



White Paper

**THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING
AN INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE WITHIN THE ENTERPRISE**



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Executive Summary

Too often, the process of developing an enterprise website happens haphazardly, growing organically without a unifying principle behind the site's development. From the end user perspective this often results in sites that seem unstructured, disorganized, and difficult to navigate. From an enterprise perspective the lack of a unifying principle can lead to a difficult and cumbersome site, which is costly to maintain. Just as any large software project requires an overall vision and design that will serve the needs of its users, so too does a large, structured website. This vision, to present an organized view of information on a website, is often referred to as the information architecture, or IA.

Information Architecture is the art and science of structuring information for a specific purpose. As in other aspects of design, informational architecture is an abstraction of the essential elements of a complex system. These elements are then organized into a coherent pattern. In a website-centric view, this abstraction serves as the overall blueprint that dictates how aspects of the site should be built. In other words, IA defines what the site is supposed to do and how the site will work.

Taking the time to develop on Informational Architecture is sometimes viewed as impractical; however, as this paper will make clear, in the long run a well developed IA will save time and money. Without an IA in place, often the implementation dictates the strategy and approach rather than the inverse. The result is often a series of disorganized heterogeneous components that are cobbled together to complete a task. Besides providing a poor end-user experience, this approach can lead to a site that becomes stagnant because resources are exhausted simply trying to maintain the site rather than provide new features. Additionally, scaling the site, to move with the evolution of the enterprise, or improving the usability of the website can also prove challenging.

A well planned informational architecture will benefit both the consumers and the producers of the website. The consumers will benefit by having a more positive user experience with the site, finding the information they need, and finding it quickly. The producers will benefit by alleviating site maintenance issues and improving the ability to update the site simply and cost effectively, as it will be well understood where new content should be placed so as not to disrupt existing content or site structure. Additionally, a well planned architecture can minimize and prevent political battles that sometimes occur when, mid-implementation, debates ensue over which department owns the content, how that content must be presented and where it should be presented.

As some of the benefits of an Information Architecture have been laid out, it is now important to determine the effort involved in creating an Information Architecture.



Creating an Information Architecture

The first question that must be addressed with Information Architecture for the web site is: Why you are building the site in the first place? Determining the site's purpose is paramount to success. On the surface, this may seem obvious, but by clarifying the unifying principle by which the site should operate at the beginning of the process, the entire team is assured to understand the end goal. As a result, the team can begin working on the site together, each with a firm understanding of what their focus should be. Likewise, the Information Architecture used as a guide, will help to prevent "feature creep" that would only serve to distract the end-user from the overall mission of the website. Though the Information Architecture will serve as clear guide for the development of the site, it must be understood that the mission will evolve over time and with it the informational architecture must also evolve.

The Information Architecture must also be created with the audience in mind. Answering questions such as: What brought the end-user to the site in the first place? What needs and concerns will the viewers of the site have? The information architecture must be able to strike a balance between the sponsor's needs and the needs of its audience.

Once the purpose and audience for the site have been clearly delineated, the next question that IA must address is: What content should be presented and how? The overall content must then be grouped and labeled, and if possible a determination must be made as to what content will be reused and repurposed throughout the site.

The final question to be addressed by the IA is: How will the site scale and change over time? Web entities are by their very nature dynamic and temporary. The typical lifetime of a typical Web entity is between six and eighteen months. The information architecture must account for the process by which new content will be added and old content will be modified.

Implementing Informational Architecture with a Content Management System

A well defined Information Architecture should ideally be complemented with a solid and flexible content management system or CMS. A content management system allows you to access, create, maintain, and manage the enterprise's information without the need for programming or HTML experience. Once the enterprise has determined its goal for the website, a solid CMS can help manage all other aspects of informational architecture.

The SR2 CMS has been designed to leverage all of the benefits of an Information Architecture, enabling users to reuse and repurpose content



rapidly, in order to address the ever-changing needs of your consumers. Additionally, content can be set to optionally appear only to specific, authorized, or premium content users. Through the unique functionality provided in the SR2 solution, websites can be setup to address end-users in the language of their choice with minimal web programming changes, enabling a highly personalized end-user experience.

In keeping with the structure of an Information Architecture, SR2's content management functionality allows users to easily group, inventory, label, organize, and reorganize the content stored within the system. SR2 also enables users to easily build and reorganize hierarchies of assets, ensuring that the proper relationships are maintained among the entities. By maintaining a separation between the content and the presentation, site navigation can be dynamically controlled through the SR2 solution. Likewise, through the use of metadata and taxonomy trees your content can be easily labeled and categorized. Additionally you may include keywords or search engine optimization (SEO) within your pages, enabling the site managers to bring the target audience to the site and allowing them to rapidly locate the information they need.

SR2 will also address how the site will scale and change over time. By creating workflows that allow new content and updates to content to be achieved without any coding changes required, the maintainability of a SR2 site is unprecedented. SR2 also supports web programming APIs in JSP, Coldfusion, Classic ASP, ASP.Net, and PHP.

Summary

Information architecture is a useful tool to ensure that a site is structured, easy to use, and easy to maintain. This is accomplished by making the determination of the mission of the site, the audience, the organization, and how the site will evolve over time. A CMS, like SR2 can help build, maintain, and foster a solid and beneficial informational architecture.

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