

PeopleServer 5.0

R40 000 (PeopleServer 5.0 Licence)

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Other pricing will depend on requirements

PeopleServer 5.0 is a high-end content-management system and suite-management tool for building web sites and generating web content. It is a flexible system, developed in ColdFusion, that uses a modular approach to build a technological back end that is appropriate for what you may need for your web site. You can start from scratch, or migrate your existing web site(s) to the new platform, which can be done in about three days, depending on complexity. Your migrated data can even be set up as multiple micro web sites that each have their own domain name.

From a user point of view, the entire system is browser based: you access your web site and the admin URL in your browser, log in, and your machine then loads the appropriate Java applications (PeopleServer is partly based on Java) that the back end of the site needs in order to function. From there it's really just a point-and-click interface. You load your images, PDF files, Word documents, and any other files that you want to incorporate into your site (collectively known as "resources") into a library, which you can access as you build your pages and add content. The various pages for your site are created from templates, which can be set up beforehand by Red Banner, or you can assign that function to your web-development manager to make the changes as necessary for your "non-techie" users and content managers. This simplified development process, which is inherent in content-management systems, makes it very easy for staff members who are not familiar with web development to be able to update the site without running into trouble or having to learn any coding. In fact, the content-updating pages resemble Microsoft Word in a number of ways, such as layout and use of familiar icons, so anyone who has experience using a browser to surf the Web, and Word to create a document with tables or images should be able to grasp how to use PeopleServer quite easily, using the WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get), drag-and-drop interface to enter information and embed content (more competent users can also add and update HTML). The more complex work, such as creating the templates and organising the site so that it is ready for updating, which should be handled by your web manager, is slightly more difficult to master and requires a bit more patience and attention in the beginning, until you know what you're doing.

Users can make changes to the content and then flag it for approval. Once approved, the updated content and pages are made live. The system also keeps a backup of the previous version of a page, so you can roll back to it if you aren't happy with the changes that have already been published or need to refer to the previous version. Work that is incomplete can be saved as "work in progress", so the person responsible for it can stop at any given time and continue at a later point without the fear of work being lost midway through a project or changes being accidentally overwritten by a colleague. You can also shuffle content and pages around quite easily, which is usually one of the bigger headaches encountered when developing a site in a more traditional manner. Information that is to be displayed on your site can be flagged as embargoed, so you can update content long before you actually want it to go live, and you can set specific content, such as your news stories, to expire within a given time frame.

The administrator is able to set up various user-access restrictions and preferences, or "user rights", for those who update the content. These include the ability to have hidden areas and the ability to enable or disable content authoring, editing, and publishing.

One of the few drawbacks I found using PeopleServer 5.0 was that the browser-based administration can be a bit slow if you don't have a decent Internet connection. Also, because some of it uses Java (if you don't have the correct files you will be prompted to download them), you need to have the Java console running on your machine, which can slow your PC

down if it isn't a particularly fast computer and, let's face it, many businesses still use slow or outdated computer equipment. However, I have since been told that the Java-based functionality has been re-coded in JavaScript. This version is not yet live for review purposes, so I wasn't able to try it out, but I have been assured that it will be used, in favour of the Java version, for any new South African installations of the product.

I also think that this software is more appropriate for larger organisations that have a rather complex web site, a web site that needs to be updated often by many people (who are not, necessarily, qualified or knowledgeable), or a number of mini web sites that need to be monitored. If you are a company that could benefit from this software it's worth bearing in mind that the initial costs are offset by not having to employ a number of qualified web people to maintain your sites. Depending on your setups and requirements, you may only need one person to oversee everything, rather than a dedicated person for each site or each complex section of your site. You may also find that it will be easier to introduce new employees to this system's drag-and-drop interface rather than to your current system, which may be largely proprietary and could have a huge learning curve.

In any event, once you've understood the system, updating and maintaining your web site and its content becomes quite a simple process, and there are a number of features and functions, such as the roll-back ability and the ability to save work in progress, which are useful to have and which one doesn't always have in a traditional web-development environment. I also rather liked the ability to build libraries of resources, so that you can collate content but also make it available for other system users to make use of.

Red Banner works with the client to get the system up and running smoothly. The company can set up your site for you – which is where the software's modular approach comes in handy as you don't have to include functionalities that you will never use – or it can teach you to do this yourself. You will also have access to two or three months of support, help, and training, until you are familiar and comfortable with your system. The entire process is very flexible and fluid, and it differs according to the particular client. The costs, therefore, will vary depending on your wants and needs. This is not a simple out-of-the-box piece of software that you install and you have instant web site capabilities; rather, it is a collaborative effort that includes a lot of consultation and configuration on both sides.

You can decide to run PeopleServer 5.0 on your own server, in which case you will need to own a ColdFusion Server licence and be running a server with it installed. It can run on Microsoft IIS, Microsoft PWS, and Apache web servers and supports

Microsoft's Windows NT, Windows 2000 Server, and Windows XP operating systems, as well as Linux and Sun Solaris. The database system powering PeopleServer 5.0 is Microsoft's SQL Server 2000 but, if you are using your own server you can use any ODBC (Open DataBase Connectivity)-compliant RDBMS (Relational DataBase Management System). (You can find out more about the specific software requirements at the PeopleServer web site.)

You can also opt to have Red Banner host your site for you, which will mean that all these requirements, including the ColdFusion licence, will immediately be taken care of and you won't have to deal with them.

PeopleServer 5.0 is a good balance of complexity and simplicity rolled into one package. I'm not going to lie and say that everyone should go out and get it immediately – it very definitely has a specific target market, but I think that this target market will be very well served by it. If you're not sure, I suggest getting in contact with Red Banner and discussing your requirements. Your specific implementation may cost less than you think (many similar high-end content-management systems also tend to be much more expensive), and it might turn out that you will be able to do more with PeopleServer 5.0 than you expected. MANDY J WATSON

Red Banner: (021) 790-1278
<http://www.peopleserver.co.uk/>

