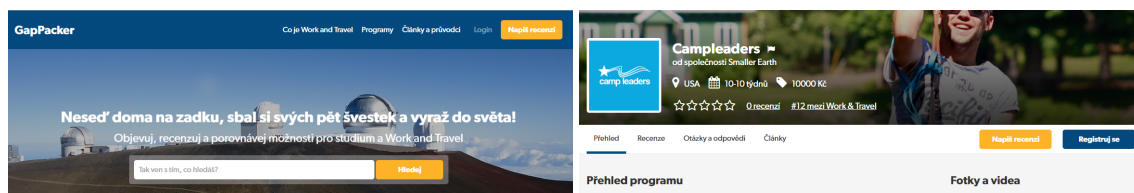


# Server for Reviewing Work and Travel Programs

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## Abstract

This paper serves as a presentation of a web oriented startup called GapPacker, which is a web application and a business model around it, created for reviewing different opportunities for students and young people to go work or study abroad. It's main purpose is to bring people one true source of all possibilities there exist, objectively rated by real participants. This paper will bring you short overview of main cores that create this project and how it is expected to work in real environment. All together I bring complete and working solution that is going live before summer 2016. Expectations and goals are that the site is going to rank first in the Czech republic whenever someone will search for a keywords as summer job, gap year program or volunteering abroad.

**Keywords:** Startup — User Interface — Web Application

**Supplementary Material:** [GapPacker CZ website](#)

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## 1. Introduction

Since today's world offers infinite number of opportunities, it is no surprise that many people want to make the best of them and go explore all the new lands, people and cultures waiting for them all over the globe. These opportunities are opened to everyone, but there is one particular group of people, that has relatively lot of free time and their age destines them to be adventurous. We are talking about students, who are lately looking for options how to spend their free time during summer break abroad, eventually those who do not want to go straight into work after their studies and decide to take a year off. This phenomena led to a big growth of companies, that serve as agencies, that arrange all the necessary paperwork, visa and other things so participant can focus only on his experience of going abroad.

The problem is that for many people it is hard to compare and chose between these companies, since their service often varies only in small details. Ex-

ample of such a desperate search for the best agency providing work in the USA was at the birth of this project. Whatever you want to do, if it is eating out, booking a hotel room or buying a computer is now very easy thanks to user/customer reviews which are aggregated on sites as Tripadvisor, Booking.com or present in all e-shops, but there is no such a solution for going abroad.

Each company has it's own website, some of them even have reviews there, but it is no surprise that these reviews often look prefabricated and it is no wonder that we will be usually presented only with the best reviews, rather than bad ones. The only solution is to create a neutral website, out of influence of any company, that would be honest, opened to everyone and any opinion, with possibility to react to reviews on both, participant's and company's, sides. And exactly that is what GapPacker is bringing.

GapPacker is a website that aggregates details about programs for going abroad, which will be rated

by users, details about companies they are provided by and other useful information in form of articles and guides. GapPacker also offers interface to communicate between companies and their participants in form of review answers, questions and events.

This platform is opened to anyone, no matter the number of participants the company has, no matter the number of programs they have. It is very easy for both companies to join in and for users to add a review. It is not possible to pay for better ranking and platform will be always company neutral, with only focus - providing the best for participants.

To make this project working and sustainable, it was necessary to carefully divide it into sections, that build on each other and make the project what it is and able to survive in the wild and fast online world. First of all it was necessary to create and validate startup's business model. After we knew that it makes sense to create such a site and that it can make money we moved into first and most important part of it's implementation, creating the user interface. We had to understand behavior of people we are building the site for and create user interface that will present them what they want in an easily consumable way. After having the idea how the UI should work a designer came into the project creating actual design of templates and branding, which is assembled from language used on site, colors, UI elements and outside presentation of the project. Next step was to actually code up the site and put it online. Final part was to create strategy for creating content, that will make the project what it is and optimizing it to be visible to search engines and people with help of SEO strategies and other techniques. Each one of next few sections will cover one of these steps closely.

## 2. Business model

In order to make this project sustainable, it was necessary to find out if there are customers, who would be interested in such a web application. Therefore large number of work and travel participants was asked, if they would welcome all the information about different programs on one place, if they would like to read other participants reviews and be willing to write their own. Their ultimate answer was yes. Companies providing these programs were also asked about their opinion and each of them welcomed such an idea, since they think there are never enough places to promote their programs. Thanks to these answers we knew there is a market for our service and we could move to planning how to actually make money on it.

To create a valid business plan that will give all the

necessary details to business people, possible investors or simply people who would like to know about the economics behind the service, I created an exhausting business plan, mainly according to [1]

GapPacker is intended to have four revenue streams. First one and the most important one will be paid referral traffic, meaning companies will pay for traffic going to their site/applications from our site. Which will work on same principle as for example ads on Facebook. Having done a research on how much a click through for a keywords such as "work abroad" costs, which is around 4 USD, we decided to start with 0.5 USD per click. Though we will not start with this revenue stream until the site is up for a while and we have certain steady traffic on site, which is expected to come in a year or more, this should be the main site's income.

Second revenue stream is based on providing companies extra features as statistics about visits of their programs, custom styling, embedded ratings for their websites and others.

Third way of making money would be sponsored links, where companies could pay for promoting their programs on certain places, which would however not have any effect on their rating and rank between other programs.

Final stream of revenue will be traditional affiliate marketing and sales of plane tickets, hotel bookings and other services connected to the topic we cover.

## 3. User Interface

Greatest and most important part of this project was developing the user interface which is together with content the key factor deciding success or failure of the project, since these factors are what will decide if users will or will not visit and use the site. Process of creating user interface has several steps[2], that need to be done properly and in correct order since they built on each other. You just can not built an excellent website if the foundations are not strong, proof and valid.

The process of designing user interface is about getting to know your users, analyzing their needs in means of visiting your website and their behavior patterns. With this information and only with this information you are able to design UI, that will enable users to do what they want and are supposed to do on the website. We will now shortly visit each of the steps.

### 3.1 User Behavior Models

First of all you need to know, who your users are and in what relationship they are to your website. Since we

know who our customers are – students and young people on one side and agencies and companies on the other side, we can easily, with help of questionnaires, conversations or based on our own experience, create behavioral models. Since I have long term experience in Work and Travel industry with many connections to it, it was not a problem to get users from both sides and analyze what their relationship to GapPacker is or could be and the result is 10 different behavioral models specifying different kinds of GapPacker users. Let's just list them for completeness: Passer by, Seeker, Acquainted seeker, Customer, Reviewer, Advice seeker, Blogger, Worried mum, Curious friend and Travel company owner. Some of the model names might not be self explaining, but we see that they cover every possible interaction that there could be to our website and its features.

### 3.2 Personas

Next step is to materialize these behavioral patterns into real people, so called personas. These personas serve as an example of real people that will use our site, they describe their basic features as age and occupation, their life story and their relationship towards GapPacker. Each of these personas can take one or more behavior models on themselves. It is important to have these personas, because with their help you can use and talk about “real” people in next steps of process rather than just virtual ones. It greatly helps further in the process when you can speak of John rather than some general student and makes one of the next steps, writing user scenarios, much easier. I have created total number of 5 personas for this project. Where all together they are able to cover all 10 behavioral models.

### 3.3 Information design

One side of every website are users and the other is content and data it serves them. GapPacker is heavily content centered website and therefore it was crucially important to define what data it will provide it's users and how are they going to be connected. This step is kind of pre-phase of one of the implementation steps, where we create entity relationship diagram and setup a database. Only here we describe entities in more human and general way.

GapPacker's main content are company and program pages, with different information about them, then we have articles with numerous possible topics created by users, travel guides created by GapPacker staff, events connected to Work and Travel business and of course program reviews with addition of questions, and their answers, that can be asked about them.










Přehled programu		
	Poskytovatel	Smaller Earth
	Typ programu	Work & Travel
	Destinace	USA
	Délka	10 týdnů
	Cena	10000 Kč
	Webovky	www.campleaders.com
	Požadavky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• student VŠ/VOŠ</li> <li>• čistý trestní rejstřík</li> </ul>
	V ceně	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• letenka</li> <li>• 90 denní pojištění</li> <li>• 24/7 asistence</li> <li>• strava a ubytování v kempu</li> </ul>
	Popis programu	Začalo to v roce 1999 v Liverpoolu. Dva studenti vycestovali na vlastní pěst do USA a zažili naprosto perfektní léto. Po návratu byli tak nadšení, že napřesrok s sebou vzali i další kamarády až se skupina profesionálně rozrostla do 13 kanceláří se 140 oddanými a energickými zaměstnanci.

Figure 1. Information about program

### 3.4 UI Prototypes

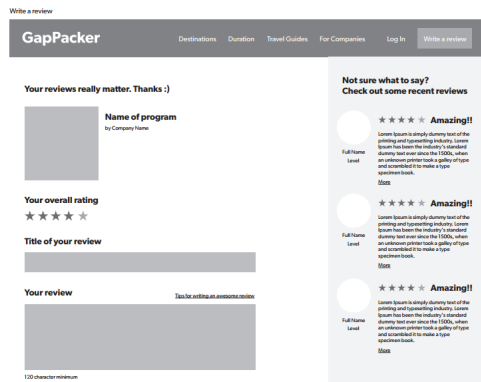
Since we already know who our users are and what their role towards GapPacker is, we can start designing UI prototypes to serve their needs. In this step I have created prototypes of all templates, that will be responsible for mediating information between user and website. There are quite a few of them: Homepage, Program, Company, Article, Event, Profile Administration, Company Dashboard and create/edit templates for each of the information entity site offers.

Even though prototypes do not yet care about design, colors and particular look of UI elements. It is already in this stage where we design where things will be on the page and how they will interact.

Before trying to create something new, it is always good idea to look around, how other people solved similar problems and maybe try to use and improve them if they are really good. There is really no point in reinventing the wheel. There is only one site that is close to the purpose of GapPacker and that is goabroad.com, but I also had a look at sites such as Tripadvisor, Booking.com and Airbnb to absorb some ideas and although these sites review different product, they do not differ that much in means of serving its content and getting the reviews. Since these pages serve millions of page views daily, we can be pretty sure they invested a lot in their UI and elements they use are based on solid usability testing. I have tried to take the best from all of them such as search modules, fixed navigation, sliding panels and others.

### 3.5 User Scenarios and Testing

Once we have prototypes ready it is time to test if they really serve their purpose and users can easily use them, achieving what they want to do on the site



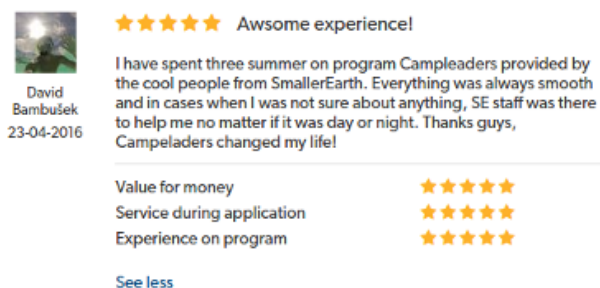
**Figure 2.** Example of wireframe - Create review page

without any problems. To make the process real again, as with personas, I have created user stories, that basically retell a situation of using GapPacker by different personas in different situations to cover everything that can be done on the site. In case of GapPacker there have been 7 stories created that cover every possible functionality.

To validate design of our templates, it is necessary to put these stories under a test by real people. To make this happen, I have created set of 8 tasks, that similarly to user stories cover complete functionality of the website and put them into test. Each of the tasks describes what is being tested and what is user told to do followed by a short list of steps for the test spectator to check in or mark where a problem occurred. I have tested these tasks on 10 people where 7 of them fall into student/young person category and 3 of them into company owner one. After each task, there was a short conversation about what the user just have gotten through with focus on what he would improve from the user experience side and if he subjectively likes the site.

There were many interesting proposals, which some of them were already applied to the design and some of them are waiting to be tested on other users in A/B testing in next test iterations.

As the site proved to be working as expected and the user experience is well established. It was possible to move to a next phase which was implementation.



**Figure 3.** Example of review

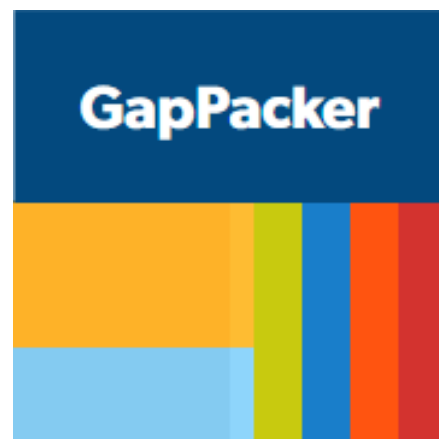
## 4. Implementation

At this stage we were sure that the designed prototypes work and we are ready to create actual website from them. GapPacker is developed in Ruby on Rails framework, which is very powerful tool for creating web applications. It follows modern Model-View-Controller architecture, that separates data from it's presentation and system logic. It comes with many useful features supporting both easy front and back end development, these features work as plugins and are called gems. On the back end it is for example abstract layer over the database that lets you easily manipulate its objects and interconnects all its data and on the front end for example powerful pre- and post-processing of all cascading style sheets, JavaScript and images.

GapPacker is deployed on a SSD cloud server, which allows for any customization and is completely free of any restrictions and opened for upgrades and improvements.

## 5. Branding

Visual identity is very important and it certainly matters how people like the page subjectively, even though the user experience is what really is the pillar of any web application. People do not want to use ugly things and therefore I also focused on communicating the visual part in the ideas and spirit of GapPacker and its focus on young people.



**Figure 4.** Logo with base color. Secondary, hover and other colors.

GapPacker is independent server for young people, therefore I have selected calm, thought vivid blue color as a base color, complemented by outstanding yellow used for the most important elements on page as are book/action buttons and others. There are also few other colors in use for other elements, which were chosen to be smooth and not too bright in order to not disturb the coalition of the two main colors. All



the information about color theory and designing UI elements was taken from [3].

Not only by the look should GapPacker express its identity, but the language with which it speaks to its users is also important. To be close to young users and make them feel that we are here to help them and we know who they are and what they want, I have decided to use informal language that intends to play with words and be funny. Users are greeted as “mates”, every info/warning message uses implements funny saying or idioms and so on.

## 6. Content

To close this article about GapPacker, we only need to mention one last section, that is no less important than others – content. Content is what users will seek on the website and what we must really do the best to get to the top of search engines and attract traffic. Except from the program and company pages, crated by companies, there will be random travel content generated by users in form of articles and professionally crated content about traveling in form of guides.

To ensure GapPacker really ranks high in search engines I have implemented best search engine optimization principles including for example new HTML5 tags that enrich web semantics or microdata schemes that help present information in form of rich snippets in Google’s search results and others.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper was intended to introduce project called GapPacker which serves as a web application for reviewing Work and Travel programs and other opportunities for young people to go abroad.

Site is in a test phase at the moment, being filled with information from 9 Czech travel agencies with more than 30 programs. Main flow of reviews is expected to come after summer by the end of September, when majority of young travelers come back home from their summer adventure. That will be also the time, when GapPacker will be heavily promoted in social media and by other streams.

If the concept proves its expectations and draws enough traffic to become important in Work and Travel sector, the paid version will be started and the service will expand to UK and middle European markets as Slovakia, Poland and Hungary.

Even though a profit is expected to come from this project, it is really the fact that I want to bring new and positive value into Work and Travel industry and provide people with a great and useful service, that led

to creation of GapPacker and I hope I will fulfill what I built it for.

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