

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

Working with an organization to improve the structure and content of its Internet site can be discouraging and humbling when its stakeholders resist change. Proven writing skills that work in traditional formats do not always succeed in an online environment, coming across as verbose, obstructing clarity and impeding easy navigation. Suggestions to simplify wayfinding around the information space may be ignored, leaving the information architect with a sense of failure to deliver relief from information overload. Though not all recommendations will be accepted, the professional IA learns from each interaction and strives to deepen others' appreciation of the potential for effective site content and structure.

KEYWORDS

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What Happens When Context Thwarts an Information Architect's Vision?

by Thom Haller, Associate Editor for IA

A few years ago, I spent several months working with an organization to help improve the structure and content of its site. I worked with many stakeholders in the organization, and most of them were excited about our goal to structure information so people could better understand and use it.

I did, however, encounter some pushback. Within the organization was a lead writer who felt confident in her writing. Her confidence was warranted when she wrote for traditional media. But she defiantly resisted the challenge to reduce the number of words and allow visual structure to support people.

As a new product emerged, it was easy to tell where the lead writer's ideas held sway. Instead of short, directive text such as "find a topic by the first letter," the site incorporated sentences such as, "We are pleased to provide an A-Z Topics page to connect you quickly with the wealth of information on our website."

I revisited the site today. "I'm happy you're pleased to provide a topics page," I think, as I scroll down the page through five sentences, 113 words of superfluous information. "Give me some structure and get out of my way."

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I feel a pain – a kick in the gut when I look at this content. "It had so much possibility."

Recently, I've been working as a volunteer helping to improve structure on a site. Once again, content matters. Our early testing revealed challenges in shaping content to help people. And the testing revealed how frequently architectural suggestions were abandoned.

Ouch.

I suspect I'm more empathetic than some hard-boiled veterans of organizations. Maybe I take structure more personally because I rely on perceptual cues and inherent structure to navigate information space. As a human whose brain isn't wired for easy sorting, I also need wayfinding cues to help me navigate public space. I rely on consistent, coherent architecture to know where I am, where I've been and where I'm going. I need online text to be clustered and accessible.

So when I see a disregard for some essential ways to help others in online space, I end up feeling great disappointment. I feel personally wounded when I see products that could come so close to helping people – but fail because of disregard for clear structure.

So I've been questioning where that disappointment comes from. Am I just prone to whining? Or do others share my belief that we have the obligation to help confused humans in an information-overloaded world?

I believe we all hold the capacity to make the world a better place. I believe the better place begins by respecting others and, in a business setting, working as hard as we can to support others.

For me, that vision manifests itself in the “aha moments” that result from my teaching and the learning time my students and I share. But this hopeful vision also manifests itself in developing products that work. I feel excitement and energy when we identify strategies to improve users’ experiences. And I work hard to help others see the possibilities inherent in clear organization and structure.

Then what happens when the products don’t work?

Sometimes I ask, “What the hell am I doing?” Then I spend a period of time spiraling out of control until I remind myself what I do. Because I am primarily a teacher, I try to create a context in which we all share and learn. My goal is to remain present and deepen others’ capacities for learning.

And when I’m faced with results I don’t prefer? That’s the challenge for everyone who works with people and politics. It’s another opportunity to learn. “Fail more often,” the pundits tell us. “Become more mindful. Be compassionate.”

I try to balance my disappointments with my vision. I know what it’s like to get lost in information and know strategies for improving the quality of print and electronic documents. If I want my work to result in a better place, my goal is to remain present and deepen others’ capacities for seeing this too.

It reminds me of a fortune cookie message I place on class syllabi: “Never consider yourself a failure; you can always serve as a bad example.” ■