Information Architects: What We Do and How We Learn
by Thom Haller, associate editor for information architecture

EDITOR’S SUMMARY
Defining the field of information architecture is as challenging as ever, but this ASIS&T Bulletin special section includes several successful efforts from different perspectives. The lead article recasts the widely shared practice of organizing information resources as a discipline itself, building a commonly applicable model with widely understandable, generic terminology for broad implementation across diverse fields. The gap between formal education and real-life learning about information architecture is the focus of another article that presents a survey and audience feedback from World IA Day. Other contributions target the practical aspects of shepherding information content through organizational platform migrations, best accomplished by a multidisciplinary team with a common understanding of the information domain. Reflections upon 15 years teaching the subject of information architecture provide an opportunity to review lessons learned and consider how they apply beyond the field.

KEYWORDS
information architecture
organization of information
information resources management
migration
information mapping
information science education

Thom Haller – teacher, speaker, writer and user advocate – teaches principles of performance-based information architecture and usability. Thom volunteers time supporting advocates of plain language. Thom can be reached via email: thom<at>thomhaller.com.

A s a long-time instructor for information architecture and user experience classes, I often face the challenge of explaining what we do. My 90-year-old mother recently told me that she explains what I do by saying, “It has something to do with the Internet.”

She’s partially correct. Information architects have emerged during the past 20 years primarily because of the emergence of the Internet. But we also remain a profession whose practitioners spend a lot of time defining what we do and why we do it. At the IA Summit in Spring 2013, I spoke briefly with a colleague who had not attended a summit for a decade. “Has anything changed?” I asked him. “Technologies are new,” he responded, “but people are still trying to define the field.”

This special section of the Bulletin continues the quest to define our work. In the research article “Learning and Teaching Information Architecture: The Current State of IA Education,” Craig M. MacDonald summarizes information he and colleagues collected as part of the Information Architecture Institute’s World IA Day events in February 2013 as they explored the relationship among practical experience, classroom learning and theoretical knowledge. I also offer a few perspectives on classroom learning in my essay, “What Sticks: Reflections from 15 Years as an IA Instructor.”

Several other articles support the mix of theory and practice as well. John Heffernan and Paula Land share practical experience in “Information Architecture in Platform Migrations: Opportunity for Strategic Value” and “Migrations: Not Just for Developers Anymore,” respectively, while theoretical knowledge is provided by Robert J. Glushko, professor at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Information.

In his lead article, “Motivating a New Discipline of Organizing,” Glushko introduces us to his book The Discipline of Organizing. He reminds us that, as humans, we organize resources. These resources may range from
ingredients in our spice cabinet or electronic records to animals or the zoo. We can emphasize how these examples differ, or we can attend to what they have in common.

Glushko encourages us to shift the conversation from using field-specific language to one based on organizing principles:

- We organize resources using easily perceived properties to make them easy to locate.
- We group resources that we often use.
- We make resources that we use frequently more accessible than those we use infrequently.
- We arrange resources alphabetically – according to their names.
- We arrange chronologically (arranging resources according to the date of their creation or other important event in their lifetimes).
- We either sort resources into predefined categories or combine resource properties to create new categories.

He also encourages us to be aware that the “we” arranging and organizing is just as likely to be a machine as it is a human:

“The organizing systems view no longer contrasts information organization as a human activity and information retrieval as a machine activity, or information organization as a topic for library and information science and information retrieval as one for computers that people contribute much of the information used by computers to enable retrieval.”

Does this shift how we explain our role to others? It could. Glushko concludes his article in this issue with an example of the practical implications of studying principles rather than field-specific language: “A student who says she knows about curation can’t as easily sell her skills to a business looking for someone to develop a business continuity plan as one who recognizes that ‘organizing resources and maintaining them over time’ is the skill the company wants and the one she has.”

Enjoy.