

Even if a content management system (CMS) project succeeds, there is the very real danger that over time, it gradually slides into disrepair.

If this occurs, the CMS can enter a state of living death: a 'zombie' CMS. Eventually, the business is left with only two options: attempt to revive the CMS, or replace it with a new system.

In most cases, the technology underlying the CMS is still sound, and the system still has the technical capabilities required by the business.

For this reason, simply purchasing a new CMS only delivers short-term benefits, and then leads back into the zombie state.

Instead, there are a number of practical, and generally non-technical, steps which can be taken to revive a zombie CMS.

### Identifying a zombie CMS

There are a number of key features that can be used to identify a zombie CMS:

- pages are out of date (even years old)
- large number of broken links
- few (if any) active authors of new content
- usage statistics are falling, not growing
- navigation, links and overall structure has become increasingly ad-hoc
- content owners of pages and sections have been lost
- competing information sources have evolved
- ownership of the CMS team has changed repeatedly

#### About the author

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A 'zombie' CMS is a system that has entered a state of 'living death'

### Reviving a zombie CMS

Like any resource, the intranet or corporate website needs ongoing maintenance and attention. In an environment of ever-shifting business directions, this can be difficult to achieve.

The good news is that even if the CMS has been allowed to wither, in most cases it can be revived with a modest amount of effort.

These practical efforts are divided into three main categories:

- people
- processes
- technology

Each of these is explored in the following sections.

### People

It is important to recognise that staff are the key component of a content management system. Without active and well-trained authors, no new content will be created.

### Sponsorship

A clear sponsor of the CMS must be identified if the project is to succeed. This person must have sufficient interest in the outcome of the project, and enough power to make it happen.

The project sponsor must also be prepared to communicate the importance of the CMS to the business as a whole.

### Content owners

Every page on the intranet or corporate website should have a 'content owner': the person responsible for keeping the information up-to-date.

Over time, organisational restructuring and changing job roles leads a gradual breakdown of the list of content owners.

Take the time to determine content owners for all current pages in the CMS. Ask each of these content owners to review their pages, and update, add or remove pages as required.

Put in place systems for more effective tracking of content owners. Also automatically notify content owners when pages haven't been updated for a specified period of time.

## Allow staff time to produce new content

### Available time

In the decentralised model, content is authored by staff across the whole organisation. In most cases, this becomes an additional responsibility on top of normal work commitments.

Ensure that the content owners are provided with sufficient time and resources to actually do this authoring work. This must be driven via the chain of command, to ensure that the CMS is given appropriate consideration.

### Training

Many of the original authors and administrators who were trained in the CMS will have moved into new job positions.

Those still using the system will have forgotten how to use many of the advanced features.

A 'refresher course' should be provided to all staff using the CMS, especially the authors. It should be possible to run this from the original training materials, thereby reducing the effort involved.

### Stakeholders

More broadly, the stakeholders of the CMS should be contacted, to identify whether the system still meets their needs.

This will identify a number of deficiencies in the current system, as well as requirements for additional features.

Once a full list of changes has been gathered, ask the stakeholders to prioritise these. This will help to manage expectations, and avoid 'scope creep' during the project.

Keep the stakeholders informed regarding ongoing progress and milestones, and ensure that all discussions are frank and open.

## Processes

Effective and robust processes are critical to maintaining the long-term viability of the CMS. Without these, the content will steadily become out-of-date, and the overall standard of the site will fall.

### Revisit business goals

Re-evaluate the documented business goals for the CMS project, and ensure that these are still aligned with the overall strategic direction of the organisation.

Ask the project sponsor and stakeholders to review these goals. This will identify some additional areas of interest, and will re-focus the business back on the benefits of the CMS.

### Content review

Pages stored in a zombie CMS are generally out of date, inaccurate or incomplete. This must be corrected if the site is to be useful.

Conduct a comprehensive review of all content stored in the CMS, working closely with the content owners. Employ the services of one or more technical writers to speed up this process.

### Usability testing

Conduct usability testing with end users, to identify issues with the design or structure of the site.

This is a cost- and time-effective way of identifying and resolving the key problems with the interface that are preventing wider usage of the site.

## Identify the usability problems that are holding the CMS back

### Information architecture

Intranets and websites have a tendency to grow 'organically', with many ad-hoc changes reducing the effectiveness of the initial information architecture work.

To counter this natural process, take the opportunity to review the overall structure of the content. For example, reorganise the content according to tasks and subjects, instead of organisational structure.

## Marketing

Market your intranet (or website) like a product, with the goal of increasing visibility and usage. Without this, the CMS will not reach a level of self-sustainability, and usage will gradually slide.

The most important messages to convey are:

- the CMS is here to stay
- the system is an important part of overall corporate strategy and goals
- the content is accurate and up-to-date

Users of the site are the best source of updates and additions

## Feedback

An effective method of feedback must be put in place, to allow staff to notify errors or omissions. Behind this, establish a process for following up on the feedback, and acting on it in a timely fashion.

Advertise the feedback mechanism widely, and feature it on all pages. Only once this is frequently used will the content be safe against obsolescence.

## Update triggers

The content in a CMS will need to be updated to reflect a range of changes within the organisation, which may be driven by either internal or external factors.

Put in place processes to ensure that the CMS is updated when a change is recognised. An example: ensuring that updating the online help is part of the sign-off for new software development.

## Technology

Every content management system, no matter how successful, requires occasional 'housekeeping'. This should clean up and rationalise the design and coding of the CMS.

## Link checking

This is one of the easiest steps to take. Run an off-the-shelf package across the intranet or website to identify broken links.

Once these have been resolved, schedule regular usage of the link checker to ensure the problems do not return.

## Usage statistics

Tracking the overall usage of the intranet or website is the only practical mechanism for assessing the ongoing success of the CMS.

Two forms of usage tracking should be established:

- web usage statistics (number of hits, pages, etc)
- search engine usage (most popular terms, failed search terms)

In conjunction, these two measures support ongoing refinement of the CMS to meet business goals.

## Rationalise templates

While templates can be a simple and effective mechanism for authoring content, the number of defined templates has a tendency to grow over time.

Once there are more than a few dozen templates, maintainability becomes a serious issue. It also becomes very hard for authors to know which template to use in a given situation.

Review the full set of templates, and rationalise these down to a small set of better-designed templates. These will blend together aspects from existing templates.

In this way, the authoring process is simplified, the site is made more consistent, and maintenance is reduced.

## Software updates

The current administrators of the CMS will have gained considerable experience with the system, and will have an intimate understanding of its strengths and weaknesses.

Ask them to compile a comprehensive list of changes and updates. This should include reworking some of the existing code to make it more efficient, stable, or maintainable.

Involve the stakeholders to prioritise this according to both business and technical needs. This should produce a 'hit list' of less than a dozen key changes that will have the greatest impact on the viability of the CMS.

Take the opportunity to 're-factor' the CMS code, for better stability and performance

## Final resort

It actually may be that the wrong CMS was originally purchased, and it simply does not provide the tools required.

In this situation, there is little benefit in pouring more resources into the system. It is time to purchase a new CMS.

It is important to learn from the lessons of the past when evaluating a new content management system. This includes:

- conducting a comprehensive requirements process, to ensure that the real business needs are met
- reviewing the existing system, to identify its strengths and deficiencies
- ensuring all stakeholders are involved throughout the selection and development process
- reviewing the existing content in the CMS, and updating where required
- rebuilding an accurate list of content owners

Not every CMS can be revived,  
some simply need to be  
replaced

By following these processes, you can start the new CMS on the right tracks, and avoid the slide into the 'zombie' state.

## Conclusion

Too many content management systems end up as a 'zombie' CMS, where they exist, yet serve no effective purpose.

Thankfully, most systems can be revived by implementing a number of straightforward activities. These primarily focus on the people and process aspects of content management, and ensure that a sustainable CMS environment is produced.



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