

Some Questions from our U3A Associations

July 2020

ONE. User Access & Capabilities

By design, all users who are added to your network will have subscriber access to all sites on your network. To allocate a different default role for users on individual sites, you must use a plugin.

Subscriber access allows users to read a page in the same way as a site visitor. This isn't a problem. The way the multisite is currently set up, administrators can add users at any level of access they choose.

The capabilities of the site administrator role are also reduced in a WordPress Network. Site admins cannot install new themes or plugins and cannot edit the profiles of users on their site. Only the Network Admin (aka Super Admin) has the ability to perform these tasks in a WordPress network.

Very true. The strength of a multisite is that the super admin can prevent insecure, out of date, or error-containing plugins and themes from compromising the security and stability of the websites. We will install a solid set of plugins and themes that admins can activate and deactivate. Our contractor has experience with a multisite containing 50 client sites and is well aware of the needs of most web editors. It is very rare for admins to need anything beyond this. Consultation will occur as part of the process of setup. Sometimes it's best for clients to have a standalone site, for example, ecommerce sites. But usually, a multisite is the best way to go.

TWO. Theme Deployment

Where multiple sites are using a common theme and have each customised the theme for their purposes, eg number of columns on a page, location of side-bar etc... (but not content). In such cases are these individual customised changes able to be supported in a Multisite environment ?

Yes. When you use the customiser to set up your layout, this will only affect your site. (Note that child themes will not be permitted on the multisite.) However, Elementor will be installed, it is a very powerful tool that will address any typical need for a child theme.

THREE. Site backup/restoration

I understand a Multisite has a single database containing multiple individual tables for each site plus a couple of control-style tables shared by all sites.

That being the case a backup would seem to backup the all the sites in one backup process.

If this is the case, then how do individual sites restore a backup without restoring (possibly over-writing) other sites at the same time in a Multisite environment ?

U3A Network NSW will purchase Updraft Premium for the multisite, based upon the advice of our contractor to address this requirement. The need to restore a multisite is very low risk if basic rules of site maintenance are addressed in an ongoing manner. Further, post revisions and trash are very useful!

FOUR. On-Boarding of Existing WordPress websites.

Some research into this may be necessary to determine the feasibility/process, if not already available.

What is meant by on-boarding? If it refers to transferring an existing website to multisite, our Contractor has just transferred dubbo.u3anet.org.au quite easily. It's currently called dubbo2.u3anet.org.au on the multisite. On updating it will be renamed back to dubbo.u3anet.org.au when ready for 'launch'.

FIVE. Proof-of-Concept

There are several (well quite a few) articles on the web, such as <https://wishdesk.com/blog/wordpress-multisitevs-multiple-single-sites> that discuss the pros and cons of Multisite. These sites also present differing commentary on these pros and cons....

I'd be inclined to suggest a Multisite Proof-of-Concept be undertaken using maybe 4-6 websites that may possibly encounter the cons mentioned in the various articles and that the outcome be reviewed before embarking fully on the project.

I'm quite happy to transfer the sites in batches. However, I'll also respond to the cons here, based on my own experience:

- Just like centralized control is a pro, it can be a con, depending on your organization's preferences. Will it be OK for you that particular site admins are unable to install plugins and themes?

As stated above, this is rarely a problem. While highly recommended and preferred by the management team, it is not mandatory for all sites to transfer to multisite.

- Security problems on one site (a hacker attack or data breach) can create a wave of the same problems on the others.

The risk is massively reduced by:

1. carefully selecting solid, well-supported plugins and themes.
2. 'hardening' the multisite (I do that with all sites)
3. updating plugins, themes, and Wordpress as soon as updates are released (many will be on auto-update)
4. running Wordfence premium security software
5. regular backups

- Performance problems on one site (traffic overload, downtime, etc.) can also influence others.

Placing all sites on the Cloudflare content delivery network largely mitigates this problem. (Site visitors can't see the difference.) The main problem for site performance is a brute force attack, where hackers hammer the sites, looking for weak points. This happens occasionally, probably about once a year, and it usually lasts a few days. Both Wordfence and Cloudflare offer some brute force attack protection. A good practice is to block countries that are the main source of attacks..

- Just like a shared user base can be a pro, it can be a con depending on your case. It's hard to separate users completely so they will access the whole network.

Not really true. This could be a problem if one of our site admins is an expert hacker with a secret desire to take down U3A Net. The entire wordpress.com network contains billions of sites and runs on multisite. They don't seem to have this problem. So really, don't worry about this one.

- There are WordPress plugins that do not work with a multisite and can cause conflicts instead.

That's true. Being aware and careful about themes and plugins is the key to avoiding problems.