



**search
laboratory**
Part of Havas Media Network

CONTENT AND CORE WEB VITALS: WHAT SEO LOOKS LIKE IN 2021

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THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF SEO

Search engine optimisation has had many faces since the practice first began, and the art of optimisation today bears little resemblance to that in the earlier nineties. Today, SEO is more of a science than an art, with digital marketers using data to drive their search strategy.

The main reason for the evolution of SEO is the many updates to Google and other search engines' algorithms. As the algorithms have grown increasingly better at delivering high-quality, relevant content to users, brands have had to improve their website, content and ranking signals to show Google it should be number one.

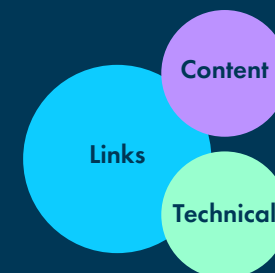
As search engines have become more sophisticated at reading and understanding both content and search queries, the power of external links is diminishing as a standalone ranking factor. Instead, algorithms look to see what pages are most relevant and useful to a user by analysing the website content and seeing how this matches the intent of the searcher. We expect to see this trend continue and, as a result, the future of SEO will lie more strongly in content strategy and technical SEO than link acquisition.

Access to more big data means the industry will become more proficient in data engineering and automation, and we will see SEO become a truly data-driven practice across the board.

In this whitepaper, we will explore how the SEO industry is changing. The information outlined can be used to influence your SEO strategy in 2021 and beyond.

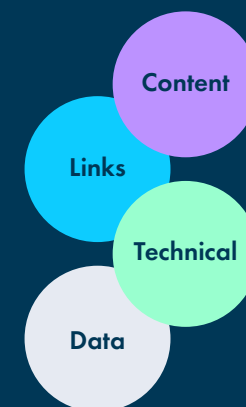
THE PAST

- Strong focus on link building
- Technical SEO and content secondary factors.



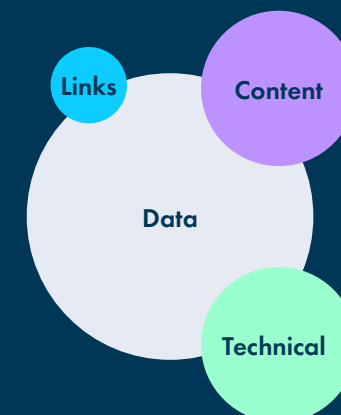
NOW

- Having the best, most useful content (and showing this to Google) is important in ranking
- Growing focus on the importance of technical SEO and content strategy.



THE FUTURE

- Content and technical SEO continue to be a focus
- Link acquisition becomes less of a ranking factor.



TECHNICAL SEO

Over the years, the value of technical SEO has increased tenfold and it now plays a major part in organic visibility. Having a solid technical SEO foundation allows search engines to understand what your website is about, and who it should be shown to.

The importance of technical SEO will continue to grow, with a focus on improving user experience.

CORE WEB VITALS

Core Web Vitals is a set of three indicators that Google uses to measure the overall user experience of a web page. Data on your website's Core Web Vitals can be found in the "enhancements" section of your Google Search Console.

Core Web Vitals are set to become part of Google's core algorithm in May 2021, highlighting the search engine's shift from prioritising backlinks towards user experience as a major ranking signal. Having a slow website will be costing you revenue now, but from May it could be disastrous when the following three measures are used as ranking factors.

CORE WEB VITALS

Loading
Largest Contentful Paint

Interactivity
First Input Delay

Visual Stability
Cumulative Layout Shift

OTHER WEB VITALS

Mobile Friendly

Safe Browsing

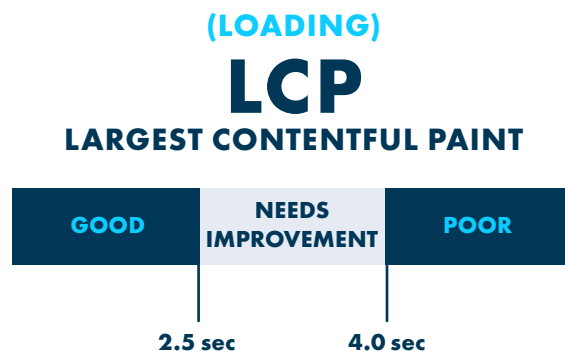
HTTPS

**No Intrusive
Interstitials**

LARGEST CONTENTFUL PAINT

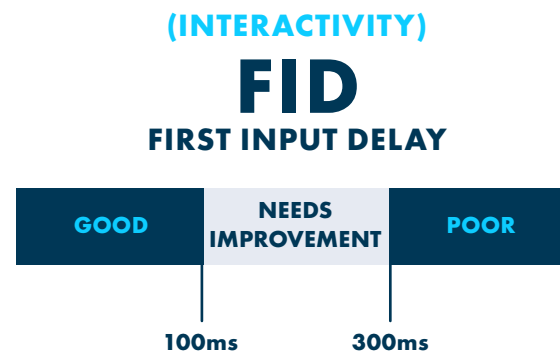
Largest Contentful Paint (LCP) measures the perceived page loading speed by marking the point in the page load timeline when the main content of the page has loaded, which is when the user would be able to see and interact with content on the screen.

Anything under 2.5 seconds is classed as “good”, between 2.5 and 4 seconds is “needs improvement”, and over 4 seconds is “poor”.



FIRST INPUT DELAY

First Input Delay (FID) measures interactivity – the time between a user first interacting with your site (either by clicking or touch) to when the browser responds to that interaction. It is normal for browsers to have a slight delay, however the longer this delay, the worse the user experience. An ideal delay is below 100ms, any longer and it becomes noticeable.

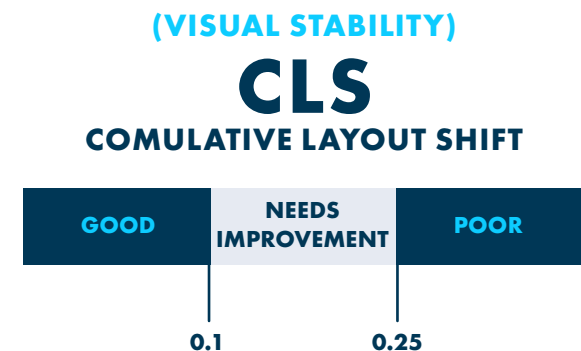


CUMULATIVE LAYOUT SHIFT

Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS) measures the unexpected shifting of elements on a webpage while the page is still downloading. A shift in the layout causes poor user experience; the user may lose track of the content they are looking at or even end up clicking on a different link than they intended as a result of the layout instability. If you have ever been on a news site and had an ad pop up and cause the page content to move down, you have experienced CLS.

According to Google, there are five factors that might cause CLS:

1. Images without dimensions
2. Ads, embeds, and iframes without dimensions
3. Dynamically injected content
4. Web Fonts causing FOIT (flash of invisible text)/ FOUT (flash of unstyled text)
5. Actions waiting for a network response before updating DOM.



CONTENT STRATEGY

MOVING AWAY FROM KEYWORDS TOWARDS TOPICS, CONCEPTS, AND ENTITIES

Content is a key component in any SEO strategy. Content for SEO typically revolves around a keyword strategy – creating content around the keywords which you want the website to rank for.

The way Google and other search engines analyses and understands content has become more sophisticated, and it now takes content across the whole website into consideration when seeing how relevant a page is to a search query, rather than making a decision based on the content on one page.

Rather than have an exclusively keyword focused content strategy for SEO, creating a topic focused strategy will become key to organic visibility. SEOs will need to identify what topics they want to rank for, and then create content for these topics, as well as for sub-topics, even if they do not necessarily have high search volume.

By creating content for related topics as well as the ones you want to show for, you show to Google that you are an authority on these topic areas. Content pieces which sit within the exact topics you want to be known for (for example, because they tie in with your commercial areas) should sit higher up in the website navigational structure as this signals to Google it is the most important.



OUR TOP TIP

Look at what Google suggests 'People also ask' to help plan related topics, as the search engine categorises these topics together.

WRITING CONTENT FOR SEMANTIC SEARCH

People's search queries don't always match what it is they are looking for – for example, if someone doesn't know the name of the song they want to listen to, they might search for the lyrics, but the end result they are hoping for is the song to listen to.

As voice search becomes more common, search queries become much more conversational, which can further dilute the query.

Google has developed an impressive grasp of the semantics of a search so that it can deliver the content a user is looking for, rather than content which matches the search query exactly.

There are three key updates which contribute to Google's understanding of semantic search:

- Knowledge Graph
- RankBrain
- BERT.

KNOWLEDGE GRAPH

Knowledge Graph is a knowledge base of different entities and the relationships between each one. By helping Google to understand how different things are connected, Knowledge Graph means the search engine can better understand the meaning behind search queries that may read ambiguously.

RANKBRAIN

RankBrain is a key component of Google's search algorithm. It uses machine learning to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases by identifying similar searches, analysing what content it is they were looking for, and applying this to the new search. Rather than simply keyword matching, RankBrain looks at search terms as a concept and tries to find pages which are relevant to this concept.

BERT

BERT, or Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers, is a natural language processing system which reads the entire sequence of words at once, from both the left and the right, to better understand the context and nuances of a sentence.

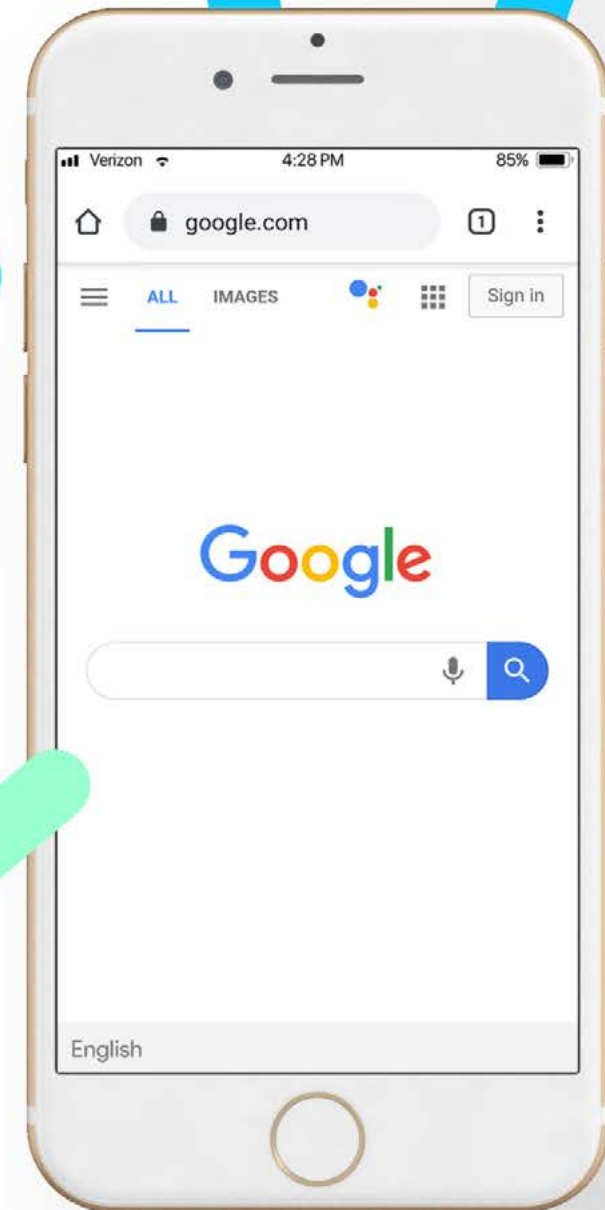
Google's greater understanding of semantic search means, more so than ever, content written for SEO purposes needs to be written for humans, not bots. Really digging into what it is your audience wants to know and making sure that you answer these questions cohesively and coherently is the best way to be seen by Google as the most authoritative piece of content to show users.

OUR TOP TIP

Use structured data such as schema mark-up and HTML5 to make it easier for search engines to crawl and understand your content. Implementing internal links also helps search engines to understand the wider context of your content.

BUILDING CONTENT AROUND AUDIENCE SEARCH INTENT

In addition to having a better grasp of the semantics of a search query, Google has become very good at understanding the intent of a search – i.e. what does the person want to see in the SERPs – and delivering the most relevant content.



THERE ARE FOUR TYPES OF SEARCH INTENT:

INFORMATIONAL INTENT

The searcher is looking for information such as what the weather is next Tuesday, how to make a carbonara, and how old an actress is.

- Relevant content
- Featured snippets
- Blogs and articles
- Guides

NAVIGATIONAL INTENT

The searcher is looking for a specific website e.g. Search Laboratory or Twitter.

- Relevant content
- Company website (landing page, about us page)
- Company social media handles

TRANSACTIONAL INTENT

Transactional intent The searcher is looking to make a purchase.

- Relevant content
- Product pages
- Category pages

COMMERCIAL INTENT

The searcher is looking to buy a product or service but is in the research stage and not yet ready to make a transaction.

- Relevant content
- Guides
- Blogs and articles
- Reviews

Building content for all four types of audience intent will help you to appear in searches across the entire customer journey. Conduct a content audit on your website to see which areas you are lacking, and then use this to create a content strategy. For each piece of content you plan in, ask yourself what intent it fills and how. Once you have identified the intent it fulfils, optimise both your meta data and content format to reflect the intent – for example, optimising pages aimed at transactional intent for keywords like ‘buy’, and using bullet points for pages targeting informational intent.

One way to ensure you are covering all types of queries is to build an FAQ page around natural queries and use schema mark-up to tell Google to rank you for these queries.

OUR TOP TIP

Bucket keywords and search queries into intent categories and use this to inform your SEO strategy.

THE RISE OF ZERO CLICK SEARCH RESULTS

Zero click search results can result in websites losing traffic and leads, and unfortunately there is no way of preventing Google from showing them. The best course of action is to optimise your content so that it appears directly on the SERPs; even if a user does not click through to your site, you have gained valuable exposure and brand awareness.

Not all search queries show zero click search results. Question-based searches are more likely to produce featured snippets and other zero click results, so target these types of queries if you want to be seen. Your content needs to be information-rich yet concise; use facts, stats and visuals to back up your information and break up long pieces of content into paragraphs or bullet points to be more easily digested. Building an FAQ page is an easy way to ensure you have well-structured content around relevant question-based search queries.

OUR TOP TIP

Setting up and optimising your Google My Business account will help you to appear in zero click search results for local queries and ensure potential customers have access to up to date information.

VIDEO SEO

Video has been gaining popularity both within the general public and among digital marketers for some time, however it is only recently that it has begun to gain traction in the SEO world for one key reason: search engines can't crawl videos.

Today, SEO is not some standalone practice where all content is put out in written form exclusively to achieve higher rankings. User experience is a factor in SEO and there are times when having a two-minute video provides a better experience than pages of written content.

Fortunately, you don't have to sacrifice SEO in favour of producing videos. There are ways of optimising your video content to improve your video's organic visibility; as video becomes a more common form of website content,

SEOs will need to work closely with the content and video team to ensure these optimisations are factored in from the get-go.

| WAYS TO OPTIMISE YOUR VIDEO CONTENT | WHY |
|--|---|
| Writing and hosting the video transcript on page | This allows search engine bots to "watch" the video and understand what it is about |
| Optimise video and page meta data | This allows search engine bots to understand what keywords the video and page are targeting |
| Create an engaging thumbnail | This increases the likelihood of users clicking through from the SERPs which signals to search engines it is high-quality content |
| Add captions in the video | Increases accessibility and user experience for both users who are hard of hearing and those who are in sound sensitive environments so can't play the video out loud, reducing bounce rate |
| Increase length of video | Increases time spent on page which signals to search engines that the page answers their query |

OUR TOP TIP

Measure your page speed before uploading videos so you can see if there is a negative impact. Different ways of hosting can impact page speed (e.g. YouTube vs custom hosting) so it is worth trialling a few to see what works for you.



WEB ACCESSIBILITY AND USER EXPERIENCE

We all know that content should be created for users first, bots second, but what about the website itself?

There is a growing focus on web accessibility and making sure that all users can easily use your website, regardless of any disabilities, situational or environmental impairments. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a need for websites to be truly accessible to everyone. Not only does it make a better user experience (which increases user satisfaction and brand loyalty), but there are legal implications to having a website which is inaccessible to people with disabilities.

WHAT DOES AN ACCESSIBLE WEBSITE LOOK LIKE?

Ways to improve accessibility include:

- Ensuring that the website and any forms can easily be navigated without the use of a mouse or touchpad
- Adding alt text to images and tables so that people using screen readers can “read” pictures and understand table columns
- Using a colour palette that ensures text stands out against the background, taking colour blindness and sunlight level into consideration
- Enabling resizable text so that users can make text bigger without it impacting your website layout
- Using heading tags so that those using screen readers can navigate content easily.

OUR TOP TIP

There is a lot of development time needed to make a website accessible. Accessibe is a software company which uses AI to identify and fix any accessibility issues on a daily basis. It is installed by inserting a single line of code into your site, making it ideal for businesses who may have limited development resource.



GOOGLE ANALYTICS 4

Previously called Google App + Web, Google Analytics 4 is Google's newest analytics platform that ties up web and app analytics in a completely new architecture structure, allowing for true cross-platform reporting, in a much faster, simpler and more flexible way.

For those who aren't already set up on GA4, that will be a priority in the first half of 2021. The platform only begins tracking data from when it is set up, so the quicker you set it up, the earlier you can collect data.

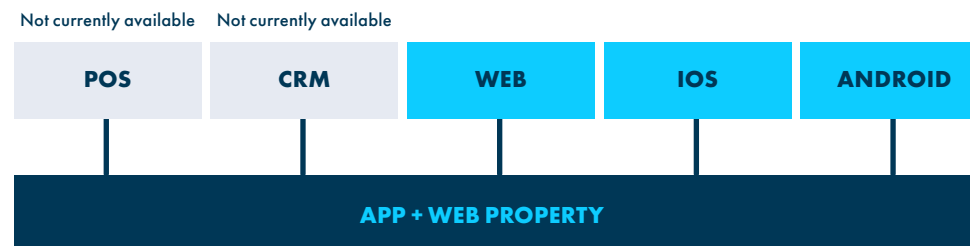
THE BENEFITS OF GOOGLE ANALYTICS 4

For a full breakdown of Google Analytics 4, visit our blog [What is Google Analytics 4](#)

- Cross-platform reporting

Google Analytics 4 has introduced the concept of 'streams' which allows for much better cross-platform reporting than Universal Analytics' userID functionality. By creating multiple streams of data (website, iOS app, android app) within the same underlying dataset/property in GA4, they can be viewed and reported on together.

STREAMS



Eventually, we expect other applications such as point of sale software or CRM data to be available (although the functionality is not there to do this just yet, unless of course, those applications run using Firebase).

- Simpler, events-based architecture

Rather than collecting data on sessions and hits within each session (like in Universal Analytics), GA4 collects and records events, each of which can have up to 25 custom-named parameters associated with it. This is a much simpler architecture that will be simpler to understand, plan, document and implement.

One final benefit to the new architecture is the greater ability to customise, rather than having to shoehorn all events into the Event Category/Action/Label/Value framework that Universal Analytics provides.

APP + WEBB

| event_name | clientID | event_params | user_properties |
|-------------------|----------|--------------|-----------------|
| page_view | 123.456 | w** | w** |
| session_start | 123.456 | x** | x** |
| video_interaction | 123.456 | y** | y** |
| page_view | 123.456 | z** | z** |

**stored as a nested table

UNIVERSAL ANALYTICS

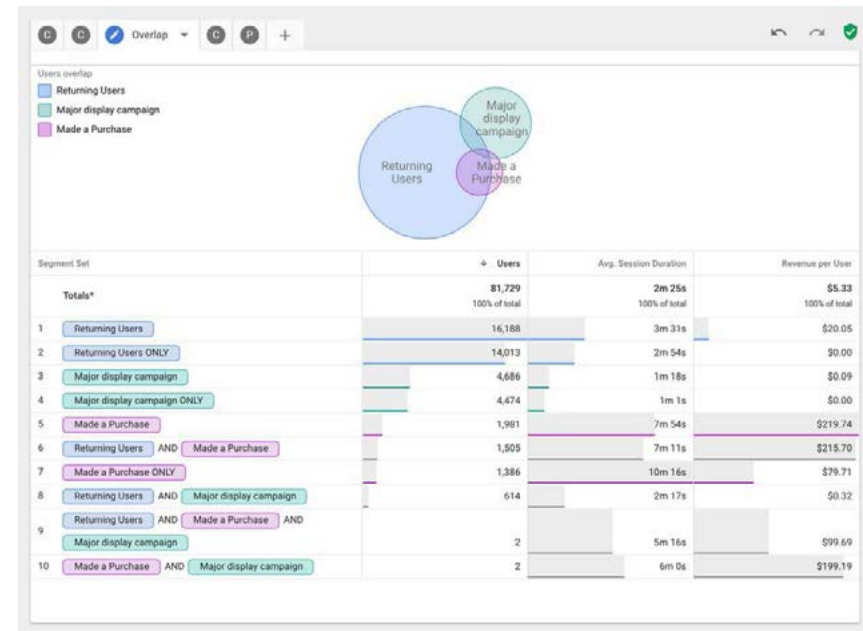
| clientID | visitID | hits | total.pageviews |
|----------|---------|--|-----------------|
| 123.456 | 456 | Hit 1: pageview Hit 2: event Hit 3: pageview Hit 4: ... | 2 |
| 654.321 | 789 | Hit 1: pageview Hit 2: event Hit 3: pageview Hit 4: ... | 5 |

- Faster, simpler, and more flexible reporting

GA4's simple architecture means simpler reporting and more flexibility than reporting in Universal Analytics. Interpreting and analysing the tracked data should also be easier than in GA.

Additionally, the more streamlined dataset should allow for quicker access to the data, and Google has promised that the new framework will provide lightning speed return of data to reports, and a level up from what is currently available in Universal Analytics.

One big selling point of the new Google Analytics 4 properties is that you get access to the 'Advanced Analysis' tool, which has historically only been available to Google 360 customers. This is a very powerful exploratory environment in which you can produce reports, visualisations, pivot tables, custom funnels, segment overlap and path analysis reports.



- BigQuery export

GA4 gives users the facility to set up and export all web and app data directly into BigQuery. This hit level data opens a whole host of opportunities, which were previously only available to GA360 customers. Some of the benefits of having your data in BigQuery include:

- Join analytics data with other data sources, such as POS or CRM data
- More powerful reporting (limited only by your ability with SQL)
- Run machine learning projects to estimate things such as lifetime value or create audiences.

As the world of data and analytics evolves, we are seeing more companies create data warehouses where they can hold multiple sources of data together, enabling them to remove silos and analyse and report on data more accurately. Being able to include web and app data within these data warehouses offers great potential to the entire industry, not just those large enterprises that are paying for the paid tool.

CROSS-PLATFORM TRACKING

Having an integrated strategy has been shown to reduce costs while increasing returns, and this will be a focus area in 2021 for many businesses who are not already tracking theirs across multiple touchpoints.

Google Analytics 4 goes a long way in improving our ability to track users across different channels, but it is also important to connect your analytics platform with your ads and display platforms, as well as your CRM, for the full customer journey to be tracked.

2021 will see brands and agencies invest in digital strategists who can take all this data from different channels and build a strategy which encompasses the full customer journey, rather than focusing solely on channel performance. As this happens, we will see brands move away from channel-specific KPIs to more overarching business objectives such as increasing revenue, and channels will work together to achieve these goals rather than act in silos.

APP STORE OPTIMISATION

Ecommerce apps are becoming much more prevalent, particularly within fashion and groceries, and with GA4 connecting the dots between app and web, 2021 will see businesses focus their attention on getting more users to their app through app store optimisation (ASO).

ASO is to the app store what SEO is to search engines: a series of optimisations that improving the ranking of mobile apps within the app store. The aim of app store optimisation is ultimately to drive downloads, but also has the benefit of increasing brand exposure and engagement (reviews).

There are many similarities between ASO and SEO. For example, you will need to carry out keyword research to find out what app store users are searching for and use this to inform your title, subtitle and meta data.

Other factors include:

- Download rate
- Download retention
- Reviews and ratings
- App freshness.



DATA AND ANALYTICS

Good SEO is always data driven, but we will see the industry take data-driven marketing to the next level over the coming years. SEO will follow in the footsteps of paid media, with machine learning and automation set to become more widespread, rather than being used by only a few agencies and brands.

AUTOMATION AND DATA ENGINEERING

Automation and data engineering are typically associated with paid media, but we are seeing more and more SEOs use these tools to deliver better results, quicker.

There are two main reasons why these are becoming more common:

1. **Data engineering is becoming much more accessible, and many platforms are intuitive to use with minimal formal training**
2. **We have access to more data than ever, and we need automation and data engineering to work quickly and efficiently with these huge datasets.**

We are slowly starting to see people and job roles with blended skillsets of technical SEO and data engineering. We expect this trend to continue to increase in 2021 and throughout the next few years.

We have built several tools which use automation to increase how quickly we can optimise our clients' sites. One example of this is our URL remapping tool.

```
print '''
my_file = open(inputfilename, "r")
for url in my_file:

    driver.get(url)
    driver.set_window_size(1920, 1080)

    from selenium.common.exceptions import NoSuchElementException
    try:
        h1 = driver.find_element_by_tag_name('h1')
        h1Text = h1.text
```

The second script allowed us to match the old H1 tags with the new much more quickly than if we were to do it manually. The script produced two documents based on whether there was an exact or partial H1 match, with a partial match identifying where keywords were similar but not the exact same, and an exact match highlighting where the new H1 and old H1 were exactly the same.

```
df = [
    pd.DataFrame({"Partial Match New H1": perfnw_list, "Exact Match New Urls": perfnw_alt, "Old H1": perfnw_list, "Old list": perfnw_alt}),
    pd.DataFrame({"Partial Match New H1": midnw_list, "Partial Match New Urls": midnw_alt, "Old H1": midnw_list, "Old list": midnw_alt})
]
```

Once we reviewed the partial matches document to ensure that the URLs were mapped to the correct alternatives, we were able to input both documents into an excel format and send to the client for implementation.

We are now able to use these scripts to efficiently implement large scale 301 redirects, ensuring there is minimal page authority lost during website migrations.

```
file_name = input("what would you like to call your file?")
df[0].to_excel('Output Data Files\{}_Exact.xlsx'.format(file_name))
df[1].to_excel('Output Data Files\{}_Partial.xlsx'.format(file_name))
```

BESPOKE REPORTING AND ANALYSIS

Another area we are beginning to see automation play a big part in is reporting and analysis. Creating and updating bespoke reports and dashboards can take up huge amounts of time, particularly if the information is required to be updated on a daily or weekly basis.

Not only does automating this process save hours per report, but it also allows marketers to identify and act on issues extremely quickly; for some sites, this can be the difference of thousands of pounds of revenue.

Dashboarding platforms like Tableau and Data Studio make it easier to generate automated reports, but for bespoke reporting solutions there is typically a need for digital strategists and data engineers to be involved – at least during set up but ideally on a monthly retainer – so that advanced metrics which tie into core business objectives can be identified, and machine learning algorithms can be built to track them.



TAKEAWAYS

SEO is constantly evolving; as search engines aim to improve the experience they deliver to users, marketers must adapt how they optimise their website for both people and search engines. The goal is to ultimately provide a better answer and experience than your competitors, but there are certain steps you can take to convince search engines that your website is better than all others out there.

How to set up for success in 2021

1. Review your website's Core Web Vitals in Google Search Console, ensuring any issues are fixed well before they become a core ranking factor in May 2021
2. Set up Google Analytics 4 and begin tracking actionable data
3. Identify which topics you want your website to be known for and build a content strategy that factors in semantic search, search intent and zero click search results
4. Review your website's accessibility and take steps to make it more inclusive if required
5. Identify your key business objectives and build automated reports to review performance against these KPIs on a daily/ weekly/ monthly basis, using insights to adjust your digital strategy as needed.



SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH IN DATA

Strategic growth

Customer insights

Activate audiences

Global reach

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