

The Pros and Cons of “Responsive” website design

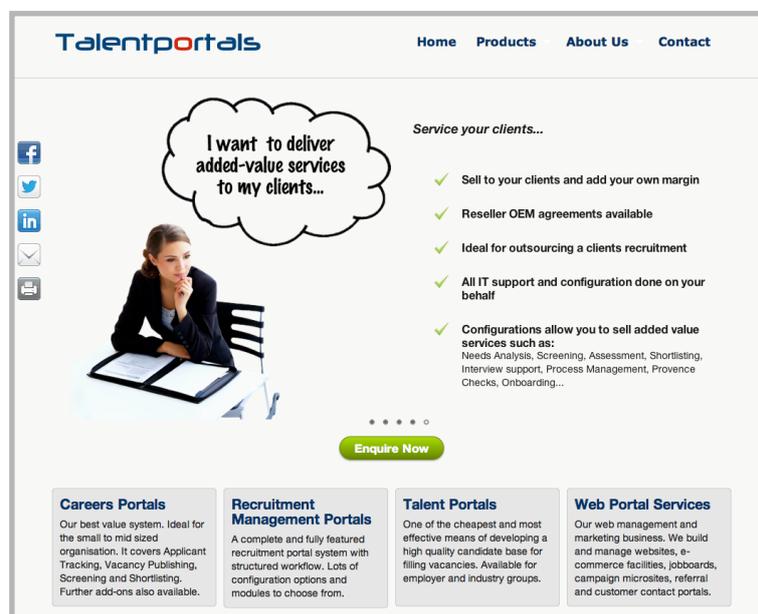
More and more people are using mobile devices to go online. Being able to present your websites for online mobile users is getting lots of airtime. ‘Responsive’ web design is getting increasingly talked about and we are getting asked if we can design websites for clients using this approach and its various techniques and technology (of course we can, and do).

So what is Responsive website design? Basically it is a set of technologies and practices that aims to have a website adapt to the device that is being used to view the web. In simple terms this means that it will alter the display to suit e.g. a desktop PC or a mobile phone. This sounds great - but is it actually the ideal solution for most customers?

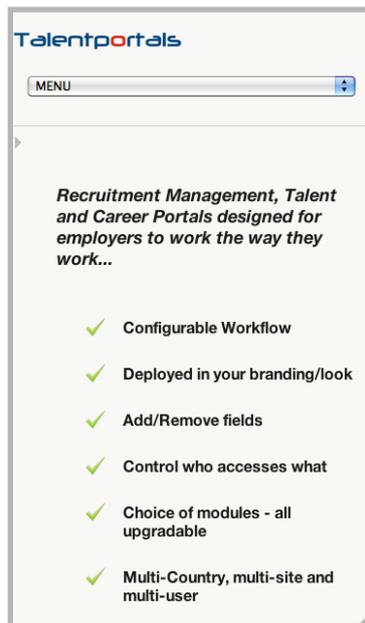
More about what is ‘Responsive’ website design

First don’t expect any hard and fast standard for saying in categorical black and white terms what is, and what is not, a ‘Responsive website’. However in broad terms; Responsive websites use bits of CSS code called ‘media queries’ to first identify and then ‘respond’ to the web-browsing device being used i.e desktop PC or phone. They also must use a flexible grid based structure and often will dynamically resize images and media to suit the viewing device.

The essential idea is that a single website serving the same content will use different set of styles to alter the layout and appearance to suit the device being used. This is seen most easily when you look at the menubar of a website. On a desktop PC, the menu is likely arranged horizontally (as in the website <http://www.talentportals.net>) see below.



But as this site was built using a Responsive design; when the same site is viewed on a mobile device, the style of navigation changes to a vertically stacked set of links or buttons. You are not actually seeing a separate mobile website, but a single website that simply adapts to the device being used (this one also renders its graphics differently when fitting a smaller screen, in this example one less than 600 pixels in width) see the site below when viewed on a mobile phone.

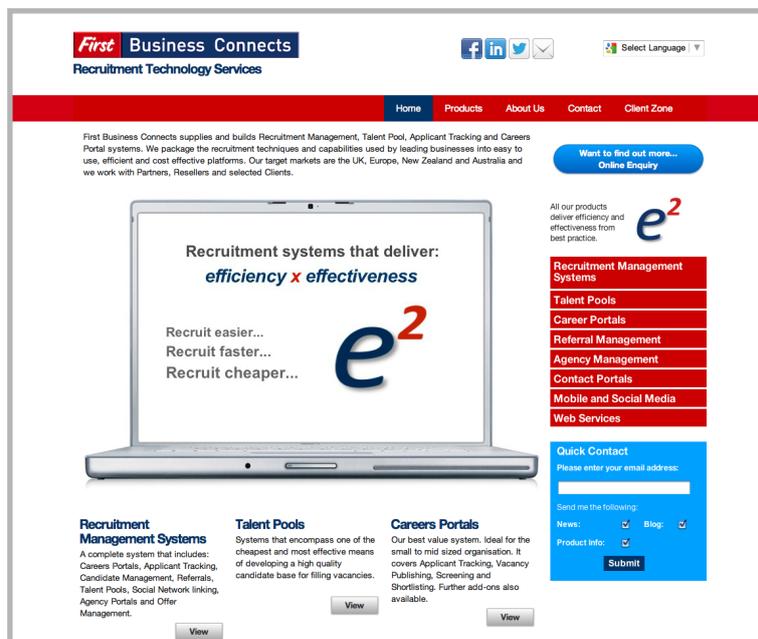


So far this all seems ideal. But is it...?

There is actually an alternative. This is to use a dedicated mobile optimised website and direct mobile visitors from your main website to this mobile site when they land. Switching them across can be made automatic so they don't need to do anything. You can even let mobile visitors choose if they want to view the mobile version or the full one set up for desktop PCs and tablets.

An advantage of this method is that you can essentially provide separate content for your mobile visitors and have full control over what they can see and do. You can see this on the www.firstbusinessconnects.com website.

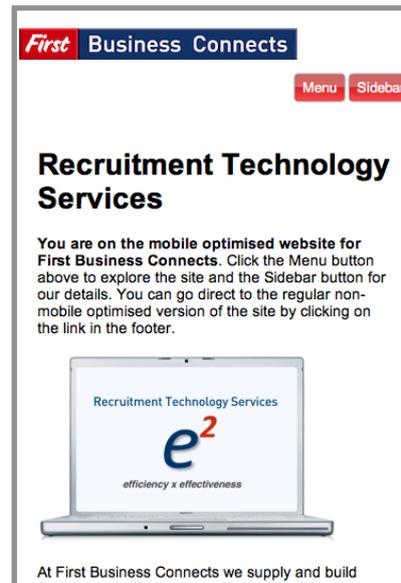
Screenshot of the Home page for www.firstbuisnessconnects.com:



This paper has been prepared for Customers (current and prospective), Partners and Resellers to inform them of our stance on this issue. It does not form in itself professional advice. It is subject to change and amendment without prior notice.

Mobile phone visitors to this site are automatically directed to www.mobi.firstbusinessconnects.com (note if you try to go directly to the mobile site with a desktop PC it will redirect you automatically back to the main site). In this site the mobile visitors are presented with reduced content and less graphics making the site much easier and faster to use on the smaller screen of a phone.

Screenshot of the mobile optimised Home page for us on iphone and Android as seen on www.mobi.firstbuisnessconnects.com:



Crucially both methods provide a more suitable viewing experience for the mobile user

Lets now look at the Pros and Cons of the Responsive approach versus the alternative of an additional mobile optimised site as outlined in each case above.

Responsive - Pros:

1. Well the main advantage with the 'Responsive' Talentportals.net website is that you only need one set of content rather than the two versions that we need for Firstbusinessconnects.com. This may save time and money (though we note that web designers do typically charge more for responsive layout design – sometimes a lot more...) than having to maintain two sites.

Responsive - Cons:

1. Responsive websites still load the entire html and code whatever the device. The problem with this is that your phone typically takes longer to download data than your PC and mobile data coverage is not as fast as typical desktop broadband. Switching mobile users immediately to a mobile optimised site as the alternative to the 'Responsive' approach will likely give them a faster response time and lower their data usage.
2. In order for a responsive website to work well it needs to have a layout that is dynamic and use a flexible grid like structure i.e. one that can flex according to the

screen size of the device being used. Most client websites we see don't utilise designs that lend themselves to such an approach. The more flexible layout approach demanded by a 'Responsive' design can impose layout limitations that clients are not necessarily wanting to incur.

3. The other issue is that in many cases people use websites a bit differently on a mobile than they do on a desktop. As well as the speed, it is simply easier to browse on the bigger screens available on desktops and the larger tablets.

We particularly see this on our recruitment side of the business where we are designing candidate sites and portals. The experience we have is that candidates in general seem keen to do a broad search or look at a position that they have been referred to on a mobile. However they don't seem to expect to apply direct online on their phone. This is particularly true if they are having to complete extensive registration or screening questions. The other usage issue is that iphone (and ipad) users don't have a file manger in their device and will thus struggle to find a way of downloading any file including a CV (if you have an iphone you may have noticed on websites that the download button is greyed out).

It probably looks like the argument is structured against the 'Responsive' approach however we think that is unfair. The technologies behind Responsive designs are still evolving and it is a very powerful web design approach in the right circumstances. How people use mobile devices and the web is also still evolving. The key thing is to make sure that your site is usable on mobile devices. Both of the approaches we outline above are valid and can be accommodated, just call us to discuss.

If you are interested in this subject please also see our Blog post of 20th December 2012 on the website.