



10 Drupal Project Pitfalls to Avoid

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Introduction

Whether you're contracting with a company to build a brand new site, updating an old one, or maintaining an existing property, there are lots of wrong choices that can undermine your investment and hinder your ability to adjust to changing business drivers. The good news is there are a lot of organizations and individuals with experience that can help you avoid these mistakes.

As a global agency working on some of the largest Drupal sites in the world, FFW has experience helping clients solve a range of different types of problems. Here are ten of the most common mistakes we've seen and how you can avoid or correct them.

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.

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.

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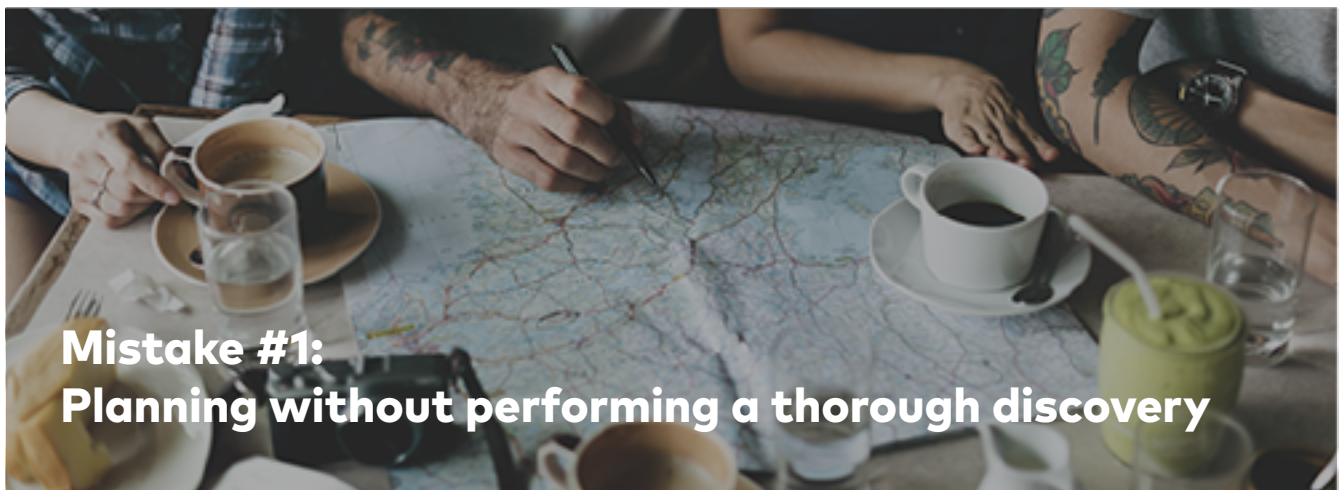
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Mistake #1: Planning without performing a thorough discovery

There's a reason why the Discovery phase is called Discovery. You may think you know what you're going to find, but often you don't.

During the Discovery phase, your job is to uncover any unanticipated issues or complexity. It's a process, not a workshop or a questionnaire, which is where many organizations slip up.

The purpose of the Discovery phase is to generate consensus around priorities and determine a project plan. **The first thing you need to do is look at your overall goals, your specific objectives, your resources and budgets, and then formulate a thorough list of questions around each of these items.** This should be done by you, your team, and your project stakeholders. In addition, make sure you have at least one person on the discovery team who has senior-level experience with the technology you expect to build out your project with.

Once you have your questions written down, ask them of yourselves and your stakeholders, and listen carefully to the results. Are any themes consistently coming up? Any concerns? Hone in on areas of consensus, and on areas where nobody can agree. Challenge the answers you've been given and address them from other angles and different sources.

It's also very important that stakeholders be involved in the Discovery phase. They should not only be answering questions—they should be asking them, too. Having stakeholders participate in discovery planning will help you achieve buy-in later in the project, and helps support accountability.

There is a science to a good discovery but good discovery is also an art. Experienced technologists know what to ask and what to listen for. They know how to reform questions to get more precise and accurate information that will help generate a project scope and specifications.

These steps are the same whether you do your own discovery in-house or with help from a consultant or services organization.



Mistake #2: Neglecting the content audit


It is amazing how often the content equation is underestimated or misunderstood. The essence of any web project is the content or message we must convey.

Many times, when building or updating a site, an organization will put tremendous effort into building a strategy and drawing up designs. This often has the unintended effect of de-emphasizing existing content that may, or may not, need to be migrated to the new project.

A thorough content audit early on in your planning process will help streamline your project and your budget. Rarely is content brought over to a project wholesale without some important changes. This can be obvious like making PDF content more search engine friendly or less obvious like adding or changing metadata and reforming its underlying data structure.

Performing a content audit will help determine if content migration should be included in your web development scope or handled as a separate component.

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Mistake #3: Adding to feature creep

If you or your organization is new to Drupal, you'll likely find yourself tempted by the 'contrib space' at drupal.org/project/*. For any newcomers: this is the web geek equivalent of a candy store filled with incredible functionality— and, like candy, an excess of features is not a healthy option.

It takes a lot of focus to limit feature creep when faced with all this open source goodness. Load up your project with too much functionality too soon in your project's development and you expose yourself to unnecessary risk and complexity.

The good news is that because of Drupal's modular nature, if you plan your project properly you can phase in your features over time. This enables you to work with your development agency to create a lean scope initially, launch the site more quickly with less risk, then evaluate and iterate. Drupal is a terrific tool for minimum viable products and user-centered projects.

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Mistake #4: Not defining user stories

Maybe you've heard about agile development methodology but don't know how it applies to you. Here's an easy take-home lesson from the agile approach that you can adapt to any project: Define your user stories. This can offer huge dividends without creating any additional risk.

Before you start writing detailed technical requirements for your project—so, ideally, when you're in the discovery phase—write a set of user stories. The goal of a user story is to shift your planning focus to how your website or web application will be used. This, in turn, will inform decisions on how it should be built.

You'll find many templates and examples for user stories on the web, but you can start with this simple sentence for each of your different users:

"As a (role), I want (something), so that (benefit)."

Explore what your users want and why. Having this knowledge helps architects and developers figure out how to build your functionality. It also helps project managers, product owners, quality assurance engineers, and analysts more efficiently define responsibilities.

Having good user stories built out is an important part of building a functional site. It also provides a basis for performing automated testing and user acceptance testing, which is covered later in this ebook. Understanding who will use your product and how offers huge returns on the up-front investment of time spent developing those stories.

“ **The goal of a user story is to shift your planning focus to how your website or web application will be used.** ”



Mistake #5: Skipping or skimping on testing

Development is a creative effort: developers build things. It's the job of Quality Assurance (QA) engineers and analysts to test things. While it's true that developers test things as they build them, it's important to remember that developers are often too close to the code to be able to step back and recognize the problems that occur once all the little pieces have been assembled and integrated.

If the developers who are building your site are managing QA, it's highly likely that you will not have a rigorous quality assurance effort. Make sure that your development agency provides at least one person who is dedicated to performing quality checks.

Likewise, when contracting with a large Drupal shop to build a site, make sure you have a plan that includes opportunities for you to provide feedback during a time-limited User Acceptance phase. The purpose of User Acceptance Testing (UAT) is to give the project's stakeholders a final opportunity to provide feedback during development. If there is no budget or time left for reasonable adjustments, then regardless of how good a project is or how well the project has been managed, the product will fall short of any overall metric for satisfaction.

“ **Make sure that your development agency provides at least one person who is dedicated to performing quality checks.** ”



Mistake #6: Forgetting to budget for Project Management

When choosing an agency to help you with your site, make sure that they have someone who will be dedicated to project management. This should never be an afterthought or add-on: It's a lot easier to recover from bad strategy, planning, or even bad code than it is to recover from bad project management.

As any developer will tell you, project management is a specialty—and that goes double for Drupal project management. Project managers are constantly helping to navigate the iron triangle of product development: time, budget, and scope.

A dedicated project manager needs have to have time time to focus on the job. If you have even a medium sized simple project and your project manager is also your lead developer, you're likely not allocating resources realistically, or need to engage a bigger team for your project.

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Mistake #7: Not exercising extreme care when planning your 'multi-site' project

The term 'multi-site' is sometimes thrown around casually as a reference to more than one Drupal powered website. In fact, the strict definition of multi-site refers to an installation of Drupal that runs more than one website off a single code base.

- There are many different ways to configure a multi-site installation:
- Sites can share and run off the exact same code
- Sites can be extended or customized with other code per-site
- Several sites run off exactly the same code while other sites each run off a combination of shared code and code that is specific for each site.


Sound complicated? It is.

Multi-site can be extremely powerful and save large organizations hundreds of thousands of dollars in development and hosting costs and can help speed up time to market significantly. Multi-sites can power hundreds, even thousands of websites. Or they can be your worst nightmare: costing significantly more money, creating unnecessary complexity, and creating technical debt that can easily strangle your project.

Consider any multi-site effort very, very carefully. Explore all your options and alternatives. There are many. Figure out what makes the most sense for your organization.

The decision to go multi-site should include considerations around hosting, IT capacity, and development workflows. Make sure you're working with people who do this everyday as a routine part of their practice.

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Mistake #8: Skipping the specialists

Want to build your project in-house? This may not be the best idea. The digital field has matured to the point where it is extremely difficult to find one individual who has enough knowledge and experience to give you the type of expertise you will likely need to deliver the best project possible.

There is an expectation that hiring or assigning one staff person to complete all your development will increase accountability. In fact, the opposite is true. No one person can keep up with the pace of changing technology in all web specializations.

Chances are, if you can find someone with broad and deep senior experience, it will likely not be economical to have that person be your only developer. In large organizations there is often a similar dynamic. It is terrific to have a deep in-house bench but what happens when your team encounters outlier requirements it has no experience implementing? This is why it's often a good idea to contract specialists to help you with your new or updated website.

“ **No one person can keep up with the pace of changing technology in all web specializations.** ”



Mistake #9: Neglecting to plan continuous development policies, tools and workflows

If your website or web application is your house, then your server or host and your development workflow is the foundation on which it sits. No one just builds a website anymore.

Web properties are continually under active development whether they are adding new features or adjusting to new security considerations. It is essential for organizations to consider the type of development activity they expect their properties to undergo during their service cycle. Survey all the options available given your budget and restrictions, be they regulatory or part of your organization's culture. Challenge those assumptions if you can't identify an optimal solution. There are plenty of organizations in the business of making sure you have a strong foundation for your Drupal project.

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Mistake #10: Adopting Drupal without engaging with the awesome community

You may be experienced in web or other IT systems but still not be familiar with open source methodologies. These include the different open source communities that have developed around technologies like Drupal.

It's important to understand that working with open source is different from working with proprietary, closed source products and businesses. The lines have begun to blur a bit recently but there are still fundamental characteristics between the two and failing to understand how to manage open source products undermines their value and your success.

The Drupal community has an abundance of free learning resources, free tools, specialized providers, experienced vendors and an unprecedented level of transparency and access to code. **If your team is not engaged with members of the Drupal community they are not doing the best job possible.** Local meetups and online opportunities make it easy.

Visit drupal.org and groups.drupal.org to get an idea of all the opportunities to learn from other people's experiences. Become a member of the Drupal Association at association.drupal.org. And, of course, come to www.ffwagency.com/event to find out about free live in person and online training around Drupal.

Time To Get Started With Your Project

Your first Drupal project doesn't need to be a painful experience. The knowledge you've gained from reading this eBook will help you negotiate the learning curve associated with starting a Drupal project for the first time.

For more help navigating your first Drupal project, contact FFW. Our team of digital experts is here to help you plan and execute your project. For advice, assistance with user research, and more, contact us. We'd love to hear from you.

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