

Drupal for the National Archives

A Viderity Case Study

The Background

The first NARA-at-work.gov Intranet website was built in 2000 in Macromedia Homesite. It received a redesign in 2006, but remained a static HTML website. Updating the website was a tedious task with source code getting edited in Microsoft Word by content contributors and emailed to the Web Program team for HTML conversion and publishing. Additionally, the site's dynamic features were limited and no social tools were present. The National Archives elected to move their Intranet site into a content management system toward having a more engaging site that is easier to update.

The Importance of Open Standards

The project required standards to maintain the content was usable and the platform modifiable. It was established early on that web information would have to be based upon Open Standards/W3C recommendations. If the nara-at-work.gov project had been built using proprietary software, it would have been detrimental to the National Archives' principles of openness and public participation. The availability of content would have been dependent on maintenance renewals. Innovations in accessibility would be dictated by the vendor's roadmap.

The Power of Drupal

With a clear, sensible charter to embrace open source technology, the team reviewed a number of potential platforms including Joomla and WordPress, which had successfully been used at the National Archives. Despite the experience with WordPress, Drupal, a true Content Management System, emerged as the best solution. The team understood that the initial setup would be more intensive than WordPress. The more involved setup, however, was viewed as an upfront investment that promised larger returns. The developer community at Drupal.org was prolific, with thousands of modules being developed and maintained. It was an energetic community; many of the modules being developed with large-scale, enterprise applications in mind. In the end, it was the flexibility and extensibility of the Drupal framework that made it the clear choice.

The National Archives understood that with Drupal, we would have a module for any application we needed,” said Viderity CEO, Rachel Everett. “And, with Drupal, we get the benefits of a really flexible front-end platform including a robust publishing workflow.”

Preparing NARA-at-Work.gov for Launch

One of the challenges in building such an ambitious project is managing the large number of users. Staff visiting the site to consume and re-purpose information, subject matter experts responsible for supplying and updating relevant information, and site administrators would all require different degrees of access over the site. Our team was able to progress from a blank server to a fully designed alpha site in less than two months - including the construction of a granular set of user/group permissions.

As the team prepared for the beta launch, a page review module was implemented for each page in order to collect, and neatly store in a database, feedback from staff on the individual pages. The site benefited from constructive criticism about individual pages and enabled the team to identify granular changes and improvements to make.

The Result

To date, nara-at-work.gov has been a tremendous success. The original goals of making content easy to maintain and to increase staff participation have been reached. Today, the team is looking ahead to introducing new functionality. For example, faceted search tools and Apache SOLR are being looked at to make information even more visible and findable.

The Benefits

- Rapid development and deployment cycles result in faster innovation for site.
- Drupal implementation can grow with emerging requirements.
- Advanced publishing workflows expedite and streamline the posting of new and revised web pages.
- Social capabilities provided by Drupal will contribute to higher traffic and engagement and internal collaboration.
- Tools for sharing and improving web content can be used to improve the site itself.
- Drupal provides a presentation layer, via a robust theme engine, for customizing the HTML output of virtually any piece of the application. We can put the user experience first.
- There is an incredibly active Drupal community. The product's maintenance is distributed across a passionate group of 1000+ developers.
- The Drupal community cares about standards. The generated HTML code is a bit bloated at times, as happens with any generalized solution, but by-and-large its HTML output conforms to modern web standards.
- There are literally thousands of contributed modules providing a vast range of additional functionality.
- Drupal is built on PHP with current support for MySQL and PostgreSQL databases, with pluggable database support on the product road-map for version 7.
- Lack of licensing costs reflect • fiscal responsibility

If you would like more information about professional Drupal development services please contact Viderity at info@viderity.com.

About Viderity

Viderity is an information technology (IT) and business consulting company headquartered in Washington, DC, USA. Viderity predominantly provides IT personnel staffing services to state and federal government agencies in the following areas: web site and application development and management; print and online marketing solutions; and IT and business strategy planning. Viderity started in the fall of 2007 with the aim towards helping agencies achieve their most challenging Internet goals. For more information about Viderity, please visit www.viderity.com.