Strategic Action: Information Architecture in Platform Migrations
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EDITOR’S SUMMARY
Information architects (IAs) have a strategic role to play, especially in firms that appreciate the need for clear and efficient user experiences. To support the end user, information must have value and be organized and understandable. An information domain model is a useful starting point to set the parameters of an organization’s collection of online information resources. It provides a shared basis for stakeholders to analyze and discuss the domain, working toward a common and well-developed mental model and foundation for information architecture work. For the IA, it becomes the basis for sorting and mapping pieces of information during a platform migration or other transition. The IA’s focus is on deep understanding of content to define and strategically manage knowledge units. Developing and implementing an information domain model supports the goal of enhancing the user’s experience through content structure and findability.

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Real world information architecture happens when enterprises need strategic solutions to business problems and when executives understand that their business lacks the technology maturity needed to remain competitive.

What is technological maturity? Technologically mature firms innovate based on network services and Internet technologies in computing and data strategies. These strategic choices cut infrastructure costs and increase data storage flexibility through script-managed transaction and data models.

It is within these competitive firms that the information architect (IA) has an increasingly strategic role to play. While creating clear and efficient user experiences that enhance an organization’s web presence and the findability of its information, the IA also considers web assets in the context of the information value they represent and how the organization’s information can be structured more efficiently, increasing reuse, simplifying business processes and laying a foundation for future change.

In working with clients in different stages of platform migration, I have found that the need to simplify the complexity of information environments, information exchanges and use cases is of paramount importance. Creating an information domain model for an organization has proved a highly effective way to define and communicate about the organization’s information world. This approach is based on the software application development methodology advocated by Eric Evans in his book Domain-Driven Design: Tackling Complexity in the Heart of Software (Addison-Wesley, 2004).

Evans’ book serves as a good place to start. Although it’s almost a decade old, the book can support many of us working with complexity. It presents a systematic approach to domain-driven design, while incorporating design best practices and experience-based techniques. However it also
offers fundamental principles that facilitate the development of software projects facing complex domains. As a reader, you will learn how to use a domain model and you will encounter patterns and language to make a complex development effort more focused and dynamic.

I’ve used the model with mixed success. While some clients have immediately seen the value of this approach, others have not. I learned to explain the model and introduce it to clients as early as possible in the development process. The value of the domain model rests in its simplicity as a heuristic tool and usefulness in discovering other information requirements. For the design team, the model provides a common orientation to the project as it starts to take shape. It creates a framework for discussing the project.

Why do I recommend this model to IAs? With information architecture projects, my experience is that the ability of the stakeholders to visualize and describe future states and possibilities can vary significantly. I have found that the quality of information one can obtain from stakeholder/subject-matter expert interviews is improved by having a domain model to discuss. Subject-matter experts will reveal weaknesses in the model and thus supply new use cases, while major stakeholders can relate the model to their strategic vision for the organization. In both cases, one can put into perspective more easily exactly what is important and what is not, contributing to the development of a well-founded mental model for the functional design work.

From the IA’s perspective, however, the real value of the domain model is as a tool for parsing and mapping information chunks from existing states to future states. Just as with data migration, where decisions about where data currently stored in one system are going to live (or not) in a new system, information platform migrations require mapping existing information into a new structure.

Platform migration is a strategic opportunity to provide for future technology maturity, regardless of the organization’s readiness to move in that direction. My experience is that the structure and availability of information in current repositories is insufficiently rich, inflexible or both. For example, how suitable or how well do product information systems support marketing functions? How “available” are systems to flow information into site templates and ecommerce interfaces? Are the textual information units sufficiently minimalist to support reuse, translation workflows and or multi-audience strategies?

In other words, how well aligned are the metadata and content structures for a N-dimensional site development effort? While site developers and designers focus on how the user experiences information, the IA needs to remember that in the end, the users experience content and therefore need to focus on the visual structure of the content being supplied along with its findability.

From an enterprise perspective, successfully envisioned and implemented information architecture results in business efficiencies that deliver return on investment in the information components. In effect, the IA is being asked to knit together the enterprise information platform and the enterprise content strategy so that the right information is being delivered to the right people at the right time with maximum consistency and minimum redundancy of effort in either the production of source information or the design team.

How do we approach this challenge? We must help organizations separate content and form, focusing on defining knowledge units. To do that task, existing content must be understood at a deep level that, as with separating HTML from CSS or XML form XSLT, allows the information architect to describe what the information actually is.

We must also work to optimize knowledge around the principles of minimalism, findability and interoperability. While mental models and persona tell the IA (and stakeholders) what knowledge units are needed when and where, the more strategic issue (and one that needs to be addressed) is how those knowledge units are stored and managed. This strategic understanding is important because content management systems are databases, and there is an increasing divergence between the worlds of the data manager and the information content manager.

I encourage you to learn more about developing an information domain model. Consider this activity as one more step in helping your organization leverage its assets, move away from costly relational database repositories and move to a new level of information maturity.