

Pick the right platform

But delay the platform decision until you understand what you need

When most people think of custom web development, they think of complex projects with cost and time overruns. Given the growth of open-source platforms and plug-ins available, these can seem like a great alternative to custom development... and in some cases that's right. But plug-ins often aren't the best fit for many projects. Compromising on functionality and being at the mercy of the plug-in developer to maintain and support the system creates its own set of risks.

So whether it is custom development or plug-ins you're looking at, our advice is to delay the decision until you really understand what you need, and what the best approach will be.

Understand the bigger picture to reduce risk

Discover what the business and the users need, in a very visual way

We've recognised this aversion for businesses to create custom applications, and the shortfalls of going down the plug-in route. So we've created a development process that reduces the risks inherent in both approaches, and is focused on good client engagement through visual interaction.

As they say, a picture paints a thousand words... so why not focus on the picture — namely graphical interfaces that engage with site users — and build the system functionality around this?

The next questions would be: how do we make this happen, and what's involved?

As with the conventional development process, this visual approach starts with the Discovery and Scoping stages, to develop a clear understanding of project requirements. This includes interviews with selected staff to better understand goals, initial thoughts about likely functionality, and confirmation of key user tasks. In short: what you want users to do, and the easiest way for them to do it.

But from this point, our visual Discovery process is somewhat different. We create visual interfaces of the key system interfaces that were identified in the early Discovery stage. This gives key stakeholders a visual representation of the end solution. This gets better buy-in and engagement in the design process from the client than the usual empty wireframes and long-winded documents. When people are engaged, they identify potential problems, and this greatly reduces project delivery risks.

We've been using this approach for most of our projects for a long time now, but the excitement of seeing people engaged and actively contributing has not worn off yet.

Design for your users

System success will be judged by system users... so user experience is critical

By making design concepts as real as possible, the user experience becomes clear. The result is a functional specification based on exactly what the client wants, as opposed to a gradual and often expensive discovery of the appropriate solution over time.

Too many projects forget about the user of the system, and the key tasks that you want them to do. If it doesn't work for the site user... it doesn't work, full stop!

Create a Specification but keep it flexible

Projects get in trouble when the functionality is not tied down — but you don't want to stifle the outcome either

The functional specification of a project is shaped around the user interfaces that we design. We view the functional spec as a collaborative document that frames the project, without constraining pragmatic and sensible thinking.

Once you have started developing, you can guarantee there'll be a light bulb moment where you say, "I wish that I had thought of that earlier!"

That is why the spec, while being a stake in the ground, must allow for creative thinking throughout the process. To that end, our functional spec isn't a butt-covering device to pin down both parties and manage cost overruns. It's a living document that describes what is being built, but has the flexibility to evolve.

The fact is that you don't know what you don't know, so it is important that your development process can accommodate this.

Find the right development partner

Build a long-term relationship with a developer that matches your culture

Given our non-traditional approach to custom web development, over time we found we do not appeal to all businesses and their projects. You've probably come to the same conclusion — that many partners are great to work with, but others are sometimes just hard work.

We think you want to set yourself up for a successful partnership when you pick a developer, and that you can do that by finding one that's a good match for your culture.

Perhaps your company is used to complex proposals and spec documents, free lunches, endless acronyms, and lavish reception areas... if so, you need an agency that fits that bill.

If you enjoy a collaborative and visual approach, where the user is central to the process, then we're worth chatting to.

