

Guidelines for Indian Government Websites

Web enablement of citizen services is one of the focus areas of NeGP (National e-Governance Plan). Effective Communication is a key indicator of a successful relationship and websites are the first point of interface in building these relationships. They also facilitate an efficient and timely interaction between the citizens and the Government.



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Internet has gradually redefined the lifestyle of the common man. With the penetration of the internet and its availability on a range of devices it is highly likely that the first point of interface for enabling information and services from Government departments to the citizens' will be the Government Websites.

Over the years a large number of websites have evolved which has not only ensured maximum reachability of information but has also provided material uplift to information sharing. The "Right to Information Act" has further strengthened the initiative by requiring mandatory disclosures of certain categories of information on government functioning and its services to citizens and other stakeholders.

Such a system still does not validate the best practices of information delivery through websites. On critically evaluating a number of websites available in the government web space there emerge certain challenges that require attention. An illustration of these challenges is placed below:

- Lack of Identity
- Citizen Centricity
- Inconsistency in the presentation
- Absence of coherent navigation strategy
- Outdated content
- Compliance to best practices
- Addressing the access needs of differently abled people
- Website operations and management policies

These are major impediments in allowing citizens to effectively use the government websites. If we could find a mechanism to address the above challenges in government websites we shall be able to provide much better experience to citizens while accessing government websites. Such an attempt will also enhance the trust level of citizens while accessing information and availing government services online.

In view of the above the need to build a pragmatic solution across the challenges and ensure an effective practice for the delivery of information through the websites was felt.

Overview

In pursuance of the same, it was decided to develop the guidelines for Indian Government websites. These guidelines were developed by National Informatics Centre through an extensive consultation process involving senior representatives from the Government Departments both at Centre and State level.

During development of these guidelines the team had referred to the internationally accepted best practices for web development. The policies laid down by other countries were also studied and comprehended so as to relate them well with the Indian context. Relevant standards of ISO and W3C viz; W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0) & ISO 23026 were also studied and duly incorporated.

The guidelines for Indian Government websites have been adopted by Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG) Government of India. DARPG has also made it an integral component of Central Secretariat Manual of Office Procedure (CSMOP). These guidelines were formally released in February 2009 at 12th National Conference for e-Governance in Goa organised by DARPG.

These guidelines are developed with an objective to make the Indian Government websites comply with the essential pre-requisites of UUU Trilogy i.e; Usable, User-Centric and Universally Accessible. It is suggested that these guidelines should be followed during the development of Government websites and portals at any organisational level belonging to both Central as well as State/UT governments.

Quality Certification

The website guidelines form the basis for obtaining website Quality Certification from STQC (Standardisation Testing Quality Certification), an organisation of Department of Information Technology, Government of India. For more details log on to the website stqc.nic.in

These guidelines are divided into three categories viz. Mandatory directed towards requirements which can be objectively assessed and which the departments are supposed to mandatorily comply with, Advisory which refers to recommended practices or advisories that are considered highly important and desirable and Voluntary which can be adopted by a department if deemed suitable .

These guidelines address the entire lifecycle of a website, web portal or a web application right from its conceptualisation to design, development, maintenance and management.

Key Domains:

- Government of India Identifiers
- Building confidence
- Scope of Content
- Quality of Content
- Design
- Development
- Hosting
- Promotion
- Management

Government of India Identifiers

This part of the guidelines pertains to the expression of 'Identity' in the websites. It guides the audience over the approach and the methodology to be adopted to ensure the veracity and authenticity of the official status of the websites. In order to maintain the same this section flows through the following touch points:-

- Ownership of Indian government is to be represented visually by the use of National Emblem of India on the homepage of websites. States may use their own emblem in case they have one and PSU and autonomous bodies must use their official logo. Ownership of the website is to be further consolidated by presenting the complete lineage of the department at the footer of the home page.
- The URL or the Web Address of any Government website is also a strong indicator of its authenticity and status as being official. With a large proliferation of websites, which resemble Government websites the role of a designated Government domain name assumes a lot of significance in ensuring the authenticity of the website.

Building Confidence

Trust is an essential element to build the relationship between the Government and the citizens and stakeholders. To uphold the same this section lays stress on framing of proper policies and disclaimers to protect the interest of both the department and the user of the website.

This section deals with the issues ranging from the department's policy towards the usage of content present on the website, the responsibility of department towards externally linked site and the terms and conditions of use of the website. Sample policies and statements have also been provided for ready reference.

Scope of Content

This segment relates to the content framework that should be followed in a government website. It categorises the content that is in the public domain (meant for the consumption of citizen), content for the internal use by the department and content that should be avoided in a government website is also highlighted.

The content in the public domain that forms the basis of this framework has been further categorised as primary secondary and tertiary content depending on the purpose it fulfils. Illustrative list of the contents heads in all the three categories have also been specified along with the guidelines pertaining to the compilation of content under each of these heads. The section also proposes the availability of certain minimum content elements on the homepage and subsequent pages.

While the whole gamut of the content has been discussed departments may choose the elements that fulfill the content requirements for their website.

Quality of Content

To ensure an effective reach the essential character is as how the content is compiled and packaged. This section provides guidance on various indicators to look at when exercising quality. It provides necessary inputs on various fronts such as content authenticity, accuracy and currency. The section guides well in terms of the quality of language considering multilingualism as a prime factor. In the same lines this section provides awareness on the methodology to ensure consistent terminology. One of the strengths of this section is the guidance on Information Architecture which entrusts ideally on the organisation of information, structuring the information, labeling and access to the information with minimum effort.

Design

Good design ensures enhancement of the user experience by presenting the content in a form that is easily understandable, navigable and searchable by the user, in addition to being visually appealing. The branding of a website can be established by incorporating common design elements such as colours, logos, styles, etc., into every page. This presents a professional and consistent visual identity as well as an important signpost.

This section of the document covers various areas involved in the design of the website like page layout, graphic buttons, typography, colour, images, audio, video, animation and also provides guidance on achieving consistent navigation across the website. The overall aim is to increase the usability quotient of the website. Navigational aids such as Site search and sitemap that are the key to ensure an effective usability function have also been discussed in this section.

Development

Developing a website involves use of technologies and tools in order to ensure interoperability and universal accessibility of websites. This part of document provides technical details on the approach to the use of markup language, cascading style sheet, use of scripting languages and also provides guidelines on various file formats to be used in the website. The section also provides a ready reference to guide the developers during the development process.

The development phase will also involve two significant areas validation /testing and web application security. These two phases ensure the correctness and validity of the content. The section recommends the use of leading practices and tools to test the site and also control risks associated with website security.

Universal Accessibility

The term 'Universal Accessibility' refers to making a website accessible to ALL irrespective of technology, platforms, devices or disabilities of any kind. Most pertinent guidelines to address the above needs have been given in various sections of the document and have been categorised as 'mandatory'. These guidelines have been adopted from W3C's 'Web Content Accessibility Guidelines'.

Website Hosting

Anywhere, anytime delivery of information and services to the citizens and other stakeholders is one of the primary objectives of a Government website. While it is extremely important to develop websites using state-of-the-art technologies, hosting infrastructure plays a crucial role in the performance, availability and accessibility of these websites. Hence, review of hosting server infrastructure as well as facilities at Data Centers is important prior to hosting. This section details the kinds of facilities and services that the Department should expect from their hosting service providers. It touches upon the important aspects like presence of security both at physical and network level, provisioning for regular backups and presence of redundant server infrastructure for fastest restoration of website in case of any eventuality. Departments are advised to have a contingency plan ready

in event of any unforeseen event like defacement, in this segment of the guidelines.

Website Promotion

Website promotion is a critical component in maximising reach. The ultimate objective of any Government website is to provide information and services to as many citizens and stakeholders as possible. In other words the websites should be accessible to ALL irrespective of technologies, platforms, devices or disabilities of any kind. This fulfillment of this objective will ensure maximum usage and participation by the citizens, thereby, assuring inclusive Governance.

To relate to an effective promotion strategy this section provides guidelines on the approach towards search engine registration and optimization and stretches to the efficacies of various promotion techniques. This part of the document also suggests on the usage of advertisements, public messages, press releases, tender notifications as a means to promote the website.

Website Management

The website management needs a blend of technical and managerial skill sets. This section provides an insight to understand and incorporate the correct practices required for the management of websites.

The critical areas in concern are the need to appoint Web information Manager whose responsibilities are to formulate the policies with regard to the website and also ensure the quality control and compliance to the guidelines and to maximize the reach of the websites through various promotional strategies. In case of a large website the Guidelines suggests a formulation of a team which includes a Technical Manager as well.

To ensure the compliance with the guidelines and standards the section discusses the tools required for website maintenance and monitoring. Website review and enhancement at planned intervals to ensure that the website lives up to expectation of the users have also been proposed.

The Section also stresses on the availability of different website policies to give a clear roadmap to management team and help them to take important decisions. The policies to be formulated are

- Copyright Policy
- Hyper linking Policy
- Terms & Conditions
- Privacy policy
- Content Contribution, Moderation and Approval Policy (CMAP)
- Content Review Policy (CRP)
- Content Archival Policy (CAP)
- Website Security Policy
- Website Monitoring Policy
- Contingency Management

Compliance to the Guidelines

It is envisaged that all government departments use these guidelines to harness the web in support of citizen centered governance. The advice is to apply education, enforcement and enhancement while using these guidelines and recognize them as a 'living document'. Compliance to these guidelines will enable the department to obtain Website Quality Certification from STQC.

This is the first version of the guidelines. National Informatics Centre is committed to bring about changes in the document in keeping with the technological changes and the suggestions/feedback of the users. We welcome Citizens and Government departments to share their knowledge and experience in our endeavor to provide comprehensive guidelines for Government Websites.

To take this initiative further a website has also been set up at <http://web.guidelines.gov.in>, where one can get full text of the guidelines in an easy to use manner.

Provision for online consultation for these guidelines is also envisaged on this website. Visitors can give their feedbacks on specific sections of the guidelines through this website.

In case you come across government websites complying with these guidelines, please let us know. We shall be glad to acknowledge the same on the above website. **i**