

Information Architecture

Visual Perspectives – Giving Logic A Face

by Lynne Duddy

You're a technical communicator with a creative bent. Your sense of logical order is matched only by your flair for layout and design. You may have developed help systems, instructional workbooks or usability specs, but you want more.

You have the vision to see that interactive technology has changed the way we communicate. You want to be a part of it but you're not sure how. This presentation will give you a sense of what the emerging field of Information Architecture has to offer and how you can transfer your core competencies into this field to become a part of the future of interactivity.

Defining Information Architecture

As people, we thrive on information. It is within our nature to seek it out, analyze it, sort it, and refine it. You name it; we have a method for doing something with that piece of information. And if we don't, we'll invent one. Often our inventions for conveying information take the form of a visual portrayal.

Throughout the ages, humans have organized information into formats that were relevant to their audience, from the cave paintings of Lascaux to British Airways' online reservation system on the worldwide web. While everything is different, not much has really changed. In defining what your role can be as an information architect, it's important to understand this paradox.

Communication on the planet has taken on a new perspective with the evolution of the worldwide web, but the basic principles of clear, concise communication still apply to the work

we do every day as writers, artists and designers regardless of the medium. With the advent of the worldwide web, our role as organizers and interpreters of information is expanding.

Technical communicators are familiar with the roles of instructional designer, technical writer and interface designer. But what is the role of an information architect? Like these other roles we're familiar with, the primary function of the information architect is to be an advocate for the end user, interpreting audience needs and creating a visual product that effectively conveys the information. Our basic end product is an organized structure of information, such as a diagram, a flowchart, or a web site. But it is the advocacy for the end user that is key to success.

Information architects are communicators but their role stems from traditional architecture. Traditional architecture is concerned with the design of space, identifying and solving the problems that arise and depicting solutions in a blueprint or a model. This requires the ability to develop a structure that accommodates the function as well as the form.

Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary defines "information" as any knowledge gained through communication, research and instruction, and "architect" as the deviser, maker or creator of anything.

As information architects, we synthesize essential data patterns, translating them into visuals that make the complex clear.

Paraphrasing Richard Saul Wurman, author of *Information Architects*, information architecture is defined as the emerging 21st century profession that focuses on clarity, human understanding and the science of organizing information.

The Emerging Profession of Information Architecture

Information architecture is an emerging profession. It is taking hold in the multimedia environment of the worldwide web. While the primary role of an information architect is to visually convey concepts, linking technology with design, it is important to recognize that many professions use aspects of information architecture, including:

- Graphic Design: creating relationships between visual elements
- Usability Engineering: testing and evaluating how people interact with information systems
- Technical Writing: translating and creating modular communication systems
- Library Science: organizing and developing access to information systems
- Journalism: retrieving and synthesizing many pieces information
- Marketing: understanding and delivering a focused message to targeted audiences
- Computer Science: modeling content for use in database systems

This is only a representative list and is designed to get you thinking about what you do and how it could relate to information architecture.

Typically, elements of human factors engineering, software design, library science, traditional architecture, technical communication and strategy are associated with information architecture. Some companies incorporate the information architect role into the project manager or creative director functions. Other companies have established information architecture groups operating as a strong component on the web team.

The Information Architect's Role on the Web Team

The information architect works collaboratively with everyone on the web team, drawing out the details, gathering the pieces of data and putting it all together into a cohesive structure.

Usually, a web team includes the client, a project manager, a creative director, an information architect, a technical consultant, a graphic designer and a developer.

It is essential that you have high quality information in order to make intelligent decisions and understand the implications of those decisions, not only for the site but within your client's company as well. Building rapport with the team increases the level of communication and directly affects the quality of information that you are able to gather. This enhances the effectiveness of the solutions you are able to offer as the information architect.

Interaction with the client is critical to understanding their target audiences, business strategies and objectives, and how these affect the scope of the project. If time and budget permit, you may also be involved directly with the audience to analyze and interpret their needs.

Working closely with the client and the technical and creative team members, you put together a 'blueprint' for the site. This blueprint is used to maintain the balance between the technical requirements (infrastructure, database, and code) and the visual execution (brand, tone, and design). It identifies the focus and becomes a communication tool for the team. The information architect is an essential member of the web team and can be a unifying force, helping everyone understand the issues involved.

Core Competencies for Information Architects

The core competency requirements of information architecture encompass a wide variety of skills. Some of these are listed below:

- Listening to people
- Conceptualizing and visualizing
- Analyzing and problem solving
- Thinking outside the box
- Creating organization out of chaos

- Communicating visually with pictures and symbols
- Transforming complex ideas into tangible products
- Taking a 'big picture' approach
- Keeping the details in mind without getting bogged down in them
- Communicating with words
- Using logic
- Creating new strategies for designing information systems
- Understanding business challenges

When we think of core competencies, we need to consider our strengths and our weaknesses. We should look to our team for complementary capabilities; focusing on what we can do well and letting others supplement with their skill sets. This is the best method for optimizing our resources, meeting client needs and producing an effective architecture for the site.

Transferable Skills

In looking at our strengths and our weaknesses in relation to core competencies, we should always consider our transferable skills. These are the skills that we've acquired in one role that can be used effectively in another.

There are five basic skill areas that you may have acquired working as a technical communicator:

- Know your audience
- Listen, Question, Analyze
- Be consistent
- Represent concepts visually
- Communicate and collaborate

Let's look at how these areas apply to information architecture:

Know your Audience

Information architects create an experience for the end users that are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. It is essential that you know and understand the audience. Knowing the

audience allows the information architect to advocate for the end user.

Listen, Question, Analyze

As an information architect, you will be responsible for gathering and analyzing vast amounts of information. Active listening, interviewing techniques and research methods will help you accomplish this goal. Your approach for each project may be different but information gathering is important to having sufficient data to make intelligent decisions about form and function.

Be Consistent

All the information in the world is useless if it cannot be easily comprehended. Consistency is key to comprehension. Give the information structure and form with consistent use of words, naming conventions and messaging. Together, presentation (functionality) and style (form) create an interface experience for the end user. Because it generates patterns for the information and makes it a satisfying and easy to comprehend.

Represent Concepts Visually

Much of what we do as information architects involves conceptualizing and it's a big part of your job to create visual 'aids' to convey concepts. Developing a logical method for delivering an interface is only half of the work. The other half is communicating the concept effectively. Creating an experience that draws the audience to the ideas rather than simply taking them to a destination is essential.

Communicate and collaborate

No one can do it all or know it all. Information architects are collaborators. You need to develop relationships with your client and your team that allow you to recognize needs and abilities – for everyone involved in the project.

The information architect is vital to decision-making and communication on a team, building collaboration that creates effective results.

Communication is the interaction on a team that helps everyone to prioritize and maintain flexibility in the ebb and flow of changing goals.

By the very nature of their work, information architects create a synergy in the process. They are the link between the strategists, the technologists and the designers.

Visual perspectives

Being the link between the strategists, technologists and the designers is no small feat, especially since you have to produce a deliverable for the client that captures all of the essential concepts. While there's no template or standard format for what information architects produce, some common deliverables include:

- Usability Test Plans and Analyses: documents describing test methods and evaluation techniques that determine how people interact with the interface
- Site Maps: flowcharts depicting the navigation and basic content
- Schematics: line drawings or block diagrams illustrating the priority of information, links, navigation and space requirements
- Content Diagrams: block diagrams showing the interactive connection between pages
- Interactive Prototypes: prototypes showing basic form and functionality that are used for both usability testing and presentations
- Functional Specs: specs documenting the flow and functionality of the interface

The Future of Information Architecture

Organizations are evolving. Business is recognizing that information is its greatest asset. Information architects will continue to be in high demand, as organizations become more cognizant of this.

Knowledge management will become the cornerstone of every company's operations, and information architects will be needed to take leading roles.

Information architects will guide others through the maze of information, using a simple approach of learning

- What an organization is,
- What it wants to communicate and to whom, and
- What its business model is

This approach will help organizations define their strategies and business models around the visualization, flow and use of information.

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Lynne Duddy, native of Portland, Oregon, has over 20 years experience in communication, management, and training. Driven by her passion for innovation and support of human interaction, she migrated from technical marketing to the Internet and currently works as a Director of Information Architecture at AGENCY.COM, an international multimedia consulting agency. She thrives on exchanges with others and actively seeks out avenues for learning and creative expression.