SEO is a team sport: How brands and agencies organize work



The importance of teamwork and workflow is often missing from discussions of SEO success.

So I interviewed 31 people, with titles ranging from Content Specialist to SEO Director, to CEO, and asked them about how teamwork and workflow affect their SEO operations and success.

Why did I do this? Because we can all learn from the experience of others. By understanding what works for others, we can hopefully avoid making their early mistakes.

Costs of poor coordination are traffic, conversions, working relationships

These costs are very real. Websites can suffer from less organic traffic and/or decreased conversions.

Whitepaper

In the same way that people who run relay races practice how they hand the baton from runner to runner, the various team members working on a website need to work on how they interact

and hand off work to each other.

Sometimes the technical SEO suffers, sometimes the design aesthetics suffer, sometimes the user experience suffers. Sometimes tradeoffs between the three need to be made. Something's gotta give, and you don't want these discussions to erode team cohesion.

How do agencies and brands coordinate SEO tasks effectively?

While there is almost universal agreement about what matters, there are interesting similarities and differences in how teams prioritize what matters. To use the relay race analogy again, there are differences in how people define a "smooth handoff".

Can we learn something from each other in taking a high-level look at how we organize our SEO and content work? I think so. This belief is the basis of this article.

This article describes similarities and differences in SEO operations

When I started interviewing people for this article, I wasn't sure what shape it would take. After several interviews, I realized people organize their teams around certain guiding principles. There seem to be a limited number of these guiding principles, and the order of importance varies from team to team.

As stated earlier, I interviewed 31 people, and the interviews uncovered seven guiding principles. Every guiding principle matters to everyone, but there are differences in opinion about which are most important.

There is also sometimes a need to make tradeoffs. For example,

in order to properly use H2, H3, headers, they must appear on the page. For some pages, the designers may feel they don't fit. So, it sometimes happens that to improve the page design aesthetics, you give a little in on-page SEO, and vice versa.

How conflicting priorities are managed also differs from team to team, and stems from which guiding principles are considered to be most important.

Disclaimer: A small data sample leads to some fuzziness in thinking

My data sample was only 31 people, and each organization was represented by one person. If I were to interview many more people, the distribution of the most important guiding principles might be different, and I might have uncovered more. If I had spoken to a different person within the organization, my understanding of their most important guiding principles might have been different.

Of the 31 people interviewed, 21 worked for agencies, and 10 worked for brands.

I believe there is something we can learn from each other through a high-level examination of how content and SEO teams organize their work and manage conflicting priorities.

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The seven guiding principles around which people organized their SEO work

Below are the seven guiding principles, along with the number of people who considered each one to be most important. There

is a brief description of each in which I explain how it's different from guiding principles to which it seems similar.

Again, I wish to emphasize that everyone places importance on all seven. What's different is the relative order of importance. Saying that six people are listed under "project management" means that six people felt project management was **most** important, not that any of the others are unimportant.

1. Project management: A primary focus on objections, milestones, and tasks

This is the tried-and-true project management we're all familiar with. Objectives, milestones, tasks, and more. Six people spoke of this as being their most important guiding principle. That makes it the second most popular guiding principle, tied with context (see below).

2. Collaboration: Working together well is considered to be the most important

Collaboration is different from project management as the focus is more on working together, rather than on the structure in which the work is managed. This feels to me to be more fluid and to involve more give and take.

Of course, there is a project structure in which the work is done. It's that the emphasis is collaboration first, then project management structure second. Four people spoke of this as their most important guiding principle.

3. Client management: An interesting way some agencies focus their internal staff

As you can imagine, this was exclusively the concern of agencies. The idea here is:

1. The internal team honors what the client has agreed to, and what the client has agreed to is spelled out in detail so as to provide guidance to the internal teams and any outside

contractors they manage

2. By spelling this out in detail for the clients, the clients are educated about SEO. Two people spoke of this as their most important guiding principle.

4. Priorities: Where managing relative priorities take center stage

The focus here is on managing relative priorities. The core idea is a very structured way of determining how tradeoffs are made, which is central to how these people run projects.

In the spirit of full disclosure, this is how I have been known to run projects, and this method has worked very well for me. Three people spoke of this as their most important guiding principle.

5. Education and knowledge: An interesting concept of a marketplace of ideas

The main focus here is that it’s not enough for people to tell other people what’s important, they must also explain and persuade as to why that point of view is important. Within these teams, team members “sell” each other on ideas to help streamline work.

SEOs teach designers why headers matter. Designers teach SEOs why templates matter.

Some of these teams also keep a shared knowledge base that everyone contributes to, which allows new team members to come up to speed faster.

This was THE most popular guiding principle around which people organized work, having been spoken of by seven people (five agencies and two brands).

6. Context: One of my personal favorites where everything is context-dependent

These last two are my personal favorites. The six people for whom context is the main guiding principle all work at agencies.

The concept could be applied in a more limited way for brands, but only agency people brought it up all, let alone described it as their main guiding principle.

The idea is that what matters most is context-dependent.

Are you working with a client who already has a lot of organic traffic and wants to increase conversion rates? Are you working with a blog post whose job is to attract readers and hand them off to a landing page, or a landing page whose job is to get the reader to download an eBook?

The context within a specific project, or set of tasks within a project, determines what matters most.

7. Experimentation: Or in other words, show me the data

Three companies, all brands, stressed the importance of experimentation as their main guiding principle.

It’s the standard methodology taught in the books: The Lean Startup and Running Lean

For those of you who haven’t read those books, the main ideas are:

1. Write down your assumptions

2. Translate those assumptions into a testable hypothesis

3. Structure experiments with which to test those hypotheses

4. Analyze the results of the experiments

If an experiment proves a hypothesis to be true, do more of that. If it proves a hypothesis to be false, stop doing that.

What is left out of the short descriptions above

It’s not the case that each team organized their work around only one guiding principle. That idea showed up in none of the interviews. That every team assigned different importance, or weight, to the different guiding principles IS the difference in how they organized their work.

Everyone settled into their patterns over time. Everyone had, at times in the past, experienced frustrations when work was coordinated and/or handed off poorly and/or simply done poorly.

As they encountered issues, they talked about how to solve them and made changes to how they worked. The guiding principles that came to be most important to them seem to be a result of the specific problems they needed to fix.

Who was interviewed and what did they say?

This section is divided into groups by guiding principles. It identifies who contributed which ideas and provides more about their thinking.

Front and center are principles of project management

The people for whom project management is the main guiding principle are:

- Dean Cacioppo, Founder, OneClickSEO (agency)
- Hamna Amjad, Content Marketing Executive, GigWorker

(brand)
- Juan Reyes, Digital Marketing Manager, Monkee Boy (agency)
- Luke Wester, Digital Marketing Analyst, Miva (brand)
- Mark Bruneman, Principle Digital Marketing Strategist, David-Kenneth Group (brand)
- Thomas Pickett, Onpage SEO and Digital Design Specialist, FitSmallBusiness (brand)

Two of the companies above (GigWorker and FitSmallBusiness) make money through affiliate sales. As such, their websites are very large; their business objective is to attract a very high number of readers, some of whom make purchases that pay commissions.

Their websites and website teams are large. In both cases, most of the company is involved in web publishing in some way. They both have adopted rigorous publishing processes, as a result of the scale of their publishing efforts.

The other four companies (two brands and two agencies) find a strong process focus clarifies requirements upfront and prevents rework.

Dean expressed that scaling is achieved through task specialization, and fitting the various specialized tasks together requires a system.

Mark stated that everything done on the website starts with a team meeting, even creating and publishing a single blog post. These meetings can last up to two hours. Mark expressed that this greatly reduced rework as everyone understood what everyone else needed, before starting work on their part.

Juan expressed how their exacting process orientation is both their greatest strength and simultaneously keeping their processes updated to reflect industry changes is a significant challenge.

Luke expressed that every project starts with SEO requirements, around which everyone else organizes their work.

For whom collaboration matters most

The people for whom collaboration is the main guiding principle are:

- Bryan Pattman, SEO Analyst, 9Sail (agency)
- Nikki Bisel, Owner and Founder, Seafoam Media (agency)
- Phil Mackie, Senior Digital Analyst and Owner, Top Sail Digital (agency)
- Stephen Jeske, Senior Content Strategist, MarketMuse (brand)

To reiterate, collaboration differs from project management in terms of emphasis. Here, working well together can cause the project management structure to "give" a little when needed.

Bryan's main points are 1) They work as an extension of their clients' marketing department, so being close to their customers is critical, and 2) Clients need to understand SEO as they have some responsibility for their SEO effort.

Nikki has an interesting concept of a monthly cadence with each client, which consists of multiple touchpoints throughout the month.

Phil expressed that tradeoffs that must be made between technical SEO and design aesthetics are very nuanced, requiring close collaboration.

Stephen stated their focus on collaboration is less intentional due to the stage of their company. He implied that as they grow, the way they organize work will likely shift.

This group most values client management

The people for whom client management is the main guiding principle are:

Again, client management is where requirements are spelled out in detail for the client, which serves two purposes; 1) educates clients about SEO, and 2) informs the team as to what the client expects in detail.

David described how there is a “translator” between the client and the internal team, the client advisor. This client interface person enables others to focus on their specialized tasks, which improves the quality of what they deliver.

Lee took this idea further and stated: “It’s all about managing clients”. This is critical to them as some of their clients are so big, there are silos within marketing at the client firm, and the folks at TK101 Global have to manage conflicting requirements from different people at the same customer.

This group most values the managing of relative priorities

The people for whom managing relative priorities is the main guiding principle are:

The managing of relative priorities has always been a bit of a sacred cow for me personally. While this is one of the most uncompromising guiding principles, in my opinion, it provides a solid framework for managing resources, whether that resource is a design template or the time of the people involved.

David stated the user experience is the new holy grail and relevancy is a critically important ranking factor.

Markelle expressed that the buyer (their client’s customer) is the anchor around which they build everything, and their priorities come from that.

Stacy strictly applies a prioritization of UX first, technical SEO second, and design third.

This group most values education and knowledge

The people for education and knowledge are the main guiding principles are:

- Greg Lee, SEO Director, DRUM Agency (agency)
- Kevin Whitbeck, Director of SEO, Results Repeat (agency)
- Matt Erickson, Director of Marketing, National Positions (agency)
- Michelle Loughry, Director of Marketing, Envision Creative (agency)
- Quincy Smith, SEO and Content Manager, Ampjar (brand)
- Shelby Liu, SEO and Analytics Lead, Brand Buddha (agency)
- Steve Page, VP of Digital Strategy, Giant Partners (brand)

This is where telling others what matters is not enough, you must also provide evidence as to why those things matter.

Greg said everyone on his team is cross-trained. SEO's learn the basics of design, and designers learn the basics of technical SEO. This builds empathy, making team decisions much easier when it comes to collaboration and priorities.

Kevin expressed the same idea in different words. He said creative teams need to be educated on technical SEO basics and SEOs need to be educated on the importance of design templates.

Matt has a saying he uses to help people focus: "It's not personal. It's SEO". This starts a conversation about why the things that matter, matter.

Michelle considers that part of her mandate is to make sure everyone has a basic knowledge of technical SEO.

Quincy has worked to ensure technical SEO is taken into consideration when design templates are created and requires SEOs and designers to provide supporting backup when

explaining to each other why something matters.

Shelby starts with detailed analytics of successful websites (of clients' competitors and others) and uses that as a starting point to discuss how and why those websites are successful, and what their clients must do to compete.

Steve said something to the effect of "It's all about education", then expanded on the importance of SEOs and designers teaching each other.

This group embraces the idea that everything is context

The people for context this is the main guiding principle are:

- Amine Rahal, Founder & CEO, IronMonk Solutions (agency)
- Chronis Tsempelis, Founder, CEO, and SEO Consultant, SEOExplode (agency)
- Joe Lawlor, CoFounder and Chief SEO Strategist, Digital Dynasty (agency)
- Justin McIntyre, Director of SEO and Content, Perfect Search Media (agency)
- Steve Mammone, President, Getfused (agency)
- Tony Mastri, Digital Marketing Manager, Marion Marketing Agency (agency)

Context refers to people who believe what is most important is very context-dependent. There were a lot of similarities in how people spoke of this – a lot.

Amine focused on the importance of the competitiveness of the industry and the relative values the client places on traffic versus conversion.

Chronis spoke about how they prioritize with their client after examining the top-ranking sites within a niche.

Joe provided the interesting statement of "the client provides the catalyst," then expanded upon how their clients business

situations determine the focus of their efforts.

Justin said something similar, that their client sets the criteria by which they make tradeoffs, and stated they sometimes feel the need to push back and make a case for what they see as a better set of priorities and tradeoffs.

Steve stated that how priorities are set and managed starts with their client, and they structure their work from that.

Tony provided what I consider to be an interesting way of thinking about this. A very high-level rigorous structure provides the framework for free-flowing creativity at a more granular level.

These folks are not from Missouri (the show me state), but they want to see the data

The people for whom experimentation is the main guiding principle are:

There are few, but interesting, differences in the way these people spoke about the importance of running experiments.

Apu made the interesting observation that short term ROI wins help fund longer-term efforts.

Chris stated that when their technical SEO people and their designers disagree, they don’t argue, they experiment.

Nadya and Chris both expressed the importance of how structured experiments based on testable hypotheses eliminate personal bias from these discussions.

The key take away for me, after talking with thirty-one people

SEO, like life, involves an endless series of trade-offs, and this is demonstrated by something as basic as how people

prioritize the seven guiding principles uncovered through these interviews.

Not everything can be equally important, so you must decide which organizing principles are most important to you and your team, and how important they are relative to each other.

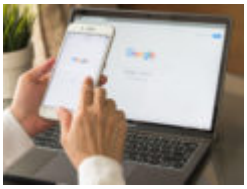
I recognize that as a “relative priorities” guy, the prior sentence reveals a personal bias of mine, but I don’t know a better way to describe the idea.

Success requires consistency, consistency requires some level of stability, and stability requires that the rules aren’t arbitrary and frequently changing.

So you need to know which organizing principles are most important to you and your team and organize the way you do your SEO work, around the principles most important to you.

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Related reading



In the dataset that I used busine

sses were found via non-branded searches 70% of the time vs. 30% of the time via a

a brand ed search.



A marketing feedback loop is when a business uses responses

they get from a campaign or product on the social web. Ways to identify and use it to

improve SEO.



In a world of highly customized SERPs and a host of ranking signal

s for local search that Google uses, relevant ranking data is as challenging.



Keyword research can be stressful. This guide explains the process of research in

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