phil Mob, your website's IP Address might be 123.456.78.910, but your domain name is www.phil.com.
- Ecommerce** Ecommerce is the practice of selling goods and services online. Simple as that. An ecommerce site is a site with the **functionality** to display a catalogue of items and accept payment for them (with credit cards, PayPal etc) online.

Favicon	A favicon (“favourite icon”) is a small thumbnail image that acts like a website’s logo, appearing at the beginning of the URL , at the top of tabs and on your favourites list. Approved Index’s favicon, for example, is the white and blue tick you can probably see above.
Flash	Adobe Flash (formerly Macromedia Flash) is a type of software used for creating and viewing animation and videos on a web page. While you have to pay to get the Flash Authoring Tool, Flash Player is free to download (anyone with the player can view sites containing Flash). A “Flash site” is a web site composed predominantly of animated and interactive Flash components.
Functionality	The functionality of a website is simply the number and type of technical functions it is able to perform e.g. having the ability to take online payments, or to perform a “search” on stored data or content. Not to be confused with usability (see below).
Hosting	All websites need to be hosted. Hosting a website means storing all its component files on a server (a computer permanently connected to the internet). Web hosting companies have huge banks of servers where you can host your site in a secure environment.
HTML	Stands for Hyper Text Markup Language . HTML is the language used to write and structure text and links on a webpage.
Hyperlink	Usually just called “links”, hyperlinks can connect any piece of information to any other piece of information on the internet. The most common form type of hyperlink is the embedded link (usually underlined).

Internet	The Internet is a computer network, in fact the biggest network, which connects computers the world over. While often used interchangeably, the terms internet and World Wide Web are not the same thing. The World Wide Web refers to the interconnected (linked) web pages which are available on the internet, whereas the internet is the network which enables systems like the World Wide Web and email.
IP address	Your IP (Internet Protocol) address is a set of 4 numbers that identifies your computer. If you're hosting your website through a hosting company, your site's IP address will be the IP of that company's server. Every site also has a unique domain name that matches up to your IP address.
Keywords	Keywords and key phrases are the terms that users type into search engines. These are the words that should appear in the titles and content of your website so search engines know that it's relevant.
Metatags	A metatag is a piece of HTML code that allows search engines to more accurately determine the content of a webpage. Metatags aren't actually visible on a webpage, but do appear in the search engine results as a description of what the page is about. They can also be a list of keywords visible only to search engines, although this type of metatag is generally no longer used.
Navigation	Web navigation is simply the process of finding your way around a website or around the internet. The navigation bar is the bar at the top of your browser containing the "Back", "Forward", "Stop" and "Home" buttons.
Organic Search	Organic search results are all the pages that are indexed by search engines purely on the content of the page. Non organic (or paid) search results are the sponsored links you see in the yellow box and down the right hand side of the Google results page.

Permalink

A permalink (“permanent link”) is a **hyperlink** that is used like a bookmark. They are usually used for linking to a specific **blog** post so you can keep track of it when the blog is updated.

PPC

PPC (**Pay Per Click**) advertising is a type of online marketing that makes use of search engines. A PPC campaign involves paying search engines to show a link to your site when users search for a product or service that you provide. Whenever a user clicks on your ad, you pay a fee to the search engine. The sponsored links you see in the yellow box and down the right hand side of Google are all PPC ads. They also appear on web pages that search engines deem relevant to what the advert is offering. So if you’re reading a page that has something to do with saxophones, you might see PPC ads offering discount brass instruments.

SEO

Stands for **Search Engine Optimisation**. This is the practice of improving the relevance and value of your website to achieve higher **organic search** positions. This is done through improving content (e.g. by adding **keywords**), and most importantly through **link building** (getting related sites to link you and hence make your site seem more relevant).

Server

Your server is the computer on which your website is **hosted**. Servers store data and allow it to be accessed and shared at all times over the web.

URL

Stands for **Uniform Resource Locator**. A webpage’s URL is its full address, e.g.
<http://www.approvedindex.co.uk/indexes/WebDesigners/default.aspx>

Usability

A website’s usability is a measure of how easy it is for visitors to understand a website, find their way around it and successfully achieve their goals. Not to be confused with **accessibility** or **functionality**.

Web Application

A more specific term than the generic web site, a web application is a kind of web site with some specific functionality. Common examples are message boards (forums) where users post messages structured in topics or threads, or **blogs** which are essentially online diaries. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, which give users their own profile pages, photo gallery and the ability to connect and share with friends, are also web applications.

World Wide Web

While the terms are often used interchangeably, the internet and the World Wide Web are not the same thing. The World Wide Web refers to the interconnected (linked) web sites and pages which are available on the internet, whereas the internet is the network which enables systems like the World Wide Web and email. The issue is further clouded by the availability of, for example, email system which are available on the World Wide Web.