

Information

BY MIR G. HAYNES, *Carolina Chapter*

As we await the beginnings of an economic recovery, it's more important than ever to optimize rather than to innovate. Business is slower and budgets are smaller. Projects are more often about evolving a process or product rather than starting from scratch.

As an information architect, I have seen a shift in the kinds of Web development projects that my clients request. A couple of years ago, companies wanted to scrap existing sites in favor of dramatic overhauls, and they didn't hesitate to throw money at extensive online initiatives. That climate grew out of the constant introduction of new Web technology (which now seems to have slowed somewhat), the relative availability of venture capital, and the general state of frenzy that surrounded anything with "dot.com" tacked onto it.

Today's approach is much more cautious. Clients want to reshape what they've already got, making it more intuitive, more usable, and more profitable. Simply put, they want to improve their products, and more and more, they're looking to information architects to help them.

Technical communicators stand to gain a great deal from understanding the work of the information architect. Even if you don't build Web sites, by thinking like an information architect, you'll greatly enhance the products you do develop. Whether you build online help systems, develop Web-based training, create or maintain knowledge bases, conduct usability testing, or help maintain your corporate intranet, you'll find it worth your while to get in touch with your inner information architect. Doing so will make your products easier for users to use and for owners/developers to maintain.

All Roads Lead to Information Architecture

Talented information architects can come from a variety of backgrounds—computer science, industrial design, graphic design, usability engineering, journalism, human-computer interaction, marketing, and of course, technical communication.

The term "information architect" was coined in 1976 by Richard Saul Wurman (architect and author of the best-selling *Information Anxiety*), and championed by experts such as Louis Rosenfeld and Peter Morville during the 1990s. It now applies to a myriad of Web professionals, each of whom has traveled a unique path to his or her career in information architecture.

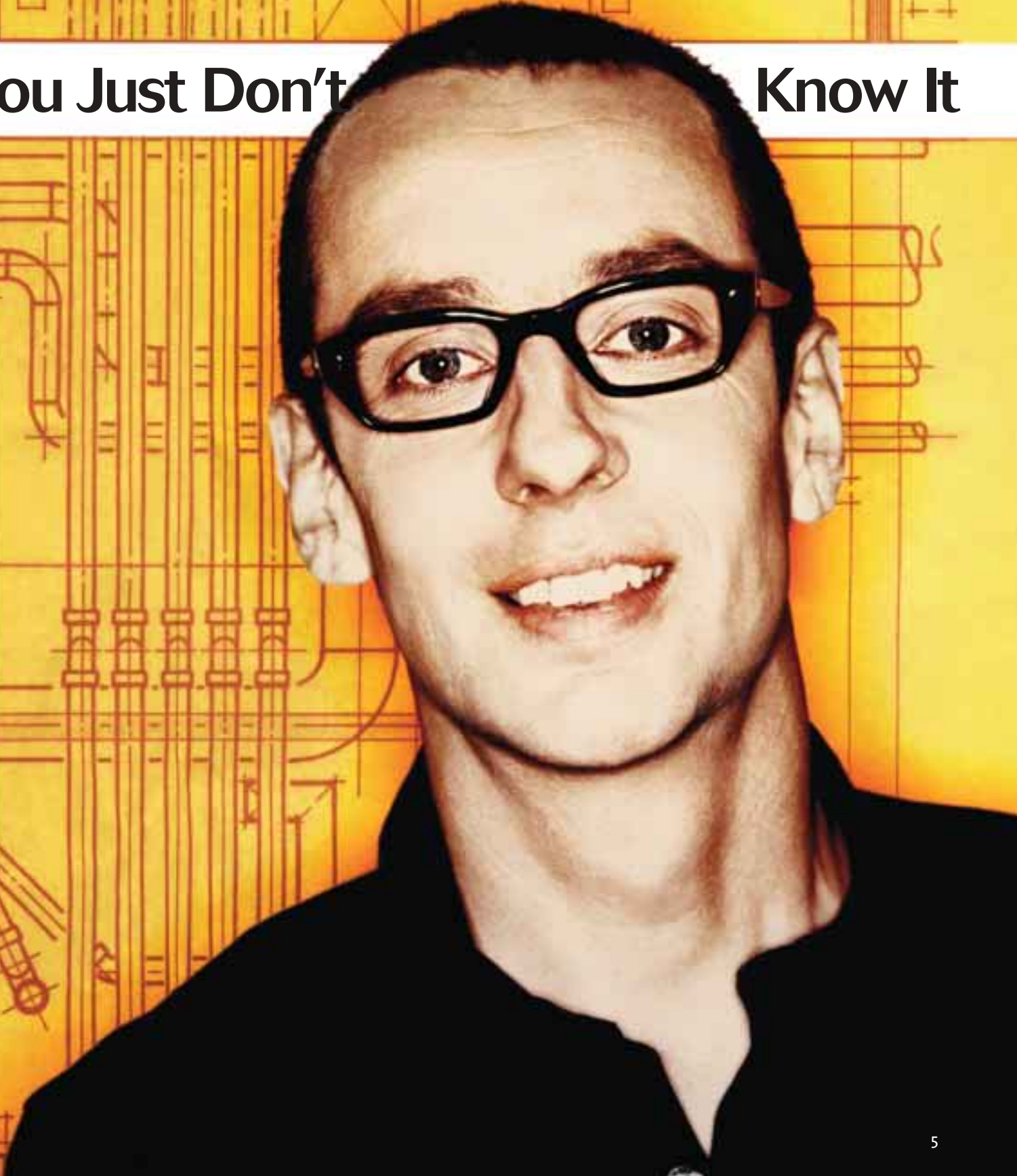
Consider information and interaction designer Drue Miller. After earning a degree in professional writing from Carnegie Mellon University, Miller worked for a time as a technical writer and print designer. But as digital media became more and more widespread, she began writing for and designing CD-ROMs and Web sites. Now, as an independent consultant, she offers information architecture as a core service to her clients. Of the journey, she says, "I kept seeing the interdependence between meaning and structure, organization and presentation, but often I was restricted to working on just one piece of the puzzle. When I discovered information architecture, and started reading Wurman and Rosenfeld, I felt like I'd found my dream job."

Steve Read/Stone

You Do It,

Architecture

You Just Don't Know It

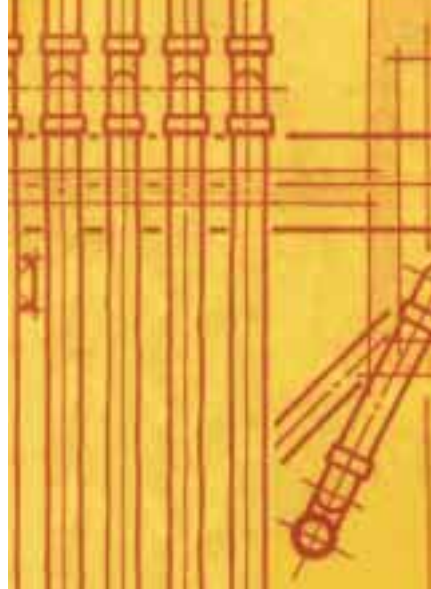


My job as a usability specialist was never as exciting to me as conducting tests on Web sites. The satellite receivers, DVD players, automobile dashboards, and various other products my company tested for its clients just never had the allure that Web sites held for me. I knew I wanted to be involved in the early stages of Web development, though not as a visual designer or technical engineer. It wasn't until I stumbled across a job description for an information architect (www.hes-keth.com/about/careers/ia.html) that I knew I'd found what I'd been searching for.

Louis Rosenfeld, a widely recognized pioneer in the field of information architecture, helped develop new information systems for the University of Michigan's graduate library. At a time when the Internet was just beginning to be used by institutions outside the U.S. government, Rosenfeld suspected that it was going to be an exciting new information medium, and that opportunities for librarians comfortable with technology would be plentiful. Since 1990, Rosenfeld has worked to introduce the principles of information science and librarianship to the Internet.

Commenting on what it takes to be a successful information architect, Rosenfeld, in an interview posted at jaundicedeye.com/stuck/archive/050897/article.html, said, "not just anyone can create a really interesting and effective information architecture, at least not for large, complex sites... You need to be a bit of an artist and a bit of a scientist to pull that off. You need to be an artist because you need a certain level of creativity to think 'outside the lines' and understand information spaces abstractly. You need to be a scientist because ultimately you need to be aware that measurement and quantification are important in justifying your work. Art doesn't fly a certain point. Lastly, I think you need to be an outsider. This makes you a better user advocate, but also divorces you from the inbred organizational biases that poison so many site architectures."

To an extent, Rosenfeld could be talking about technical communicators. We also must balance the art and science of information design. We must be able to quantify the value we add. And we must "stand in the gap" on behalf of end-users.



So how can you learn to think like an information architect?

Are You Experienced?

User experience, a term employed by Web and software professionals, describes users' successes and failures—and their thoughts about these events—as they interact with Web sites or use software or Web-based applications.

User experience is positive when good interface design, solid programming, and thoughtful information design work together to create functionality that is "transparent" to the user. That is, users are able to focus on the task at hand without having to think too hard. It's the seamless experience of adding an item to a shopping cart, perusing the morning's headlines, or downloading the trial version of software.

When a Web site is structured well, we usually don't even notice. But when we can't find what we're looking for, when labels are misleading or confusing, when navigation doesn't work in the way we expect it to, or when it's not easy to see where we've already been, we're left feeling annoyed, incompetent, or even angry. (If you've ever observed or moderated a Web usability test, you've seen, first-hand, how emotional people can get.)

Technical communicators who have learned to think like information architects can greatly improve the user experience of the information products they

design. So how can you learn to think like an information architect? Chances are, you already do.

You already think about the principles of solid information design, both at the macro level (such as chapters, sections, and subsections) and at the micro level (such as levels of headings, content chunking, and type treatment). These principles carry over to designing for the Web and for most other graphical user interface (GUI) information products.

Designing at the macro level means defining the primary, secondary, and tertiary sections of a Web site or other information product and supplying the navigational aids required to move easily between them. At the micro level, it means consulting with visual designers and peer-reviewing throughout development to ensure that individual pages of the site or product are easy to scan, easy to interpret, and easy to use.

As a technical communicator, you are already accustomed to thinking about the user. This ability is as key to designing intuitive organizational hierarchies, labeling systems, and navigational aids as it is to writing software manuals, white papers, or quick reference guides. Maintaining that user-centered perspective grows out of our recognition of the classic tenets of audience, purpose, and scope. These tenets form the foundation for any information architecture project, much as they do for any technical communication project.

We all know the importance of investing in our continued professional development. Perhaps one way you will decide to grow your skills in the coming year is by more closely examining the tools, techniques, and resources used by information architects.

For an excellent overview of the information architect's toolbox, pull out the August 2000 issue of *Technical Communication*, a special issue devoted to "Heuristics for Web Communication." This issue covers topics such as Web navigation, heuristic evaluation, using personas, creating content for the Web, displaying information online, and collecting data from users. Another great resource—and a good read—is Steve Krug's *Don't Make Me Think*. The Asilomar Institute for

Information Architecture also offers information and resources on its Web site (www.aifia.org).

Making Change

This article has so far explored how technical communicators can incorporate the skills and thought processes of information architects to greatly improve the user's experience of Web-based and information products. But for technical communicators who wish to make a career shift, it is important to consider what's shaping the field of information architecture today:

- Since 1997, the trend in business has been for companies to allow their separate departments to create and post content to their "little corners" of the corporate site. The result has been sprawling, inconsistent, poorly edited, expensive sites that are difficult to navigate.
- Recent studies have found that Internet users have high expectations when it comes to Web site usability: 78 percent think ease of use is the most important feature of a Web site, and 83 percent say they are likely to leave a Web site if they feel they have to make too many clicks. Yet approximately 60 percent of the time, Internet users can't find what they're looking for at all, according to User Interface Engineering, a leading Web usability research company.
- When people have a positive experience on a site, they're likely to return to that site, potentially increasing revenue and establishing a base for further exposure. Clearly, crafting a positive user experience through sound information architecture is good corporate practice.

The value of solid information architecture is beginning to be quantified. "Selling" it to clients isn't as difficult as it was a few years ago. Because sites continue to get larger and more complex as technologies progress, now is an ideal time for the emergent field of information architecture to play an integral part in corporate Web initiatives.

If your company's Web site needs help,

take the initiative and seek to apply your skills as a technical communicator. Chances are, the Web team (or lone Web person) will appreciate your fresh perspective and enthusiasm. Many information architects get their start this way, by being brave enough to say, "Hey, our Web site has problems!" and then, even more bravely, saying, "Why don't I try to fix it?" Very often, by demonstrating these skills, you can move into the role of information architect, even though your company may never have placed an ad for that position.

Alternately, you may want to suggest to your managers outsourcing the reconstruction of a poorly designed site. In doing so, you can position yourself to become the team leader or project manager for the new Web initiative. And when you're interviewing Web firms to do the work, make sure they employ an information architect.

Whether you're interviewing Web firms as your company's team leader or seeking a full-time position with a Web development firm, remember that a well-rounded Web firm will offer not just design, but application development and integration, e-commerce functionality, community interaction (such as mailing lists, bulletin boards, and chat functionality), and user interface programming (such as JavaScript and Dynamic HTML). While you won't have to become an expert in any of these areas, you will have to learn enough about them to work with more technical team members.

Caveats and Closing Thoughts

There are, of course, some important differences between technical communication and information architecture. For some people, regarding information as dynamic, rather than static, is a leap. You need to be able to see deliverables as evolving entities and learn to forecast and plan for changing business contexts, user profiles, or content. You also have to be comfortable with the fact that, according to Rosenfeld, "there simply are no absolutes in information architecture, because there are so many variables." In his article "Seven Pitfalls to Avoid in Information Architecture," he continues, "Trust no gurus. Seek guidelines that

help shape your creativity instead of rules that constrain it."

Like all of you, I hope that we're seeing the beginning of the end of this present downturn. In the meantime, continue to champion "the user's experience" in your area of specialty. And if you just haven't found your niche yet, or are craving a new challenge, consider information architecture. You already have a strong foundation on which to build. ☐

SUGGESTED READINGS

Asilomar Institute for Information Architecture. www.aifia.org.

Kimen, Shel. "10 Questions about Information Architecture." Builder.com. builder.cnet.com/webbuilding/0-3881-8-5113200-1.html.

Krug, Steve. *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. Indianapolis: Que, A Division of Macmillan USA, 2000.

Rosenfeld, Louis, and Peter Morville. *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*. 2nd Ed. Sebastopol, Calif.: O'Reilly & Associates, Inc., 2002.

Rosenfeld, Louis. "Seven Pitfalls to Avoid in Information Architecture." *Internet World*. www.internetworld.com/magazine.php?inc=121500/12.15.00feature3long.html.

Wurman, Richard Saul, David Sume, and Loring Leifer. *Information Anxiety 2*. Indianapolis: Que, A Division of Macmillan USA, 2000.

Zetlin, Minda. "The Web's Master Builders." *Computerworld*. www.computerworld.com/cwi/story/0,1199,NAV47_STO56575,00.html.

Mir Haynes is an information architect, writer, and small-business owner (www.mirhaynes.com). She serves as communications manager for the Carolina chapter of STC and holds an M.S. in technical communication from North Carolina State University. Mir can be reached at mir@mirhaynes.com.