



# Five questions to ask before building a Drupal multisite

# Planning a Drupal platform solution that scales

For organizations that manage an ecosystem of Drupal websites, a strategy for managing existing sites and deploying new ones is crucial. Without this strategy, every new site must be built individually, leading to large amounts of individualized functionality and skyrocketing maintenance costs.

Administering multiplying websites with different technologies and different quirks can leave both developers and stakeholders frustrated – and the startup time to create new sites is considerably higher if each must be created from scratch. Fortunately, there are platform solutions that simplify the process of managing and deploying websites, and with the right partner, the process of standing them up doesn't have to be overwhelming.

Here are five questions every organization should ask before designing a new multisite platform.





## Question 1: What are the options for platform solutions?

Organizations with many Drupal sites typically need one of the following solutions:

- A **single Drupal site** with all content consolidated into it, and sections controlled through roles and permissioning. In this model, a single codebase and database powers multiple domains. This is most useful for small content administration teams that lean on the work done for previous sites to quickly create new ones.
- A **centralized code repository**, generally known as an upstream repository, with child repositories for each site. In this model, changes ripple downstream from the master repository, but each individual site has flexibility at the code level. This is most useful when each site must have its own functionality and when additional maintenance is an acceptable cost.
- A **multisite solution** through which a small group of sites share a single codebase. While this doesn't allow for much customization at the code level, it enables each site to make changes within preset options, and to add custom modules and themes where needed. This is most useful when sites have different editorial teams, functionality is standardized, and design variation is handled within a set of common templates.
- A **managed multisite solution** that extends the solutions above by providing a user interface for rapidly creating, managing and deploying sites. This is most useful when organizations need a multisite solution with minimal developer attention for each site.

Each of these have their own advantages and challenges. We've put together the factors you should consider in choosing the right solution for you.



## Question 2: Will different teams administer each site?

When considering your technology options, make sure to think about them in the context of your organization's governance and administration processes.

If you have different teams administering each site, you'll need a different solution than if you have one team administering a group of sites. With **different teams for different sites**, you may prioritize boundaries to make sure that the wrong team doesn't get access to another team's content. In this scenario, a multisite solution or upstream repository solution may be a better fit for you, because the separate databases will keep content from getting muddled.

On the other hand, if you have a **small team of content editors** administering many sites, your team may be frustrated by working on separate sites. They may add a taxonomy term to one site and expect it to appear on another, or want to clone an existing set of pages as a starting point for fresh content. Unless there's a Single Sign-on (SSO) solution in place, they'll need to log into each site separately, which can quickly become a headache. For a group like this, you'll likely find that a single Drupal instance — with a solution like the `Domain Access` module in place — will fit best with your workflow.

It's also worth considering how your sites will be developed and maintained. If you plan on working with multiple vendor teams to develop the sites or to enhance them over time, a single codebase is likely to cause more problems than it solves, and you should consider having separate sites rather than a platform solution.

Finally, think about who will create and deploy new sites. If you'd like to have certain administrators creating new sites initially, while other editors add content or make adjustments to them once created, a multisite platform solution will help you. A robust user interface and permission structure can empower team to create projects without developer intervention.



### Question 3: What features will be shared across your sites?

When you're setting up a platform, it's critical to think through the features and requirements you want the sites within the platform to have. If it's intimidating to plan out every single feature your site may need in the next few years, don't worry: that's not what you have to do! All systems should be designed to grow and change over time as new features are added. What's important at the outset is to think about the **feature differences** between your sites, so that you understand how they may differ as well as how they'll overlap, and can determine the level of flexibility you need.

We recommend asking yourself questions like these:

- **What key functionality will need to be shared across sites for the end-users?**
- **What key functionality will need to be shared across sites for the content editors?**
- **What unique customizations will you need on Site A? How about Site B?**  
(Repeat for at least five of the sites you know about.)
- **As you consider your feature list, can you make some broad statements to help you categorize the content?** For example, "Sites of Type A will all need CRM integration and a single design with some variation, and Type B will all have user-generated content and multiple distinct designs."

The more your functionality overlaps, the better fit multisites or even a single Drupal instance will be for you. The more they diverge, the better fit you'll have with an upstream repository, or even fully separated sites.



## Question 4: How will you manage customization and governance?

Once you've thought through the questions above, you may decide that your site features overlap significantly and that multisites or a single Drupal instance sound great. It's worth taking a moment to ask yourself who controls the long-term vision for your sites — and how much new feature requests can turn your strategy on its head.

For organizations with **top-down technology governance**, where a primary team manages the technology, you'll likely be able to limit deviation and focus your enhancement efforts strategically. You can add to your platform over time, evaluating each customization request to determine how it will fit into the big picture.

For **flat or federated** organizations, you may find that a consistent feature list is difficult to put together initially and difficult to maintain after the platform launch. You may even find that enforcing consistency goes against what the organization is trying to achieve.

As you consider your options, remember that you'll want to balance maximum flexibility with minimal technology costs. The more you can define your feature set and hold to it, the easier it will be to create and maintain your platform. Keep this tradeoff in mind throughout the process, and you'll have a better sense of where to make your investments.



## **Question 5: How will your ecosystem grow over time?**

As a final consideration, it's worth keeping in mind that where you are now might not be where you're at in a year. Maybe you only have a few sites now, but you have plans to make a larger rollout in a few quarters; maybe you have one content administrator team for all of your sites now, but you ultimately want to empower other teams to run their own sites.

Think through each of these consideration questions in the context of short-term (the next six months), medium-term (six months to two years), and long-term (two to five years) decisions. If there are changes on the horizon for your organization, think about how your ecosystem might have to change to adapt them.

# The Key to Success: A Partner You Can Trust

Determining the right platform solution isn't a snap decision, which is why organizations need to be thoughtful in their selection of a services vendor. Make sure you're choosing a vendor who'll help you account for all functionalities — shared and otherwise — that will span the sites in the ecosystem, and will design a system with flexibility built in.

If you're working with a pre-existing ecosystem, you need to have a migration plan in place for transitioning to the new system. Your team may also need training in managing both the codebase and the additional sites that will be created.

Designing an effective platform requires extensive input from both marketing and IT teams. A partner like FFW will have established processes to help all your stakeholders find a consensus, regardless of what department they're from — so that your brand will be consistent, and your sites will remain secure. This, in turn, will ensure that you have an ecosystem that allows for thoughtful collaboration between your marketing and IT teams, and allows everyone to move forward in accomplishing their goals together.

If you're interested in learning about how your organization can benefit from a Drupal platform solution, or you're curious about the process of migration and implementation, give us a call. We're here to run strategic workshops, help you determine a governance plan, identify features, functionality, and flexibility, and (of course) build, implement, and migrate your solution. To learn more about what we can do, contact us. Our team of strategists, designers, and technical experts is here to help you design and manage a multisite ecosystem that puts your business goals within reach.



## About FFW

FFW is a digital agency focused on creating digital experience platforms that ensure our clients' success, always moving forward at the speed of digital innovation.

We're an Acquia preferred partner, and have been recognized for our commitment to Acquia products, expertise, and quality of our production. We're Acquia Engage sponsors, 3-time Acquia Partner Site of the Year winners, and 3-time Acquia MVP winners, with 120 Acquia-Certified developers on staff.

Since 2000, the world's largest brands have relied on us to build accessible, creative, and user-friendly digital solutions that deliver results. We are more than 375+ people across 10 countries, with a track record of over 1,000 digital solutions delivered.

Learn More At:

 [FFWagency.com](https://ffwagency.com)

 [Drupal.org](https://drupal.org)

 [Facebook](#)

 [Twitter](#)

 [LinkedIn](#)