

# Making a Profound Impact

by Thom Haller

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I'm sitting with my elderly parents at the lunch table. My mother folds the newspaper, hands it to me and says, "You'll find sad news in here." "Oh, no, an obituary?" I ask and then read of the sudden passing of an 87-year-old woman I had known for seven months. Actually, I had not really known her for seven months. I merely met her seven months ago when she shared a rehabilitation room with my mother following their respective surgeries. Yet Wanda's passing was a surprise. I would often think of her as I drove near her house, and she had come up in conversation the day before. Despite her age we didn't think of her as someone who would pass away following a "sudden illness."

I don't take well to sad news. So I raked leaves. Drank bourbon. Rubbed my eyes a lot. And tried to figure out why I felt moved by Wanda's passing. What was it about Wanda? I only spent "visiting hours" with her for one week. Yet I felt a big loss.

After some reflection, I suspect I appreciated Wanda's big spirit, unorthodox nature and robust energy. I also realized that, in a short time, she made a profound impact on me.

And that's why I'm mentioning this story in my new *Bulletin* column. I always wanted work that made a profound impact on others. I gravitated to the field of information architecture because I was attracted to the

profound impact available to practitioners in this field.

Years ago, when I was beginning work as an information architect, I was sitting at a local café. I listened to a young woman, a recent college graduate (or so I assumed as someone dipping into her conversation), who sat nearby describing her work-world frustrations to her father. "Don't you see, I don't want to be a marketer," she whined. "I want to be in a field where I can help people."

"Information architects help people," I might have blurted. Surprisingly, I didn't.

As a teacher I get to evangelize about the possibilities inherent in our work as information architects. I show a photo of Thom, grumpy in his mauve cubicle, with the text: "Early work days. Often built deliverables nobody wanted to use." The slides show a problem with the process – how the contracts define and the attention is paid to the *deliverable*, not to the *use* of the product or site.

As information architects we tend to build a lot of deliverables – products we provide to communicate design (preferred) or clarify the end of a period of work (costly). Deliverables can be fascinating and useful. But the profound impact of our work takes place at the moment someone is able to use a product or content we have helped develop.

I see we do our best work when we think about the helping humans. Although I have attended eight IA summits,

I've only attended one ASIS&T Annual Meeting. But I do recall the enthusiasm that practitioners brought to their case studies on helping people retrieve information. I wonder if our enthusiasm for helping others differentiates us from other professionals.

How profound is our impact? I'm still trying to learn that, but I think it's a question worth addressing. I'm hoping this column provides me a space to investigate and articulate that question. And perhaps, synthesize and share some answers.

Help me out:

- Do you see your work having a profound impact? If so, how? If not, why not?
- Do you find inherent possibilities in your work? Do you share these with others? How?
- Is helping people part of the reason you pursued your schooling or professional choices?
- How do you perceive information architecture – especially as someone who didn't enter the field from a design or user experience perspective? ■