

Selecting the right content management system

Web Content Management (WCM) systems can be bewildering. If you are new to WCM systems, you may find the different offerings available confusing. This paper will help you:

- Decide if your organization needs a content management system
- Understand the disparate approaches taken by vendors in delivering WCM systems
- Provide high-level next steps in a WCM selection process

Does my organization need a WCM system?

WCM systems are used to simplify and automate the maintenance of Web sites. Your organization needs a content management system to manage its Web site(s) if you:

- Need to publish Web information faster than you are now, even in real time
- Need to distribute the publishing process to many people within or outside of your organization
- Need to track volumes of information on your site(s)
- Need to stage information in advance for timed release and/or automatically expire information on your site(s)
- Need to enforce quality control processes for information published to your site(s)
- Need to reduce the cost of ongoing manual updates to your site(s)

- Need to decrease reliance on technical resources for day-to-day site maintenance
- Need to maintain presentation consistency, making information easier to find and better supporting your brand

While these are the traditional reasons for implementing a WCM system, other specialized business requirements may also justify the cost of implementing such a system:

- Need to personalize, target, or secure content for specific audiences or individual site visitors
- Need to integrate custom Web-based business applications with static information in a consistent way
- Need to syndicate content to other systems or sites inside or outside your organization
- Need to archive historical content for regulatory or auditing purposes

Ultimately, the answer to the question of whether you need a WCM system is determined by value and return on investment (ROI). While you may have all of these needs, there is no good business case for implementing a system that doesn't provide quick ROI and doesn't provide ongoing savings in time, fixed costs, or other less tangible values. Content management ROI is a broad subject, and is covered extensively outside this paper.



Once you've determined whether a WCM system makes sense from a cost and value perspective, you are ready to start the WCM product selection process. The first step in this process is determining what kind of WCM system you need. This is where understanding the fundamental differences between WCM approaches becomes vitally important.

WCM systems are not all the same

Platforms

Many WCM vendors have examined the problem of online communication and determined that there are too many possible unique needs within an organization to make a one-size-fits-all system work. Consequently, these vendors have built development platforms that can be tailored to meet almost any need and to include almost any feature. You buy the generic platform and related tools, and you build the specific WCM system needed for your organization, much like a child might use a generic set of building blocks to build either an aircraft carrier or a fire truck. These platform products do achieve flexibility—often an important business requirement for WCM systems—but this comes at the expense of implementation time, which is directly proportional to cost.

Implementing a system on a WCM development platform is time-consuming because your organization (either with internal resources or through the use of consultants) must first determine what type of system to build and then use the platform tools to build it (again, either internally, with the vendor, or with third-party consultants). The cost for these platforms generally starts at USD \$200,000 for the software

Platform vendors

Currently, these are the most popular vendors in this category:

- Documentum (EMC)
- FileNet
- Interwoven
- Stellent
- Vignette

licensing alone¹. Service costs when using external consultants are commonly 1-5 times the cost of the software itself.

Some organizations look at these costs and opt to build a home-grown Web publishing system (using internal IT resources or an external consultancy) not based on a WCM platform but using a basic programming framework, such as .NET or J2EE. This was a popular choice in the late 1990s when there were few mature WCM products available. However, as most organizations who tried this came to realize, this approach can be just as—if not more—costly when factoring in initial development plus ongoing maintenance and support.

If your organization's business focus is not content management, building and maintaining a home-grown system (even one based on an open-source platform) becomes a distraction from your core competencies. Unless your core business actually consists of the specialized management and processing of Web content, like Amazon.com, building a system from scratch does not make sense. You will get better value from a WCM product.

¹ Information best estimated from publicly available sources

Another common barrier to ROI occurs when organizations over-extend themselves. Because of the large amount of money required for a platform WCM system, an organization understandably wishes to maximize its investment by addressing every potential information management need. This requires lengthy planning plus the development of an extremely complex system. Typically, complete implementation time for a WCM platform is 6-12 months. While this may seem long, building a home-grown system without the use of a WCM platform has historically proven to be a multi-year endeavor.

The most significant risks in either of these approaches are the same—systems often become so complex that they don't serve anyone's needs well and end up costing far more than anticipated. The result: a system that was very costly to build and that no one can use effectively—bad ROI.

Development platforms, however, do serve a valid segment of the WCM marketplace. If your organization is able to manage feature-creep² and keep a large, complex development project focused, WCM platforms can provide a well-tailored solution. You should consider a platform product if you:

- Have specialized publishing requirements not met by any other product's out-of-box capabilities
- Have the time, budget, and desire to build a custom Web publishing solution exactly tailored to your organization's needs and existing work processes

² When a project team continually adds features that increase the project's complexity and the time and cost for completion. Added features spawn additional requirements, which in turn spawn more features—a process that, if unchecked, can continue indefinitely.

- Have available technical resources qualified to use the platform tools to build client-server applications for managing Web content
- Want to keep internal and/or external technical resources (including the WCM platform vendor) engaged in the Web publishing system management as part of your business processes

Simple page management

At the other end of the spectrum from WCM platforms are a host of vendors that approach WCM as simple Web page management—the process of maintaining pages on a Web server, ensuring easy updates and consistent presentation. This is a practical approach that is particularly well suited to smaller organizations whose information doesn't change frequently or to those that have limited information to manage across a small number of sites.

Simple page management vendors

Popular vendors in this category include:

- Atomz
- Ektron
- Macromedia
- Microsoft (FrontPage)

Implementing a system in this category can be relatively inexpensive, ranging from a few hundred dollars to tens of thousands of dollars, depending largely on the size of your organization. The implementation time for these kinds of systems is generally short—a few days to a few weeks. Display templates must be designed, which can be done either in-house or by an external consultant with technical skills.

The beauty of these systems lies in their simplicity. Contributors in your organization simply open administrative template files using either desktop software or a Web-based application, fill out desired content fields, and publish. The pages are pushed to your Web server.

Some products may provide slightly more sophisticated features that allow you to update navigational links, choose different design themes, or even route information for approval using simple workflows. The tradeoff with these systems is their lack of power and flexibility. Consider a simple page management system like this if you:

- Have relatively few static Web pages to manage (less than 500, for example)
- Have relatively few contributors who all have similar access rights
- Do not need to share content across multiple sites
- Do not need to schedule the release or expiration of content in advance
- Have no need for personalization
- Have no need for targeted or selectively secure content
- Do not syndicate content
- Do not need to integrate custom Web applications or data stores into your Web site(s)
- Require limited or no workflow processes
- Do not need a programming interface for customized management features

A mid-level approach to WCM

Several WCM systems are neither development platforms nor simple page management tools. These systems land somewhere in the middle and strive to provide the benefits of both extremes—lower cost, easy implementation, and powerful features that are often equivalent to or greater than those provided by an implementation built on a WCM platform. Although they don't provide the total flexibility of a platform, these systems provide perhaps a more important benefit. They are *easy* to customize within their own frameworks, which becomes critical as your organization's information management needs evolve. While they are not as straightforward to use as the simple page management tools, they are all highly usable with a little training.

Full implementation of a mid-market system—which includes licensing, installation, and training—generally ranges from USD \$50,000 to \$200,000³. Total implementation time varies from one to several weeks. Implementation is dramatically shorter than with a WCM platform because the content management and publishing framework and supporting features are already built in.

Often, only a small amount of non-technical work is required to customize these to your organization's information management needs. As with the other types of WCM systems, display templates that deliver your Web site's look-and-feel must also be created for mid-market systems. Although this is a technical task, it is often much simpler than on a development platform because the publishing framework is already provided.

³ Information best estimated from publicly available sources

Most mid-market WCM products evolved from custom Web publishing solutions that were refined over time to be easily configurable by non-technical business users. They often meet 90-100% of an organization's requirements right out of the box—although their information is unique, most organizations have fundamentally similar Web management and publishing requirements.

Mid-market vendors

Popular vendors in this mid-market category include:

- EM3
- Microsoft (Content Management Server)
- PaperThin
- Percussion
- RedDot Solutions

A mid-market WCM product may be the best fit for your organization simply because both platform and simple page management systems are *not* a fit. Even if a mid-market system doesn't meet 100% of your business requirements, it may still provide the best overall value because in addition to the benefits described above, these systems:

- Provide a quick return on investment while meeting the majority of your WCM needs
- Are backed by companies that focus on WCM only (except Microsoft) and provide out-of-box WCM feature innovations based on evolving information management requirements

Each mid-market product has different strengths and areas of specialization. If your organization falls into this category, you will want to determine how each vendor's product matches your needs for information modeling, templating, site management, search, reporting, personalization, application integration, workflow, security, syndication, performance, and IT infrastructure.

WCM: where to go from here

If you are just beginning to research WCM systems, the selection process may seem daunting. You've already taken the first step by recognizing the need. The next step involves identifying specific information management and Web publishing requirements within your organization so you can determine which of the three types of WCM systems you should investigate further. This requires discussion with key information producers and IT stakeholders within your organization. These discussions should focus on overall publishing objectives rather than on simply replicating the processes currently in place. Understanding the differences between the types of WCM systems discussed in this paper will help you focus your needs assessment.

The third step is preliminary product research—evaluating at a high level the different offerings to determine which are viable for your “long list.” At this point, by using the information in this paper, you should know which of the three (or at most two of the three) types of WCM systems may work for your organization.

Whether your needs fall into the high-end platform, low-end simple page management, or mid-market out-of-box category, all WCM vendors provide online demonstrations with live technical sales professionals who can answer your questions and help you determine if their systems are a fit based on your needs. If you fall into the platform or mid-market category, equipped with a high-level understanding of your key needs, you may find that attending these online demos is the fastest way to eliminate products that do not fit.

The next step depends on which type of system is best for you. If you have narrowed your search to a page management tool, you will most likely be able to download, install, and evaluate the tools on your own computer. After your evaluation, you may purchase the tool online or through a software retailer.

If you are looking into a platform or mid-market WCM, send potential vendors your specific business requirements. This allows you to have meaningful discussions and participate in detailed, targeted demonstrations with each vendor. Based on information gathered in these sessions, create a “short list” of potentially viable options.

The final step is to request proposals from the finalists and check references. Make sure you speak with people who are using the vendor’s system. They have

already gone through what you now face and can give valuable insight into the implementation process and ongoing vendor relationship. This may be the most important factor in the long-term success of your WCM choice.

More information

Organizations implement WCM systems because they must communicate efficiently to all of their target audiences via the Web. This is no longer a luxury but rather a basic requirement of doing business. For most organizations, selecting a WCM is not a question of *if* but *when*. Over the last decade, EM3 has collected requirements from thousands of content producers and IT managers in many varied organizations. Their input has molded the development of EM3’s mid-market Web content management system—iOn™—into one of the most powerful, usable solutions available today.

If you are beginning the needs analysis step in your WCM selection process and would like to receive a free *Business Requirements Guide* to help you identify specific content management and Web publishing needs within your organization, please contact sales@em3.com.

If you are ready to evaluate mid-market WCM products and would like to learn more about iOn, please visit <http://www.em3.com/demo> to register for an online demonstration.



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