

WPengine®

HOW TO TRANSITION TO WORDPRESS AS A DIGITAL AGENCY

WHITE PAPER



In our previous [white paper](#), we made the case for agencies adopting WordPress as an essential weapon in the fight to survive and thrive. While we hopefully managed to convince you that WordPress has a crucial role to play, many readers may well have been left scratching their heads about how best to actually get started. That's exactly the topic we're going to address this time around.

In this piece, we'll step through six sensible ways you and your team can start leveraging WordPress today on real projects, prepare you for classic roadblocks you'll encounter as you do so, and point you in the right direction for hiring. By the time we're finished, you should be in a great position to take things further on your own.

Before we get down to business, however, let's kick things off with a quick recap of the value that WordPress brings to the table.

A Quick Reminder of WordPress' Unique Set of Benefits

The following list of WordPress' plus points is by no means exhaustive, but it highlights several key considerations:

- **Ubiquity:** WordPress is powering [more than a quarter](#) of the web and shows no signs of slowing down. It's a solution that clients, your team, and prospective hires will almost certainly have some level of experience with and knowledge of already.

- **Open-source nature:** WordPress is one of the highest profile and best maintained pieces of open-source software in the world. The platform is under constant development with regular releases and billion-dollar backing in the form of [Automattic's](#) ongoing patronage.
- **Thriving plugin and theme markets:** A staggering array of quality, modular, off-the-shelf solutions already exist for the platform, and the number is growing every day. You can radically cut development time and complexity if you find the right mix.
- **A truly global community:** WordPress has a large and active community of users. Top development talent is out there (if you know [where to look](#)), and informed answers to common questions are never far away.

WordPress has an enormous amount going for it already, and the [REST API](#) is set to radically broaden its appeal and programmatic power in the near future. Long story short: now is an excellent time to board this particular train.

Okay – with that reminder out of the way, let's move on to how your agency can start making WordPress work.

6 Sensible Ways Your Agency Can Leverage WordPress

Anyone with an agency background will be painfully familiar with the eternal truth that all change carries risk. While you may be looking to work WordPress into an increasingly large part of your firm's day-to-day workflow over time, it would obviously be madness to go all-in straight out of the gate.

In the next section, we'll deal with specific issues you might face while transitioning to WordPress, but it's worth stressing up top that it will more than likely be a *gradual* process, rather than an overnight switch.

You'll want to clear distinct blocks of time for your developers and designers to have a good think about how the software is going to fit into existing workflows and your overall stack, and give them plenty of room for learning and experimentation. You're also likely to want to limit yourself to green-field projects to kick things off, rather than struggling to retrofit existing work.

With that in mind, we've broken out an initial list of opportunities in ascending order of potential complexity. As you and your team get more familiar with WordPress, you'll find yourself moving through them with increasing confidence and ease.

Let's take it from the top!

1 Use WordPress as a Quick Prototyping Tool

Prototyping is a natural environment for quickly learning the basics of a new technology. As an essentially internal process (at least in terms of what's going on under the hood) it's also a low-risk scenario to cut your team's teeth on.

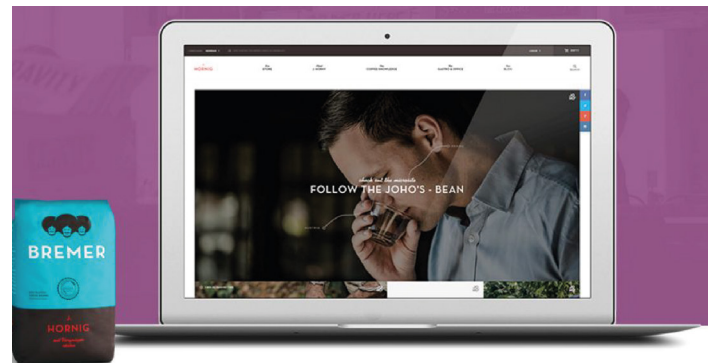
The next time you're looking to knock out a quick prototype on a project, task your team with delivering it in WordPress to start getting a feel for the platform's possibilities and limitations.

2 Produce Marketing Sites in Record Time

Quickly delivering marketing sites is a key requirement on innumerable real-world projects, and presents a natural opportunity for WordPress to shine. Unless a particular instance specifically demands another technology, introduce WordPress as your de facto marketing site solution going forward.

3 Start Avoiding the Cost and Complexity of Custom Code Where Possible

Once your team is comfortable churning out quick solutions for relatively straightforward use cases such as marketing sites, you can start aiming a little higher. The huge range of existing high-quality plugins available for WordPress means it can often step into the breach where a particular piece of user-facing functionality is required.



WordPress offers solid off-the-shelf solutions for areas such as [ecommerce](#).

Rather than getting your developers to reinvent the wheel with custom code, look to leverage WordPress' intrinsic flexibility where possible with an appropriate plugin-based solution. For example, perhaps you can quickly solve a membership requirement with something like [MemberMouse](#), or isolate an ecommerce requirement in a [WooCommerce](#) install.

4 Integrate With Front End Frameworks

At some stage, you'll want your team to get intimately familiar with the workings of the [REST API](#) to prepare them for the [future of the platform](#). Look for projects where you can use WordPress as a slick admin and back end solution for clients; then, look to marry it via API to standalone front ends powered by [Angular](#), [Ember](#), or [React](#).

This is an approach that's already [gaining ground among top agencies](#), and offers an excellent learning opportunity for all concerned.

5 Connect the Dots With Legacy Solutions

The highly anticipated [REST API](#) has now opened the doors to a broader programmatic world for WordPress. It allows for many exciting new options, such as a 'headless' CMS, where you can manage all of your content from one central location, and then push it to any of your platforms – in an app, on a website, or anywhere else.

That's the theory, but what about practical applications? Let's take a closer look at exactly how the REST API's potential is being realized in the 'real' world.

The New York Times, for example, has been using the REST API [since 2014](#). WordPress is now their de facto 'Breaking News' framework for managing content, even though they use a separate front end website to display the pieces.

[StoryCorps](#) uses the REST API to fuel their [mobile app](#) to manage a customized content structure and easily scale up without being tied to a specific operating system, such as iOS or Android.

WordPress plugins like [Editus](#) use the REST API to enable site owners to write and edit posts directly on their websites' front end, instead of drafting articles within the WordPress back end. This is again possible thanks to the way the REST API decouples creation and maintenance from the end product.

As you can see, the REST API pushes WordPress beyond the bounds of a traditional content management system. By enabling complex data communication with external applications, WordPress is now a viable foundation for running much more than a simple website. What you do with this ability is only limited by your imagination!

6 Go All-in on Large Projects

As your team's skillset broadens, you'll be increasingly confident about pitching WordPress as a complete solution for larger engagements. With the right mix of specialities on your team, and the flexibility in integrating technical alternatives that the REST API offers, you should be in a great position to take on truly large and lucrative projects.

Forewarned Is Forearmed: 5 Classic Roadblocks to Be Aware Of

The road to WordPress adoption will not always be a smooth one. As you employ it in earnest on more and more of your projects, there are a number of relatively standard internal and external obstacles that may well rear their heads.

None of these themselves are deal-breakers, but it's best to have a clear sense of potential sticking points going in. Let's step through some of more common issues that tend to arise.

1 Getting Buy-In From Decision Makers

While most small business owners would be shocked if you *didn't* tout WordPress as a solution, that's not necessarily the case as you move up the value chain. Though it's made great strides of late, WordPress has yet to truly thrive in environments where

frameworks such as [Ruby on Rails](#) and [Django](#) have made a name for themselves.

Particularly when pitching to new clients, you may find yourself cast in something of an evangelical role as you're forced to sell the merits of the underlying technology alongside your own value add. Don't be surprised to see some of the subsequent points we list below being raised early by key decision makers.

This is as much an opportunity as it is a challenge, however. If the overall project fit is right, WordPress may enable you to come in with project bids that are substantially more affordable and quicker than those of your rivals.

That said, be prepared for some potential pushback along the way.

2 Security Concerns

Let's cut straight to the chase on this one. WordPress core boasts [security standards](#) that are easily on par with those of any competing platforms. That [hasn't always](#) been the case, however, and the perception that the platform is somehow not up to scratch in this department has lingered with many developers and decision makers. Those concerns are, ultimately, legitimate. You have to be prepared to address them in detail.

From a slightly more selfish perspective, you'll also need to factor in the topic of code review of any external plugins or themes used by your team. While WordPress core arrives locked down out of the box, it's a [very different story](#) when it comes to the wider ecosystem of plugins and themes.

From the client's perspective, it's a matter of extreme indifference where a security issue originally arose from – the buck stops with you as the service provider. You'll need to perform a significant level of due diligence on any external resources before they make it into a project.

3 Code Quality and Culture

Both WordPress and PHP are big players when it comes to web-driven technology. A whopping [82.4% of websites](#) are currently powered by PHP, while [27.4% of the internet](#) runs on WordPress.

PHP made a radical leap from version 5.6.29 to 7.0.0 on [December 3, 2015](#). Thanks to a brand new processor and the ditching of long-since deprecated functions, PHP 7 is now [twice as fast](#) as its predecessors. The latest version also introduced a number of new features, including elegant error handling, that make it a more [pleasant language](#) to work in.

WordPress core [runs smoothly](#) with PHP 7. However, this doesn't account for the actions of third-party developers, and many plugins have not yet been updated to take advantage of the benefits of the latest iteration of PHP.

WordPress.org publishes [PHP coding standards](#) in a digital handbook to help developers follow best practices. For the more experienced, well-supported and streamlined development tools have become prevalent in recent years. (Consider [WP CLI](#), which allows complex WordPress task management from the command line.) And thanks to the WordPress community, open-source partner scripts are also available.

Project templates and frameworks, such as the [WordPress Plugin Boilerplate](#) and [Roots](#), help the efficient production of high-quality code without having to start from scratch. Increased access to flexible and affordable cloud hosting, through services such as [Digital Ocean](#), makes it easy to test, launch, and scale WordPress-based apps affordably.

It may be that WordPress' biggest overall challenge is in influencing developers to follow modern coding standards. This is difficult because so many developers are entry level, and not used to best practices such as [Object Oriented Programming](#). Without proper research, you may find yourself struggling to keep up – many independent theme and plugin developers do.

Thankfully, helpful resources abound when you play it smart. By forming partnerships with experienced and responsible agencies who have a track record of adopting best practices, you can create spectacular projects without having to build from the ground up or be an expert going in.

WordPress is not a perfect platform, but it does offer a solid foundation from which it is possible to build (nearly) anything with relative efficiency while keeping costs down in the process. Furthermore, its wide adoption and the size of its community ensures that you won't be alone in your efforts – now or in the future.

4 Project Upkeep and Maintenance

Regular feature and security updates to WordPress are very much a plus point, but they do raise the wider subject of maintenance when it comes to client relations.

Be prepared to spend slightly more time than you might be used to in hammering out the exact terms governing project maintenance, updates, and change requests with clients.

In particular, pay extremely close attention during the spec'ing stage to exactly what clients should and shouldn't be able to change on their own.

The inherent flexibility and user-friendliness of WordPress often leads many clients to expect to be able to magically change every aspect of their site with a few clicks. Confusion in these types of areas can lead to awkward post-launch scenarios. Get it clear from the get go.

5 Hiring

There's no shortage of PHP and WordPress developers in the world today, but quality varies enormously. You're obviously not just looking for someone who's knocked together a couple of WordPress sites for small clients in the past; you're looking for a highly skilled professional who's equally at home on the front and back end. Ideally, you're also looking for people with at least some design sensibility and a feel for product development. Such people are not that easy to find.

Hiring is going to be one of the biggest hurdles you face when making the move to WordPress on your team, so let's continue by breaking this topic out a bit further.

Who to Hire for WordPress Development

At this point we'll assume you already have a solid team in place to cover front end concerns, and that your existing developers and system administrators have already had time to get their heads around moving to WordPress.

```
1 <?php
2
3
4 class Idea extends Eloquent
5 {
6
7     /**
8      * Dreaming of something more?
9      *
10     * @with Laravel
11     */
12     public function create()
13     {
14         // Have a fresh start...
15     }
16
```

You're looking for organized pros with extensive experience of frameworks such as [Laravel](#).

WordPress is a relatively easy environment for experienced developers to transition into, but you want someone arriving who can deliver instant value, and potentially guide others into the platform based on their experience. Here's a quick breakdown of the characteristics you should be looking for:

- **Agency experience.** You don't want someone whose hand you have to hold in this regard.
- **Programming polyglot.** You want demonstrable experience with another major language (such as Java, Python, or Ruby), and solid knowledge of a modern framework in that language.
- **Deep PHP knowledge.** You're looking for depth outside the specific confines of WordPress here. Expect to see familiarity with modern tools such as [Composer](#), and an excellent working knowledge of frameworks such as [Laravel](#).
- **JavaScript skills.** They don't have to be a ninja in this regard, but JavaScript is a [huge part of the future](#) of WordPress, so they must be up to speed. Solid knowledge of the [DOM](#) and [jQuery](#) is a must. Ideally, they should also have experience with modern libraries and frameworks such as [Ember](#), [Angular](#), or [React/Redux](#).
- **API-driven development experience.** The [REST API](#) is going to power the next generation of WordPress solutions. You want somebody who has extensive previous experience in leveraging APIs in other contexts.
- **A firm commitment to best practices.** The ideal candidate should be deeply familiar with unit and integration testing, version control, and standard deployment strategies.

Did we also mention that they should be advanced in WordPress itself?

You want provable experience on large-scale commercial projects, and ideally a couple of visible examples of plugins they've developed.

Where do we find such mythical creatures? It isn't necessarily going to be easy, but they are out there. Let's look at how you track them down.

How to Hire for WordPress Development

Every agency will have its own unique take on hiring, so we'll stick to a broad sequence of steps here that should gel nicely with the intricacies of your own approach:

1. **Get familiar with the WordPress agency landscape.** There are several large agencies already knocking it out of the park worldwide. Get familiar with their work and public-facing personnel to start understanding the terrain you're operating in. Firms such as [10up](#) and [Modern Tribe](#) are excellent examples.
2. **Consult deeply with your existing team.** There's zero point in trying to parachute professionals into an existing mix and hoping everything magically goes right. Actively engage your team in the hiring process, and get their feedback about properties and precise roles you're looking for.
3. **Only use high-quality job boards.** Cut straight to the chase here and go directly after the pros. [Stack Overflow](#), [WP Hired](#), and [Authentic Jobs](#) are all excellent places to start your search. Toptal is also an interesting alternative worth considering, and a quick posting in the monthly [Who Is Hiring?](#) thread on [Hacker News](#) is also always worth a punt.
4. **Date before you marry.** Even if you're offering long-term engagements, small-scale test projects are always the way to go, particularly when you're making this type of transition. Take a [tip from Automattic's book](#) in this regard.

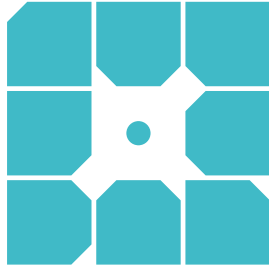
Conclusion

Embracing WordPress is a natural choice for many digital agencies, but as always, the devil is in the actual implementation details. Hopefully the various points we've outlined above are enough to help you start working out a practical roadmap that's tailored to the needs of your own setup.

Let's step through the main points we covered one more time:

1. Ease into wholesale WordPress adoption slowly using the sample projects we listed as a possible ladder your team can climb.
2. Take a hard look at the potential obstacles we outlined, and be prepared for some objection handling in the wild.
3. Aim high with your initial hiring using our list of core characteristics and recommended resources.

We'd love to hear how you're tackling the transition in your own agency. Feel free to [get in touch](#) with our team and share the lessons you've learned!



About WP Engine

WP Engine powers amazing digital experiences for websites and applications built on WordPress. The company's premium managed hosting platform provides the performance, reliability and security required by the biggest brands in the world, while remaining affordable and intuitive enough for smaller businesses and individuals. Companies of all sizes rely on WP Engine's award-winning customer service team to quickly solve technical problems and create a world-class customer experience. Founded in 2010, WP Engine is headquartered in Austin, Texas and has offices in Limerick, Ireland, San Francisco, California, San Antonio, Texas, and London, England.

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