Learning About Learning: Lessons on Implementing a KM and Learning Project from the USAID KDMD Project

Web Development

What we mean by Web Development:

Web Development for knowledge management and learning involves the creation of websites that effectively encourage knowledge sharing and audience engagement, and communicate key messages that are customized based on stakeholder objectives and enhance user experience.

Why it matters:

Websites should be seen as outreach and information vehicles that serve as a platform for additional activities such as communications, events, and trainings. By creating a purpose-driven and iterative approach to web development, these platforms are best suited to support program objectives over time and extend the reach of program activities.

How it works:

Although there is often a tendency just "build a website," best practice involves a series of phases that ensure the final product meets the needs and expectations of all stakeholder and creates a platform that can be strategically developed over time. Websites by their nature are dynamic, iterative products that require constant content updates, engagement, management, and upgrades. They are significant investments of time and resources, but they are a critical component of knowledge management and learning work, especially in a global context.

Phases of web design are as follows, although they often overlap.

Discovery – stakeholders articulate objectives and vision that should be kept in mind when developing all web related strategies. This could take the form of a kickoff meeting, individual interviews, and discussions with potential users. The goal is to identify the need that the website will address, normalize expectations of what is (and isn't) possible to achieve, and establish a timeline and approach. In addition, requirements are gathered from potential users to generate a good understanding of what users want from the website, and what needs they have for knowledge sharing, networking, and learning. This is the most important phase as it's critical to ensure that stakeholders and potential users are on the same page to

What it looks like:

In 2009, USAID's Bureau for Food Security (BFS) bought into the KDMD Project. Having already created the www.microlinks.kdid.org website for the Microenterprise Development (MD) office, the team was able to use the lessons and best practices from this experience to inform the development of www.agrilinks.org, however the discovery process proved to be just as important due to the different objectives and goals of BFS. Although both sites include a knowledge sharing and learning agenda, each has a distinct approach and audience that make them stand apart and needs to be kept in mind when designing the sites and continuously through the implementation of site activities.

mitigate the chance of failure and maximize the future site's usefulness for everyone involved. In certain cases, this phase may actually take several months.

Architecture and Design – the functionality of the site is developed. Wire frames are used to engage stakeholders in a discussion of how features will integrate into the site. Wire framing is about more than just how a site will look, and where its features sit on the page; it is a robust approach to reach agreement on how users with different needs will interact with a site, and how the site will communicate with and engage them.

Engagement Planning – consideration for future engagement and communications efforts are articulated and documented. This may include using discovery documents to create an engagement plan, crafting key messages, preparing email and social media campaigns, and conducting focus groups and site tours.

Content Development and Migration – because any website is only as good as the content and activity that it hosts, content sources are identified and mapped, taxonomies/ vocabularies are established, and a gap analysis is conducted.

Site Build – the most technical aspect of web development. Hosting is determined, the site is programmed and themed, content migrated, analytics are implemented, and quality assurance tests conducted.

Site Launch – formally introduces the website to its community and audience.

Engagement Implementation – follows the launch to reach the desired user community, engage them, and encourage their feedback for iterative improvements as defined in the engagement planning process.

Training – key content contributors and site administrators are trained to use the site.

Maintenance – ongoing support to ensure that the site is functioning properly and trouble-shooting when problems arise.

As evidenced from this approach, discovery, engagement, and content development are critical to informing architecture, design, and site build and therefore require substantive conversation and a thorough review process at each stage.

Learn More:

The KDMD Project uses a Drupal platform to create the KDMD family of websites (www.microlinks.org, www.agrilinks.org, www.usaidlearninglab.org, www.wlsme.org, www.kdid.org, and www.feedthefuture.gov).

In the last several years, Drupal has come into its own as the go-to open source content management tool. The open source development community has contributed tens of thousands of modules that expand its feature set well beyond its original kernel to include collaboration, social networking, social media, database capabilities, and even e-commerce. This rich set of options allows a client to develop a highly customized knowledge and learning website. This puts an absolute premium on the discovery phase, because with Drupal, if you build the wrong site for the strategy, the costs of correcting a poor foundation after the fact can be very high.