



# Effective web sites – the responsibility of the whole organisation not just the web team

Dr Sarah Burton-Taylor. Director – WUP Revised September 2006

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Building an effective website is often seen exclusively as the job of the web team, and viewed as a design or technical issue. However, having worked with many different organisations, we would argue that often what stops them improving their web site is the organisation itself. Developing an effective web site often requires organisational change: it requires a culture where people at all levels in the organisation adopt behaviours that make a 'good user experience' an important goal. A good user experience is one where a user achieves their goals and is highly satisfied with the process; it will encourage reuse and recommendation of the site. If the organisation is not focused on providing a good user experience, then the web team will be unable to build an effective web site. Understanding the user experience, through research methods like usability testing, can be a powerful tool in driving the organisational change needed to develop effective websites.

## How do Organisational issues affect web site effectiveness?

Three key organisational issues can get in the way of developing effective websites:

- Strategic confusion
- Organisation not user focused
- Distributed content production

**Strategic Confusion:** It is critical that everyone in the organisation who can affect the user experience has a clear understanding of what the web site is trying to achieve – that is:

- Who's the target audience for the site?
- What does the organisation want the site to achieve?
- What goals do users want to achieve?
- Which user goals will the organisation support on the site?

In our experience, strategic confusion rather than strategic clarity is the norm, as these questions have not been answered. Often the strategy is just "We must have a web site!" with no detailed thought given to: which audiences are to be targeted, what goals users want to achieve, and how the site will deliver value for the organisation. Even if these issues have been addressed they are often poorly communicated, so different people in

the organisation are working on different assumptions about what the site strategy is.

**Organisational focus:** Web sites are often designed to reflect the internal structure of the organisation. But users don't care about departments and functions; users just want to achieve their goals, and this is likely to cut across internal structural boundaries. Organisational staff will be very familiar with how their organisation works; users do not come with this knowledge. So, without a detailed understanding of users, their likely goals, and how they want to achieve these goals, the web site will inevitably end up with an organisational rather than user focus.

**Distributed content production:** If only one person is responsible for producing content for a site, it's easy to get consistency. However, as soon as several people have this responsibility, the web site is likely to become variable in quality and style. This is exacerbated when content providers have a poor understanding of the site strategy and users, and have experience of developing content for print media rather than the web. In order to have an effective web site, these distributed content producers need to understand what information needs to be presented to meet user and organisational goals, and how this needs to be presented to make the site usable.

## Bringing about change

Change often fails in organisations either because change is not focused on the 'right' business issues or because people don't change their behaviours in the long term. The trick is to get people to change their behaviours to focus on the 'right' issues – e.g. having an effective web site. This needs user-based evidence on how to meet user goals, clear leadership to direct and inspire, and the participation of the organisational members in changing their behaviours. To paraphrase Henry Mintzberg et al (1997), a well known writer on strategic change:

*"Managers must understand what's happening, ensure staff know what's happening and set frameworks for change – but ultimately allowing people to figure out how to change".*

But changing behaviours is easier said than done. Organisational culture – or ‘the way we do things around here’ – is described by Ed Schein (1994) as having three levels: the behaviours, which are underpinned by espoused values about how the world works, and which in turn are shaped by hidden assumptions and values, derived from both the organisation and individuals’ own experiences.

Behaviours are explicit – you can see them; assumptions and values are normally tacit, or hidden. Only by affecting the tacit assumptions and values can behaviours be changed. Just telling people what to do won’t work – change will only result if the tacit issues can be influenced.

Understanding the user experience can be a powerful tool in disturbing tacit assumptions and ‘mental models’ about how the world works. The user is often not well understood by staff within the organisation. It is only by watching users on the web site and seeing their frustration, often over things which should be very easy to do, will people develop new mental models of users’ requirements, and be motivated to change things.

## What can the organisation do?

Change cannot be ‘done’ to an organisation – the organisation has to commit to the process and ‘do it to itself’. Because change ultimately has to take effect at the level of individual assumptions and values, it is very specific to the organisation. Prescriptive blueprints won’t work. However, there are certain key elements that need to be incorporated into a change framework aimed at focusing the organisation on developing and maintaining an effective website:

- A clearly articulated strategy about what the web site is trying to do
- Rigorous user based research to surface users’ requirements: it’s all too easy for everyone to think they know what users want – but it’s only by getting primary evidence from users can the organisation be sure that they’re getting it right
- The opportunity for staff to experience the users’ reactions, in order to challenge their assumptions and values and develop their knowledge of the issues
- Enabling staff to develop a shared understanding of the issues: even having watched users on the web site, different people will take away a different interpretation and understanding of what they have seen. It is only by articulating and sharing these understandings that a common articulated view of a problem can be gained.

- Agree actions themselves: recommendations on how to fix problems are often developed by ‘experts’. However, they may not understand the organisational constraints and so the recommendations may not be implemented. Actions developed by the people responsible for implementing them are more likely to be implemented because they are framed in the light of the organisational constraints and are ‘owned’ by the relevant team.
- Developing staff knowledge and understanding of the principles of developing a usable web site through a series of activities (e.g. reading, workshops, networking, usability testing etc.)
- Develop ‘change agents’ - individuals who operate in their areas of influence in order to help embed a culture where a good user experience on the web site (if not more broadly) is seen as a critical success factor.

## How can the WUP help?

The WUP directors, consultants and facilitators are highly experienced in user experience research, strategy, and change management, and can assist clients design and implement change programmes to improve the user experience and web site effectiveness through:

- Site Strategy formulation and Goal Mapping
- User experience research, including usability testing
- Facilitating workshops to develop shared understandings of the user experience
- Facilitating action planning workshops
- Training & Mentoring

© Web Usability Partnership Ltd  
Unit 15, Lansdowne Court, Bumpers Farm,  
Chippenham, Wilts SN14 6RZ  
Tel: 01249 444 757  
Email: [info@wupltd.co.uk](mailto:info@wupltd.co.uk)  
Web: [www.wupltd.co.uk](http://www.wupltd.co.uk)

## References

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