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Information Architecture

The Architects of the Information Age

In today's high-tech economy, managing data efficiently gives companies a competitive edge.

In today's high-tech economy there is too much information, the amount of data companies deal with is growing exponentially. And how a company uses this data is frequently the key to their success—or failure. Understanding the way information is used is particularly crucial in relation to the Internet: Sites that help users find what they need quickly and easily tend to win customers. Sites that frustrate users lose them—fast. So, to get their data game-plan right, savvy companies are turning to the increasingly important field of information architecture.

It's not exactly a new science. For as long as there have been groups of objects—from books to baseball cards—there have been people looking for useful ways to sort them. Information Architects spot recurring patterns, organize meaningful categories, give things names people will recognize, and place information where people can easily find it. They help businesses arrange their products and services; and they help search engines accurately index the Internet.

Online, information architecture is everything. If a site doesn't understand that users searching for "pensioner" really want information that's been filed under "retiree," it's not going to return the best results. And that's just one of many pitfalls: "If users aren't achieving their goals when they visit your site, you can be sure you're not going to achieve your business goals, either," says Eric Reiss, president of the Information Architecture Institute, a nonprofit group that supports more than 1,500 professionals and organizations specializing in the design of shared information environments.

It also means creating a site thesaurus, so when users type in one word, all the synonyms they could have meant are also considered. Ultimately, it means developing new and novel categorization systems—like collaborative filtration, where customers buying a product can see related products other customers bought.

More universities are offering degrees in order to create a new generation of Information Architects.

Not surprisingly, data-intensive businesses like Google and Amazon.com have been snapping up the best and brightest Information Architects around. The challenge, then, is to grow the talent pool. That's where San Francisco State University comes in. Since 1998, their master's program in Information Architecture and Design, though interdisciplinary, has offered state-of-the-art training from the expertise of professionals that work in the industry. Then to create a new generation of Information Architects, working in the industry in our community. The University's program offers training in: Information Architecture, Navigational Systems, Graphic Design, Project Management, Corporate Training, E-Learning, Technical Writing, and Usability Testing. While a few Universities now offer graduate-level degrees in Information Architecture, San Francisco State University offers a most competitive program, allowing architects and designers to do original research and work in Information Architecture.

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