

7 Content Migration Myths

As a company that focuses on providing web content migration services to large organizations, it's no surprise that we've come across quite a few misconceptions about our industry. Content migrations are in fact a very contentious subject. This too is not surprising given the overwhelming need for migration support, and the relatively few businesses equipped to provide it. Instead we find a lot of people drawing out a dizzying array of conclusions on a subject they have little to no experience with. This would almost be amusing if it didn't cause so much heartburn for the people that need clear guidance for their projects.

It is our hope that this article will help to put some of the more common myths to rest. After reading this, you should have a clear picture of what a content migration is, and also what it is not. As for our credentials, well, we've seen just about every level of content migration project there is, from the smallest of small business websites to multi-year and multi-million dollar migrations of Fortune 50 enterprise web sites. We have literally migrated millions of web content assets. From that, we leave it to our readers to draw their own conclusions. So now on to the myths:

Myth 1

Migrating content is fast and easy.

People tend to underestimate the effort involved in something that they do not have personal experience in. Very few people have direct and significant experience in content migrations, so the myth that content migrations are fast and easy is something that we encounter frequently. Many times a business will license a new content management system and hire consultants to install and configure the

software, but it isn't until the later part of the project that they start to think of migrating content into their new system. By this time it's too late to benefit from up front planning and the business has to go through an exhausting process of rushing to get content into their system before the project deadline.

On the flip side, we have met with many businesses that have had the foresight to plan for their content migration in the beginning of their project. Unfortunately in most cases these businesses are woefully inexperienced and their planning does not accurately reflect the effort that lies ahead. So we are here to tell you right now that you must plan for your migration up front, and you must accept that the project may very well require as much or more effort than the installation of the content management system itself.

The last part is what most people have a hard time accepting. In truth, they can't really be blamed. After all, a content migration is just moving files over from one system to another right? It seems, on the surface, like a simple copy and paste job. But as you are about to see, it's just not that easy. The following list outlines common tasks that each take time to complete:

1. **Navigating Systems:** Migrating content often requires logging into, and moving between several systems. This can include the source web server, the new CMS, the authoring tool of choice, the task tracking application, the VPN software and more. It all adds up and must be done for each piece of content.
2. **Content Cleanup:** More often than not, legacy content must be cleaned before it can be imported into a new

Endstate Solutions

25075 Blue Ravine Road
Suite 120-310
Folsom, CA 95630

888.569.2982

info@endstate.com

content management system.

Frequently this can be automated, but even then a person is usually required to manually edit the content to make sure that the formatting is correct in the new system. This is one of the most time consuming steps in a migration.

3. **Redirects:** Often in a migration into a new content management system the URLs will change to reflect a new directory structure. When this occurs, any bookmarks to the old site that users might have, or any links embedded in online and offline advertisements will break. To resolve this, a 405 redirect will have to be created that points every old URL to the corresponding content asset in the new system.
4. **Broken Links:** Similar to the issue with redirects, if you migrate your site into a new directory structure, most of your hyperlinks will break. When these are fixed manually, it can be a very time consuming process.
5. **Meta tagging:** Content management systems often require a well defined metadata strategy to function properly. Some of this metadata can be defaulted automatically, but to be truly useful at least some of the metadata must be manually added to each piece of content. This step is especially prone to errors [See our article, “The 4 C’s of Metadata”] and even the smallest mistakes can require massive rework.
6. **Content Chunking:** Part and parcel to modern content management systems is the concept of one to many relationships between content. Essentially, you break your legacy content up into smaller chunks so that they can be reused across your site. The key time drain here is that when

you break a piece of content up into chunks, you effectively create multiple new pieces of content, with each piece needing separate meta tagging and link resolution. This can compound the scope of your migration very quickly.

Often each of these tasks must be performed for each piece of content. Some of these tasks may only take 30 seconds to complete, but when you multiply that 30 seconds by the many thousands of content items regularly found in a migration you end up with a large chunk of time. When you take all of these tasks together, and consider all of your binary files too (GIF, JPG, PDF, EXE etc.) you start to see how big this effort can be.

Myth 2

A migration is a good time to redesign your site

In the science of Economics the term *ceteris paribus*, meaning “leave all other things as they are”, is often used. This is generally applied when studying an economic phenomenon and the economist chooses to isolate a single variable and ignore all other possible variables. This is done to simplify matters, because the more variables the economist has to consider, the more difficult the task will be. This is also a core tenet in good project management.

The simple fact is that the more things you have to worry about, the more difficult the project will be. A content migration is a challenging task and a wise project team will do whatever they can to simplify the effort. This is not the time to redesign a website. If you do choose to migrate into a new content management system and a new design at the same time, you will be introducing a huge new variable resulting in a content cleanup and quality assurance (QA) nightmare. In essence you will be asking the Migration and QA teams to

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compare apples to oranges, that is, the new design to the old. The variable scope increases two fold, because not only must you test that the content was effectively migrated into the new system, but also that it was correctly migrated into the new design. Better to simplify the effort by embracing the concept of *ceteris paribus* and to migrate the site in its current design, thus allowing the teams to compare apples to apples and “leave all other things as they are”.

Myth 3

A content migration is a low-skill effort

Make no mistake; a content migration is not a simple data entry or copy and paste job. The large volume of content moved in a typical content migration requires the diligence and coordination that only a skilled and experienced project team can provide. There are usually large groups of stakeholders and numerous workers to manage. In addition, deep analysis is usually needed along with broad training in both the target content management system and the source web site.

Moreover, the migration team itself must usually consist of technically skilled people. If much of the migration is to be automated then this team will likely need to be skilled in technologies such as XSLT, Perl, Python, Regular Expressions and more. The people that will manually migrate and troubleshoot the content will also need baseline skills in web technologies such as HTML, CSS, Javascript and XML. This may seem counter intuitive given that most content management systems are touted as being business user friendly, but there is a big difference between creating new content in a content management system, and importing legacy web content and getting it to look and function correctly.

Myth 4

Automation is more trouble than it's worth

This is a common myth that stems from the realm of small, simple migrations. It is true that with the smallest of migrations it may not be worth your time to set up any automation. In these cases, it is often faster to simply migrate the pages manually and call it a day. But most migration projects are large enough in scope that there are easily enough economies of scale to justify the effort of setting up your automation. On larger migrations it might take you several weeks to set up your migration tools, but once established they can run through tens of thousands of content items in a fraction of the time that it would take to do so manually.

One classic content migration example involved a Fortune 500 technology company. This business was consolidating several content management systems for a total migration of 400,000 content items. After exploring migration solutions, they settled on hiring 250 people to manually move the content over a three month period. Technology has now evolved to the point that this scenario should never be repeated. Simply put, there is almost never a good reason to conduct a migration entirely with manual labor.

Myth 5

Automation only works on well-structured content

While this may have been true just a few years in the past, this is no longer true today. Sure it is easier to automatically migrate content that is already well structured in XML or a relational database, with content and presentation cleanly separated. But experience and common sense tells us that this scenario is a rare one indeed. More often organizations are faced

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with migrating large amounts of poorly structured legacy content across many silos. This more common scenario created a great need for a better solution, and as the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention.

Today there are elegant technical solutions on the market that address this problem. And though these tools are often complex and technically demanding to deploy, a skilled team can often use them to automatically migrate well over 80% of even the most poorly structured content.

Myth 6

A content migration can be completely automated

While it is true that there are fantastic technical solutions available today, there are still some aspects of a content migration that require a human touch. The most obvious is in the project management and analysis space. There are still stakeholders to be managed and strategies to be developed. These are simply not tasks for computers.

Also, some aspects of meta tagging require human reasoning to give meaning to content, and even after extensive configuration refinement there exists some content that simply cannot be automatically migrated. These content items are usually technical anomalies that require a web developer to migrate correctly.

Myth 7

It's better to start from scratch than to migrate

The very nature of this statement is offensive. It would not be included in this article at all if not for some supposed content management experts touting this very notion. To agree to this is to completely devalue all of the effort and thought that has gone into creating a site's

content. It should be safe to assume instead that this content was created for a reason and should not be tossed away at the first sign of a challenge. Let's explore this a little deeper.

If an organization did choose to throw out their content and start from scratch in a new content management system they would be faced with a number of new challenges. The first, and possibly most obvious, is an enormous content development project. Creating content from scratch is a difficult task that averages three to four times the effort involved in migrating legacy content. One could argue that this is balanced out with the fact that you can significantly reduce the total amount of content in your site. Sure, we'll give them that, but the same could be said for migrating the site's content. More important though, getting rid of your site's content introduces another serious issue.

Search engine optimization experts have long understood that content is king when it comes to receiving favorable ranking in the major search engine results pages. This ranking requires a lot of content to be indexed by the search engines over a long period of time. If you delete your content, you significantly change the composition of your site in the eyes of the search algorithms. The result is simple; you lose your good ranking.

Most simply, though, purchasing a new content management system is an investment in your content. To do so means that you see enough value in the site's content to make this investment worth while. However, if the defeatist attitude of starting from scratch is taken, then clearly the content is not important enough for the team to even justify the expense and effort of implementing a new content management system in the first place. The idea of throwing out your site's content and starting anew is indeed antithetical to the very reason you started the project.

Conclusion

After reading this article it should be clear that web content migrations are not simple projects, but they are also not hopeless. Our goal is that you, the reader can walk away with a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that you will have in a migration project so that you can more effectively plan for what lies ahead. Now go forth and share your knowledge, because after all, myths can only exist when the truth is unknown.