One of my students recently sent me an old blog post announcing that the term information architecture is dead. The article questions the need for the label and claims that the term emphasizes data rather than humans. The author believes practitioners spend too much time questioning the label and has decided to stick with designer.

I wasn’t terribly impressed with the writer’s arguments. Richard Saul Wurman coined the term information architect (IA) 35 years ago because he saw limits in the meaning of the word designer. Wurman suggested communicators could focus on making the complex clear and offered the label as a better choice.

I also don’t feel bothered when people avoid the label information architect. It makes sense to speak your client’s language, so I use labels such as teacher and communications consultant more than I use the label IA. But I am frequently reminded why the world needs folks who practice IA. I experienced such an example this week.

I was chatting with a friend who typically does not travel for work. The organization asked him to log into its company-wide travel system and book a hotel room and a car. My friend spent four hours trying to make his reservations. “Four hours!” he cried. “It took me half the day to understand how the travel system worked. Do you know what I could have done with this time? I don’t know why they build systems so bad.”

Hmmm…. What do you think? Why do organizations build and maintain systems that people can’t use?

Could it be a disregard for the people who use the systems? Or possibly (more charitably), could it be a lack of understanding? Do system developers have a limited view of people who use electronic communication systems? Do executives look at systematic solutions as an expense rather than an opportunity?

I’d respond, “Yes.” Working with organizations for (muffled sound) years, I have encountered all these situations. Sometimes they overlap.

I’m reminded of some work helping personnel in state offices for a large association. Our audience consisted of hard-working people managing programs, running the office, recruiting and supporting volunteers and balancing resources. Hard job.

To do their jobs, they relied on electronic systems – payroll, scheduling, finance, operations, purchasing (and sadly, the list goes on). Naturally, they liked some products more than others. One, they detested.

So when it came time to introduce a new system to the office, what model did the technical team use to create a system? You know the answer: The system people detested. Why? Developers could use available code.

Did they want feedback on how to make the system more user-friendly? No. Did they care that the system took longer for state office people to use? No. Did this cost the organization more money in the long run? Probably.
I was intrigued by a definition Scott Abel (www.thecontentwrangler.com) used to frame his thinking about content strategy. He said, “We need to strategically explore how we can use organizational resources directed toward a common goal so they accomplish the goal.”[1] This dictum holds true for those who frame their work as information architects, too.

At the end of the day, an organization’s job is “improving performance.” Employees need to perform their jobs to support their clients. Information architects are on the front lines when it comes to improving performance. We know how to listen to what users want from a system; we know how to analyze what we learn so we can determine what to put in and what to leave out; we know how to cluster information into smaller usable chunks that support information processing and decision-making; and we know how to test our assumptions and optimize a system so it is directed toward a common goal.

Useful skills? I’d argue, “Yes.” Remember my friend who spent four hours using a travel system? He’s a senior staff member, so if you consider his salary and benefits, he spent more than a thousand dollars trying to get his job done. And when he returned to the corporate travel system later to check on his reservations, they weren’t there. Why? He has no clue. In the end, he had to call someone else for help.

Instead of spending time decrying the death of information architecture, let us instead spend our energy informing others that information structure matters. Envision 100 workers spending 1,000 lost hours in corporate systems. You are looking at $100,000 – enough to spend money on a seasoned information architect. Even in a bad economy.

User experience champion Eric Reiss commented on information architecture’s apparent passing in last fall’s Journal of Information Architecture. He wrote, “Is information architecture dead? No way! It ain’t even sick.” [2].

I agree. ■