

The iCrossing Guide to Site Migration





Introduction

A website migration can come in many different forms and have different objectives. It is important SEO is not overlooked and considered right from the start of any migration project. The steps within this guide will help you plan for the expected and unexpected, ensure the correct SEO elements are built into the site specification from the start and that SEO is monitored throughout the project. Crucially, this guide will help remove the stress of a poorly planned migration and potential loss to organic traffic.

So, let's get started.

iCrossing have an established history of site migration success and have identified six key phases which need to be considered in every project.

Phase One: Strategy & Scope

Identifying growth opportunities and risks. Also setting realistic objectives and goals for the project that are mapped to an accurate project plan.

Phase Two: Preparing for Success

In this critical step there are four planning areas:

- Understanding site performance and migration impact
- SEO specification for project success
- Benchmarking
- Communicating core requirements

Phase Three: Pre-launch Testing

Time to make sure what was agreed in the SEO specification has been implemented. Complete a full technical review against SEO requirements set in Phase Two. Marking current status against SEO specifications set.

Phase Four: Launch Day Testing

Ensuring that search engines can correctly crawl and index content and that any attributes to block search engines from crawling the site have been removed.

Phase Five: Post-launch Review

The week following the launch of the migration it's critical to keep monitoring performance to spot any problem areas and ensuring search engines are correctly understanding page elements. Feeding back initial insights into performance and how Google is interpreting the new site changes.

Phase 6: Performance Review

Revisit the objective and benchmarks that were set at the beginning of the project. Check performance against KPIs and feed findings into ongoing technical roadmap.

What we do.

iCrossing has helped some of the biggest brands in the world complete successful migrations. We've found clearly communicating technical SEO requirements and tracking these against agreed milestones, as well as being transparent about risks to organic traffic new development changes could cause (and being able to tangibly demonstrate impact) is critical to deliver a successful migration.



Phase One: Strategy & Scope

Setting objectives and understanding the aim of a site migration is an important first step. SEO needs to be considered right at the beginning of any migration. First, you need to identify the type of migration that is being implemented, to then understand the level complexity, risk to SEO and effort required.

Consider the migration type

There are several different types of migration:

- **Rebuilding, change of CMS or redesigning a website:**

This migration offers plenty of opportunity to fix outstanding technical issues and see organic performance improvements. Ensure new functionality doesn't impact SEO performance.

SEO Risk: Medium

Complexity: High

- **Changing domain name:**

Changing domain name with no other sites changes has minimal risk to SEO. Managing redirects correctly is critical.

SEO Risk: Low

Complexity: Low

- **Merging multiple websites:**

Merging multiple sites is very complicated and needs a detailed strategy.

SEO risk: High

Complexity: High

It's possible a combination of all the above is being completed. Detailed planning will be needed.

Identify initial growth opportunities and risks

Site migrations are a great opportunity to explore ways of increasing organic visibility and traffic to your site, for example by improving taxonomy or addressing duplicate content issues. Be sure to factor these into your scope of work. Also consider any potential risks that could harm your site's visibility so you can plan to mitigate the impact.

Set realistic objectives and goals

Share clear and realistic objectives and goals with key stakeholders to help set and manage expectations. Agreeing on this in the set-up phase will also help keep the project within scope and budget.

Ensure you are feeding in knowledge of the type of migration and growth opportunities and risks to SEO into your objectives for the migration.

It's critical to understand core milestones for the project and when SEO requirements need to feed in and be reviewed.

Project plan

A project plan with key deliverables, dependencies and milestones is critical. This plan is most likely going to change as the project moves ahead, however, it is important to document when the SEO specification will be provided (see Phase Two in this document), and this specification is not delivered too late to impact site build specifications, and enough time is included for testing and iteration.



Phase One: Strategy & Scope Checklist

- ☐ Kick-off call with key stakeholders to fully understand the aims of the migration and technical elements being completed
- ☐ Gain access to site analytics and Google Search Console if you don't already have access
- ☐ Identify the complexity for SEO and potential effort
- ☐ Identify initial risks to SEO performance based on known migration aims and what are the opportunities for growth
- ☐ Feed in SEO objectives and KPIs into overall migration aims and objectives
- ☐ Plan SEO effort throughout migration
- ☐ Feed key SEO milestones into migration project plan



iX's Top Tip:

Use the Objective Key Result framework to create tangible result focused SEO objectives for the migration.



Phase Two: Preparing for Success

The key to a successful migration is completing detailed SEO specifications which need to be undertaken as part of the migration (this will vary for each migration). It's also important to fully understand site performance and the potential impact of the migration on SEO and ensure benchmarking is set up to track performance.

Review any known migration specification data and prototypes to create SEO specification

The SEO specification documents SEO requirements that need to be considered from a development perspective. These are critical SEO implementations to first protect SEO visibility, but also enhancements to grow traffic. Include all SEO requirements to be ticked off from a development perspective, documenting new as well as existing features that work well and you want to keep, and considerations based on proposed prototypes and known new functionality.

This specification should be created in a shared document and be used as a checklist throughout the project. Reviewing what's been completed at key milestones and highlighting the 'must haves' for go live.



Time to raise core SEO requirements

When the SEO specification is completed it's critical that this feeds into the overall development specification as soon as possible. It is important core requirements are raised and the development team sign off SEO requirements.

If SEO requirements are highlighted as out of scope, there is a chance to provide stakeholders with the impact of not including functionality and provide a business case for the severity of removing certain SEO best practice. Ensuring this is done early in the project provides transparency of what is or isn't in scope and the impact to all stakeholders.

Identify site performance and migration impact

It's also important to fully understand current organic site performance and the risk to organic traffic from any new proposed site changes. Understanding the most valuable assets that can't afford to lose visibility is critical and feeding this information into 'must have' SEO specification requirements.



Benchmarking

Note your legacy site's page loading times, organic traffic and conversion data and top search query rankings across desktop and mobile, so you can compare performance post-migration. Ensure you have data in place to track against agreed KPIs and objectives which were set for the migration.

Phase Two: Preparing for Success Checklist



iX's Top Tip:

Use the Google Data Studio Google Search Console native connector to extract all the search query performance into a Data Studio dashboard. Use Custom Fields and Case Statements to create custom groupings for query and URLs to quickly drilldown into category and non-brand performance. This provides valuable insight into current site performance and where visibility needs to be maintained through the migration.



Create SEO specification document

- ☐ **Website structure**
Define taxonomy, category and subcategory structure. Facet requirements and crawling parameters
- ☐ **Website navigation**
Define navigation structures and URLs contained in primary navigation
- ☐ **XML sitemap**
Dynamic XML sitemap best practice
- ☐ **Robots.txt**
Detail Robots.txt rules to manage site crawling
- ☐ **Redirects**
Define redirect strategy, best practice and needed rules
- ☐ **404 / Status codes**
Dealing with broken pages, out of stock products and status code best practice
- ☐ **Website hosting**
HTTP/2 and security certificate best practice
- ☐ **URL structure**
URL best practice and define URL folder requirements
- ☐ **Page titles & meta descriptions**
Dynamic rules and best practice
- ☐ **CMS**
SEO functionality requirements
- ☐ **Page Speed & Core Web Vitals**
Core Web Vitals requirements and page speed best practice
- ☐ **Image optimisation**
Image loading and next-gen best practice formats
- ☐ **Video optimisation**
Selfhosting and YouTube best practice
- ☐ **Internal linking**
Pagination, vertical and horizontal linking best practice
- ☐ **Rel-canonical**
Canonical best practice
- ☐ **International targeting**
Hreflang and international targeting best practice
- ☐ **Structured data**
Define relevant structured data
- ☐ **JavaScript**
JavaScript best practice. Define SEO requirements if the site is a SPA
- ☐ **Tracking**
Migrate analytics and tag management
- ☐ **Security**
Define strict transport security (HSTS) requirements



Phase Two: Preparing for Success Checklist Continued



iX's Top Tip:

What's included in the SEO specification will vary based on what type of migration is being completed. It's best to be thorough and not overlook any basic items. It's important to ensure all SEO 101 best practice is included, for example also including CMS functionality if a new CMS migration is being completed.

- ☐ Detailed review of organic performance by reviewing analytics and Google Search Console data. Complete categorising of Google Search Console Performance data into non-brand performance and site categories to identify key organic visibility performance areas and opportunities to grow and protect traffic through the migration
- ☐ Identify current organic market share performance based on an agreed search query taxonomy
- ☐ Complete forecasting based on current organic performance data to demonstrate current organic baseline and potential risks from the migration
- ☐ Ensure any current SEO functionality which is providing value has been carried over into the new specification
- ☐ Meet with development team to run through SEO specification and document what's in scope and agree key milestones for testing
- ☐ If needed business case SEO requirements if they have been removed from scope
- ☐ Setup performance benchmarking to meet agreed SEO KPIs and objectives
- ☐ Whitelist IPs to allow technical site crawlers to access staging site in phase three testing



Phase Three: Pre-launch Testing

The migration is starting to take shape, it is important to review changes to ensure they're matching what was documented in the SEO specification in Phase Two and feeding back required changes to meet agreed requirements. See checklist items on the next page for a detailed list of things to watch out for in pre-launch testing.

Technical SEO review

Time to get into the technical detail and ensure that the SEO best practice detailed in the SEO specification is being met. It's more efficient to try and complete testing in batches and ensuring the final functionality is in place to stop having to complete multiple testing and feedback rounds. Ensure all staging environments are not accessible to search engines.

Page template review

Review page templates to make sure all essential SEO features are in place and optimised. We're talking page titles, meta descriptions, headings and as well as technical attributes such as robots directives, canonical tags, hreflang tags, schema, AMP tags etc. It's best to complete this testing when the new site is complete on staging to allow testing across all page templates and identifying issues across the entire site.

Redirect mapping

Test redirect mapping in the staging environment to make sure all one-to-one redirects work as expected and any generic redirect rules are working too.

Content review

Review content against SEO specification ensuring core pages driving organic traffic have been retained and content hasn't been removed which was meeting core search intent. Ensure you're aware of the searches that matter to the site and how the migration could impact visibility for pages if changes are being made to content.

Architecture and internal linking review

Internal linking is the backbone of a site's link equity flow. Review your vertical linking – from the homepage to deeper pages – as well as horizontally linking to neighbouring relevant pages. Work closely with the UX team to complete a taxonomy review to identity the relationship between content topics and core user journeys to inform internal linking and navigation structures. Tree testing is a fantastic way to gain feedback into new navigation structures to see if they meet user needs.

Review analytics set-up

This is the time to check that your analytics tracking is properly set-up, including any advanced analytics features you need such as event and e-commerce tracking as two examples.

Phase Three: Pre-launch Testing Checklist

Pre-launch testing is very important. It's critical to review the staging site against the defined SEO specification in Phase Two.

Technical checks:

- ☐ **Review JavaScript**
Complete a crawl executing JavaScript to ensure best practice has been followed
- ☐ **Undertake cloaking checks**
Crawl the staging site using both Googlebot regular and Googlebot smartphone user agents to make sure there are no search accessibility or cloaking issues
- ☐ **Review structured data**
Check structured data has been implemented correctly using Google's structured data testing tool
- ☐ **Review indexing elements**
Ensure pages are returning the correct status codes, robots.txt is following best practice, and noindex and canonical tags are implemented correctly
- ☐ **Review XML sitemap**
Check new XML sitemaps and make sure they include all indexable URLs. Also check to ensure that non-indexable URLs such as 404, redirects or canonical pages haven't been included
- ☐ **Hreflang review**
If your site targets multiple countries ensure hreflang is following best practice
- ☐ **URL structure**
Ensure URLs are following best practice and agreed structure
- ☐ **Page titles & meta descriptions**
Ensure pages have optimised page titles and descriptions and dynamic rules have been applied
- ☐ **CMS**
Ensure components are setup to follow SEO best practice. SEO functionality within the CMS is following SEO specification

Page Template checks:

- ☐ **Page speed checks**
Complete checks of page speed elements and CWV using Inspect in Chrome across each core template to ensure it is meeting SEO specification
- ☐ **Heading structure and layout**
Review heading structure across templates and page layouts ensuring they're following best practice
- ☐ **AMP**
If AMP is implemented check pages are being rendered correct and best practice is in place to inform the relationship between the AMP page and site
- ☐ **Review content**
Ensure agreed content hasn't been removed and priority content is included

Internal Linking checks:

- ☐ **Review breadcrumbs**
Breadcrumbs are in place, structured correctly and following best practice
- ☐ **Review broken links**
Complete a crawl of the staging site to spot broken links and pagination can be crawled
- ☐ **Review navigation**
Review navigation structures to ensure they follow SEO best practice and what was defined in the SEO specification

Redirect checks:

- ☐ Test 1:1 redirect mapping
- ☐ Test rule-based redirect mapping
Ensure pages are redirecting to the correct page and using the correct redirect status code

Analytics tracking checks:

- ☐ Review tracking code implementation
Ensure tracking has implemented correctly



Phase Four: Launch Day Checklist

The big day has arrived. The following are the core checks that need to be carried out to ensure search engines can correctly find your new site content and redirects are passing equity from old pages.



Spot-check search engine crawling:

- ☐ Robots.txt is setup correctly and any sitewide disallow rules have been removed
- ☐ There's no unintentional noindex tags in place
- ☐ Search engines and users are being treated in the same way (there's no cloaking issues or unintentional redirecting by user agent)
- ☐ Canonicals are implemented correctly
- ☐ Server responses are correct across both desktop and mobile user agents

Complete redirect checking:

- ☐ Check old URLs redirect correctly to the new pages
- ☐ Redirects are implemented as 301 (permanent redirects)
- ☐ Legacy redirects haven't been lost
- ☐ There's aren't any long redirect chains
- ☐ Dynamic redirect rules work as expected, including:
 - www. vs non-www URL requests
 - http vs https URL requests
 - lowercase vs uppercase URL requests
 - Trailing forward slash URL requests

Carry out Google Search Console actions:

- ☐ Request indexing via the URL inspection tool for new or important pages to make sure they're indexed quickly as possible
- ☐ Checked the blocked resources on key pages using URL Inspection tool. Test the page and view screenshots and page resources
- ☐ Use the URL Inspection tool on each page type (i.e. homepage, category, product)
- ☐ Set the targeted country using the International targeting configuration if relevant
- ☐ Submit and test each XML sitemap for errors
- ☐ Upload disavow file if applicable
- ☐ Use Change of Address tool if moving domain

Complete full site crawl to review page templates and internal linking:

- ☐ Spot internal linking errors and 404 pages
- ☐ Page title and meta descriptions are correct
- ☐ All indexable pages can be discovered
- ☐ Content has been correctly migrated



Phase Five: Post-launch Actions Checklist

The week following the launch of the migration it's critical to keep monitoring performance to spot any problem areas and ensuring search engines are correctly understanding page elements.



iX's Top Tip:

Log file analysis is the best way to understand how search engines are crawling a site. Compare log data before the migration and after to identify new patterns and pages search engines are visiting frequently and any page errors they're hitting. Combining log and crawl data from your chosen technical site crawl is a great way to evaluate your site hierarchy against how search engines are crawling the site.

Google Search Console Analysis

- ☐ Regularly checking Coverage report to closely monitor indexation
- ☐ Keep an eye on the Crawl states report in case the number of pages Google crawls per day drops
- ☐ Download and review the crawl errors report daily from the Coverage tab
- ☐ Monitor Performance report for any changes in organic rankings
- ☐ Monitor Page experience overview for shifts in page experience signals

Analytics Analysis

- ☐ Check analytics for pages which produce an error and have received traffic
- ☐ Monitor live traffic to monitor user journeys and any users hitting errors
- ☐ Review page behaviour stats to spot any unusual activity to ensure content is correctly rendering for users across different templates
- ☐ Check all analytics tags are firing and collecting data as expected

Log file Analysis

- ☐ Obtain log data and filter for search engines hits
- ☐ Review search engine crawl behaviour and pages which are returning a non 200OK status
- ☐ Review crawl frequency across the site to identify pages which are being hit less frequently
- ☐ Identify any pages which are being hit regularly and shouldn't be based on crawl rules, this includes robots.txt and parameter handling



Phase Six: Performance Review Checklist

After three weeks you've got enough data to start to get a good read on performance and revisit your objectives and KPIs set at the beginning of the project.



iX's Top Tip:

It's inevitable that not all SEO requirements would have gone live for launch and there might have been pushes to include certain elements post launch. Ensure that the following launch SEO requirements are not forgotten about, and that post launch the development roadmap considers SEO. Launching a new site is just the start of an exciting new journey, it's critical to continue to push SEO optimisation and establish an SEO roadmap to grow and protect performance.

Go back to your objectives and KPIs

- ☐ Review performance against the KPIs that were set
- ☐ Review performance against any forecasts and identify wins and losses
- ☐ Identify key wins from the migration and why that has happened

Review your benchmarks

- ☐ Revisit your benchmarks to identify any changes following the migration
- ☐ Review technical health benchmarks to identify areas where overall site health has improved
- ☐ After 30 days you'll start to get new Core Web Vitals data to allow you to review page performance for CWV

Deep dive into performance and build out your ongoing roadmap

- ☐ Any SEO items which were out of scope for launch have been included in the post live roadmap
- ☐ Analyse brand vs non-brand performance
- ☐ Review non-brand category performance pre and post migration to identify any trends and identify any visibility increases or declines
- ☐ Review organic share of voice metrics for agreed search query drops to identify any increase in organic market share



Common migration mistakes and how to overcome them

Pages are removed and not redirected to a relevant page

Redirects are critical for maintaining SEO performance as they help inform search engines about the relationships between pages. Pages which are being removed should be mapped 1:2:1, meaning each page is mapped to its most relevant corresponding page. This takes time but will help protect SEO performance. Ensure 301 redirects are used when creating redirects.

Pages are removed which had significant SEO value

Always ensure page performance is evaluated before being removed. It might be that you still decide that the content will be removed, but the team will be aware of the impact. Analysis of top SEO driving pages should be completed as well as identifying the reasons why they are performing well at the start of a migration.

Technical SEO requirements are not fed into the site build

Always try and ensure SEO is considered at the beginning of the project. If they are not, Technical SEO recommendations can't always be included at a later stage and the site might have to be launched with technical issues – which then might impact SEO performance.

Not setting performance benchmarks and SEO objectives for the migration

To understand if a migration was successful you need to have objectives set and trended data to demonstrate performance improvement. For example, if one of the goals was around improving site speed and benchmarks of old site pages hasn't been documented, you've now lost your chance to capture this data and review performance.

About iCrossing

iCrossing is a digital marketing agency that works with businesses who are ready to move faster in digital to create a real step-change. iCrossing is owned by Hearst, the world's largest independent media, entertainment, and content company. Being part of the Hearst family gives iCrossing access to Hearst audiences, data, consumer research and category experts which allows iCrossing to better spot new insights, trends and inform direction for its clients. iCrossing delivers Change. Made Simple.

<https://www.icrossing.co.uk/>

Are you ready to make a digital step-change?

We believe that moving too slowly in digital is the biggest risk your business faces. If you are ready to move faster in digital, we are here to help.

For more SEO advice and top tips, get in touch. We'd love to chat.

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