In the mid-90s I spent time with two professional organizations, the Society for Technical Communication (STC) and a group now known as the International Society for Performance and Instruction (ISPI). STC provided me with the skills to develop usable communication products. ISPI encouraged me to think about individual and organizational performance. They reminded me that organizations often went looking for solutions (“We need training”) when they might do better by taking advantage of an alternative (“We now benefit from better instructions”).

At about the same time, I was becoming quite interested in the visual display of information and cognitive thinking. I thought I might stop calling myself a technical writer and begin calling myself a data stylist. Instead, I ran into a colleague at the 1995 STC conference who suggested that I call myself an information architect. He directed me to the work of Richard Saul Wurman, who proposed strategies for making the complex clear. I embraced the new label and the opportunities it presented.

Meanwhile, the Internet reshaped our lives, our jobs and our communication products. “How wonderful,” I thought. “Now that we have more ways to present information, stakeholders will place more value on reducing complexity.”

Maybe not. “Let’s just get something up there,” business leaders cried. They wanted “home pages.” They wanted “features,” often based on the technology of the time. And they wanted “portals.”

Look. It’s a Portal!

During the first decade of online engagement, World Wide Web structure was typically scattered and siloed. Content emerged haphazardly; it was often program-specific, seldom reader-focused.

My teaching placed me inside an organization where mid-level managers heard my call about possibilities inherent in user-focused structure. They embraced the opportunity to improve the organization’s public-facing website, and together we reviewed content, interviewed specialists and identified core topics that were central to the organization’s mission.

The mid-level employees felt they were accomplishing great success until senior stakeholders announced they would spend no money on the website and instead would invest in a portal. They envisioned an entirely new online environment where members could congregate, connect and advance the ideas of the organization. They attended to what technology
could offer them and purchased “the most complete set of capabilities and a best-of-breed solution while delivering a scalable, unified platform to handle traffic that is expected to grow exponentially in the months and years ahead.”

It didn’t work. Their public-facing web presence floundered for years. And the URL for their portal is now available for sale from GoDaddy.

What Happened?
Did these executives make a strategic business decision? History suggests they did not. Instead of collecting research that supported strategic decision-making, the executive team selected a product based on an imagined information structure. The tool didn’t support the tasks its visitors needed to accomplish. Nor did it provide clear pathways to the information they wanted. Ultimately, the tool failed.

The failure was, in part, contextual. The executives placed tremendous faith in a systematic solution without fully understanding the problem. Mid-level managers who better understood the problem didn’t articulate their belief in user-focused structure in such a way that mattered to decision-makers.

No strategic conversation took place.

Our Role in Strategic Decision-Making
As professional communicators, we are called on to develop strategies to help humans find their way through information structure. Whether or not we work on the user interface, we all work with others in mind. We know we need to fully understand our users’ perspective and translate it to and for others.

How do we translate this knowledge to stakeholders? The questions we ask are valuable to the entire organization. Consider the following:

We ask strategic questions about **audience**:
- Who are we addressing?
- What do they need to know and do?
- What do they know now?
- How do we want them to respond?

We ask strategic questions about **purpose**:
- What do our audiences want to do with our content?
- What value do they get from our content?
- What’s in it for them? Why should we matter to them?

What is YOUR Context?
1. Is your business motivated by the desire to “just get something up there” as opposed to the challenge of enabling people who read content to get their jobs done?
2. Are your bosses and organization motivated by preference (“Let’s develop a cool site”) as opposed to creating an online environment that supports audiences and meets an organizational mission?
3. Does your boss/organization expect a “perfect” communication product that solves a host of problems? Or do you work toward progressive success in meeting organization goals”?
4. Does your organization present itself as an expert (“the company that wrote the book on repair parts”) or as a client-focused servant (provider of communication products that enable people to make many choices themselves)?
5. Do your own perceptions of document design and construction come from “intuitive models” (as writers, we are gifted with the ability to present information in clever ways that will get the attention of our peers) as opposed to coming from a systematic understanding of our audience and a reliance on feedback models to better understand users?
6. Do your content and structure choices reflect an organization that is unsure about how it wants to present itself to its audiences or as one that provides focused and purposeful content?
We ask strategic questions about **context**:
- How do our readers respond to our mission and “value proposition”?
- What assumptions guide us?
- How do our audiences feel about our assumptions?
- What barriers do our audiences face that could preclude them from understanding or responding to what we offer?

We ask strategic questions about **priorities and actions**:
- What results do we seek?
- What are the priorities?
- What actions must we take?

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- What are timelines and responsibilities?

Organizations have been managing online communication now for 15 years. But the culture and context of business continues to thwart what’s possible for our audiences. Ask yourself – Is your business motivated by the desire to “just get something up there?” Or is it interested in enabling people to get their jobs done?

Put on your strategist hat. Help your organization think clearly about audience, purpose, context and priorities. Help your colleagues understand how content is a critical asset. Enable them to see why good structure makes strategic sense.