

The rollout of a content management system (CMS) has the potential to impact on more users than any other system since e-mail.

More crucially, the success of a CMS depends entirely on how much it is used, whether it is authors creating content, or users accessing the published site.

It is these two challenges that place usability as a central issue to be raised and addressed.

Introducing usability

Loosely, usability can be equated with “ease of use”. Beyond this, usability also includes:

- how quickly and easily a system can be learned
- how efficient it is for regular users
- whether users will remember how to use the system after a break
- how user errors are managed (and ideally prevented).

Usability is a major factor in whether staff will be able (and willing) to make use of a new technology, such as a content management system.

Usability challenges

Successfully deploying a CMS, and ensuring its long-term viability, is not easy:

- In a distributed authoring model, many staff will be using the CMS to create content. With few having existing skills, or available time, the CMS must be quick and easy to use.

If authors do not make use of the CMS, the content quickly becomes stale, and the project fails.

- Editors and reviewers also need to quickly manage their CMS work around existing responsibilities.
- System administrators must be able to manage the CMS, without constant recourse to the vendor.
- The published site (internet or intranet) must be well structured and easy to use.

The general rule is: *the more people using a system, the simpler and easier it needs to be.*

Success depends entirely on staff being able to use the CMS

Authoring tools

Special emphasis needs to be placed on the usability of the authoring tools. These should provide a familiar Word-like interface, with the overall design being both simple and intuitive.

The CMS should not expose underlying technical details, or use complex jargon or concepts.

Benefits of usability

Ensuring a content management system is usable delivers many benefits:

- deployment is simpler and quicker
- training needs are reduced
- resistance to change is lessened
- content is more frequently updated
- ability to conduct in-house maintenance and management reduces cost of ownership
- published site is used more frequently, and more successfully.

How to ensure a usable CMS

There is a range of practical steps that can be taken to ensure a usable content management system, including:

- Involve all stakeholders in the CMS project, to identify their issues and needs.
- **Include usability as a criteria in the CMS tender**, to be demonstrated by the vendor.
- Rigorously assess the usability of the potential solutions, including the quality of training materials and documentation.
- Design and implement the CMS with usability principles (and simplicity) in mind.
- Use light-weight **usability testing** for all aspects of the CMS, and the published pages.
- Include an interface designer, or usability specialist, in the CMS team.