

Date : 20th December 2001
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Which web development tools ?

This question is not really that simple.
What do you mean by web tools ?

We asked a group of people to list the web tools they use.

They came back with much more than we expected the tools break down into the following categories:

- Web Servers.
- Browsers.
- Web page layout tools.
- Content Management systems.
- Scripting engines.

These can really be broken down into three categories:

- Content viewing technology.**
- Content delivery technology.**
- Development tools.**

1) **Content viewing technology:**

These are generally the browsers, or sometimes-bespoke applications that use the internet as a communications technology.

2) **Content delivery technology:**

This is the technology at the server end.

The most popular technologies in use today are:

- MS Windows running IIS (Internet Information Server) web server.
- Linux running Apache web server.
- Unix running a variety of enterprise web servers e.g. iPlanet.

3) **Development tools:**

These are the tools that the developers are using to build the pages. The development tools break down into two types:

- Front end development tools.
- Backend development tools.

Content viewing technology

The content viewing technology is normal a browser. There are several browsers available. The most popular is Microsoft Internet Explorer (MSIE) with Netscape navigator in second place.

There is a misconception that MSIE is always the platform to develop for. This is not always true.

You need to understand your client base.

If your users are have "FreeServe" accounts you can be fairly certain that the majority will be using MSIE.

If your clients are generally the creative artistic people then a lot will be using Netscape.

If your clients are predominantly the rises arm chair markets they may be using WebTV browsers.

You can determine exactly what your audience are using by very simple methods.

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Content Delivery

This is the technology at your ISP or IT department. The platform that you are running on can make a huge difference to how you develop your site.

For example if you are wanting to stick with MS Access as your database, because you are familiar with it then you need MS IIS hosting.

If you want cheap ISP hosting with full functionality then you will probably settle for Linux - Apache hosting.

If you are a large organisation with enterprise databases you have more freedom. These databases can be viewed from multiple platforms.

The scripting languages and database technologies on both systems are different. If you develop for an MS-IIS platform and it turns out your ISP is running Linux then you either have to change your hosting (package or even provider) or start again.

Before you embark on a costly development you must understand what you are getting into.
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There is a trend at present to use off the shelf solutions (shopping carts and content management). Often these solutions are very cost effective. However they often use a completely bespoke scripting language or can only run on specially configured servers.
If you outgrow your solution, your migration path might be to start again.

You need to understand the implications of your decisions up front.
There is a case for off the shelf and for bespoke, you should make the decision from a position of knowledge not ignorance.

Development Tools

To build a web application / site efficiently we need to use tools to make the mundane tasks simple. There are a raft of "Pure" developers who will not use tools; this is not good commercial sense. It is true that the tools do sometimes have a problem and you do have to dive in. However 95% of the time the tools will increase your efficiency.

Overall a development tool will increase your productivity by a factor of between 10 and 50 times.

a) **Front-end development tools:**

There are a huge number of tools available today including:

- Hot Metal
- Hot Dog
- Coffee Cup
- Dreamweaver
- FrontPage
- Home site

Most professional developers are using Dreamweaver.
Most Intranet developers are using FrontPage.

We much prefer Dreamweaver; it produces layout (HTML) that is generally platform independent. Development tools such as FrontPage are popular with the Intranet market as it is often shipped with the standard Microsoft bundle that many companies buy, so has no additional cost for a limited IT budget.

FrontPage however will very easily generate content that can only be viewed properly and deployed properly on Microsoft technologies, i.e. IIS based hosting and the MS Internet Explorer browser.

b) **Backend development tools:**

Once a site has to start earning its living you need to integrate the site with backend technologies such as databases.

The better tools offer this capability.

The better tools allow non-IT developers to implement basic integration with a database. Such tools include MS FrontPage and Macromedia UltraDev (Big brother to Dreamweaver).

These tools will not allow you to develop very complex backend solutions, unless used in conjunction with an experienced software developer.

There are lots of options, you need to make those decisions from a point of knowledge
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