The Basics of Choosing a Drupal Vendor
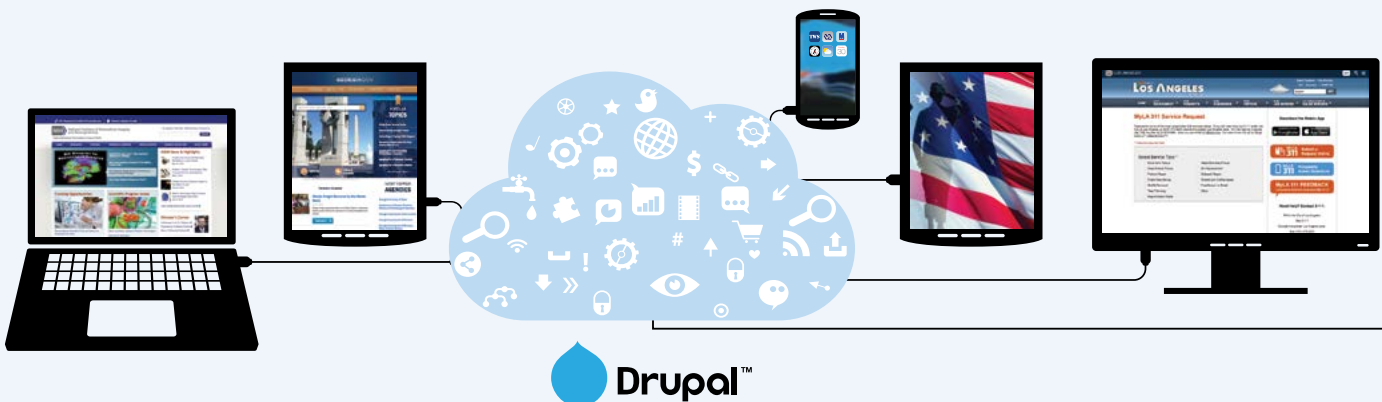
At a recent government conference, an audience member asked the panel I was on, "Aren't all people who do Drupal the same?" The answer is, most emphatically, no. Here are five questions to ask when evaluating a Drupal vendor.

1 DOES THEIR SKILL SET MATCH MY PROJECT'S NEEDS?

Key to answering this question is understanding the scale and complexity of your project. The following table provides a (very) rough model for assessing your project.

Relatively simple	Relatively complex
Brochureware: A site with content and graphics but little functionality	**Enterprise platform:** An application that serves a critical business need with significant functionality, often across multiple websites, as well as critical performance and security considerations
Site building: Creating pages and content using the Drupal user interface	**Custom development:** Creating or modifying functionality at the code level with an eye toward code quality, maintainability, security, and performance
Little business logic: Limited customization of workflows, content types, or integrations	**Significant business logic:** Highly customized and individualized workflows and content types as well as third-party integrations requiring read/write access
Small or straightforward migrations: Manually migrating a small amount of content (small meaning "quantity it would be reasonable to cut and paste") or migrating content from a structured data source that imports cleanly into Drupal without much unwanted markup	**Large, variable migrations:** Migrating content from unstructured data sources, from data sources that include unwanted markup that needs to be cleaned up, or from multiple sources with complex relationships

DRUPAL DONE RIGHT

2 WHAT KINDS OF DRUPALISTS DO THEY HAVE?

Once you know what kind of project you have, you can match the right Drupal roles to the project. Here are the common terms and how you might use them in your project. If possible, have your vendor tell you what mix of roles it thinks suits your project.

→ **Site builders:** A site builder creates a website using core and contributed modules. In other words, she downloads and installs modules from Drupal.org and configures those modules using the Drupal user interface to create the functionality she wants on the site.

→ **Themers and front-end developer:** Themer is a Drupal term for a front-end developer with Drupal experience. If you want your Drupal site to look like something other than the vanilla look-and-feel that downloads with it, you'll need a themer.

→ **Back-end developers:** A back-end developer is someone who writes the PHP code, database queries, and the like that comprise Drupal modules. If you want any custom work done at all—and for enterprise sites, you probably do—you'll need a back-end developer.

→ **Technical architects:** Technical architects are skilled at turning business requirements into a maintainable and scalable plan for building your application. Every enterprise project needs technical architecture, yet it's not always included. Whoever you choose to work with, make sure they've taken this into consideration. Building an enterprise application without architecture is like building a house without a blueprint.

3 DO THEY HAVE SIGNIFICANT PAST PERFORMANCE IN DRUPAL?

Many vendors will tell you they can do Drupal, making the assumption that it's a technology their team can learn easily. Drupal is a sophisticated framework that requires expertise like any technology does, especially at the enterprise level. Look for vendors who have previous experience in Drupal. Even better, look for vendors who specialize exclusively in Drupal, under the assumption that people can only really be experts in one area.

Sometimes you don't have the option to use an experienced Drupal vendor—maybe for contracting reasons you have to use a specific contractor for the project. In this situation, supplement your team with targeted services from a Drupal expert. Acquia frequently helps teams new to Drupal get started on their projects with a combination of training and workshops that apply expert knowledge at key points in the project. These key points include:

→ **Discovery and technical architecture:** When you're deciding what and how you're going to build the site, a Drupal expert can help you translate your vision into Drupal.

→ **Start of development:** Get your team off to a good start using the right tools and processes by having an expert pair-program with them for a week or two.

→ **Mid-project code audit:** Ensure your team is on the right track by auditing its work midway through the project so you can catch issues before launch.

→ **Security and performance audits:** A few weeks prior to code freeze, have the code audited specifically for security and performance issues. Be sure to allow enough time to remediate the issues prior to launch.

When you have the right Drupal team in place the results are amazing!

Savings
Energy.gov
$10M
Georgia.gov
$4.7M

NY.gov
+251%
pageviews

New Federal
.Gov Microsite
3 Weeks
to Launch

ACQUIA® THINK AHEAD.

4 ARE THEY ACTIVE MEMBERS OF THE DRUPAL COMMUNITY?

One great thing about open source developers is that their work is out in the open for you to see. Just like you might vet a candidate for employment by checking their LinkedIn profile, go to Drupal.org to check out the profile of the company and developers you're considering hiring. Check out the Drupal Marketplace* to find service providers of all kinds. Click through to view individual profiles of their teams. Activities you're looking for on individual profiles include:

Length of membership: At the top of the profile page, you can see how long someone has been a member of Drupal.org. If a developer just joined, that tells you he has little Drupal experience. Drupal.org is the hub of the Drupal world—if you're not a member, you're not a Drupalist.

Projects: A project encompasses a Drupal module, theme, or installation profile. This list is automatically populated by Drupal.org whenever a person contributes to a project. The key thing to note here is just the presence of projects in this list—if projects are listed, this person is a code contributor.

Posts: Posts are comments, questions, or answers like you might find on any social network. Developers who post frequently are engaging actively in the Drupal community. As in the Projects list, this indicates participation in the community—a long list of posts indicates active participation, but even a short list is much better than no list at all. The frequency and age of posts also indicates the degree of involvement.

5 DO THEY HAVE ACQUIA CERTIFIED DEVELOPERS?

Acquia has developed a certification program to solve the very problem this article addresses—how do you find a good Drupal developer? Acquia Certified Developers have demonstrated they understand Drupal by completing and passing very rigorous tests. Since this program debuted in 2014, we've seen increasing numbers of RFPs require Acquia Certified Developers as a way of ensuring Drupal projects are staffed with high-quality developers.

*https://www.drupal.org/drupal-services

For more information about Drupal, visit **www.drupal.org,** and for more information about Acquia's Drupal certification and solutions, visit **www.acquia.com.**

The blog post on building a great Drupal team provides more insight into these roles. As a basic rule of thumb, simple sites can be built by site builders and themers. More complex site builds need teams made up of all the roles mentioned here.*

* https://www.acquia.com/blog/5-steps-build-great-drupal-team-step-1-teams-roles-and-skills

Let's talk

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