

A Posting for a Job That Does Not Exist: How We Might Define Information Architects in Today's “Integrated” Advertising Agency

by Dan Klyn

Information Architecture

A friend of mine who works at a storied and successful advertising and PR firm that’s undertaking a reconfiguration to become an “integrated agency” asked me about job descriptions for information architects. He was looking for a way to advocate for a position called “information architect” in this firm and was asking for a job description that would make sense to the VPs and C-levels. I didn’t come up with anything good after Googling for two minutes so I decided to craft my own:

The role of the information architect is to help discover and articulate the “why” of the project and to work directly with the client and horizontally across vertically oriented disciplines within the agency to ensure consistency and continuity of meaning in the processes, products and metrics the team uses to measure its outcomes.

In the early stages of the project, the information architect assists in the formulation of strategy and uses simple pictures and sometimes complex linguistic structures to assist the team and the client in explaining and understanding the nature of the client’s business and the nature of the experiences that consumers will have with the client’s brand, products and collateral.

In the middle stages of the project, the information architect assists the project team in identifying the “what” and then subsequently the “how” of the project and in prioritizing, selecting

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and arraying specific tactics in ways that protect the continuity, consistency and purposefulness of the resulting user experiences.

During the implementation stage of the project, the information architect listens to and collaborates with the people who build, test and deploy the solution in order to capitalize on the unique insights that emerge during implementation, maximizing opportunities to enhance the solution as it is being built.

Once a solution is deployed, the information architect assists in the measurement of performance and of users’ experience and in the collection of diverse insights to continuously improve the performance and maintainability of the solution.

Upon re-reading the fictional job description I’d just written, I quickly realized that I’d done it wrong. I’d forgotten the cardinal rule of user-centered design. Instead of writing copy that would make sense to and persuade the executives at the agency, I wrote the copy as if I were the one who needed to be convinced.

There Are No Such Things as Information Architects Anymore

Before starting in on a user-centered rewrite of this job description, this time with the explicit purpose of persuading advertising executives that they should create a position called IA, I paused to reflect on what these folks might find on Google if they did a quick search for *information architect*. Would they find the video from Jesse James Garrett’s closing plenary at the ASIS&T Information Architecture Summit in 2008 where he declared

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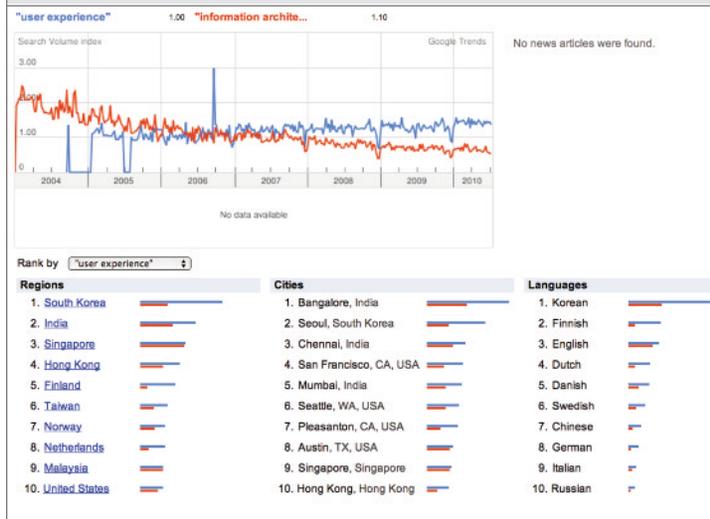
“there is no such thing as information architects - there are only and have only ever been user experience (UX) designers?” Or would any of them find the episode of Jeffery Zeldman’s *Big Web Show* where he introduced that day’s guest as “what we used to call IA?” Probably not. It’s even less likely that their Google search would connect them with footage from the 2009 ASIS&T Information Architecture Summit, where Richard Saul Wurman reiterated his original conception of IA as an “understanding business” which is concerned with “making the complex clear.”

No, I think the cacophony and near-impenetrability of the first page of results for searches on *information architecture* and *advertising* would – thankfully – combine to protect these executives from the harder-hitting rhetoric in the war of words that would seem to pit IA against user experience. In my rewrite of this job description, I decided that there were just two external reference points for “IA” that would matter to the audience I was writing for. I needed to focus on what other folks in their social network talk and think about IA and UX, and what other agencies say and think about IA and UX. And in both of these categories, it’s my belief that IA has, in the words of the Mad Hatter in Tim Burton’s remake of *Alice in Wonderland*, “lost its muchness.”

“You Used To Be Much Muchier”

There’s a combination of anecdotal and Google Trends evidence to support my assertion that the folks who run this advertising firm would perceive IA (if they perceived it at all) as something less than user experience. From a simple mathematical standpoint, the number of references to *user experience* that advertising executives encounter over a given week or month will surely dwarf the number of references to and encounters with *information architecture*.

FIGURE 1. Comparison of Google searches on the terms *user experience* and *information architecture* 2004-2010.



How do these executives’ peers and competitors think these terms relate to roles and job titles? The spread between listings for “user experience” compared to listings for “information architect” (both in aggregate as well as when narrowed by the advertising industry) follows a similarly top-heavy pattern.

“The Lunatic of One Idea in a World of Ideas”

If you’ve not already detected it, I will here state plainly that I’m biased when it comes to matters having to do with the role and discipline of IA. You could accurately characterize me, in the way Wallace Stevens described a tragic character in one of his

poems, as “the lunatic of one idea/in a world of ideas.” I teach the IA course at the University of Michigan School of Information – a job that I love and that I inherited from my mentor Peter Morville, who’s the co-author of the bestselling “Polar Bear” O’Reilly book on IA. I’m also a devoted disciple of Richard Saul Wurman, the lapsed architect and former protégé of Lou Kahn who invented information architecture as chairman of the American Institute of Architects annual conference in Philadelphia in 1976. Morville and Wurman have widely diverging ideas about IA, but they’ve both articulated an expansive vision for the role and the discipline of IA.

At the other end of the spectrum, beginning with a diagram in 2000 called “The Elements of User Experience” and then reinforced in 2003 an influential book of the same title, Jesse James Garrett cast a far narrower vision for the role of IA, allowing it only half of a slice in a six-slice array that visually catalogs the constituent members of an overarching concept called *user experience*.

I place myself at the far end of the Wurman/Morville side of the continuum, and while I acknowledge that the task of writing a job description for “user experience designer” would be a much easier sell in the integrated digital

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agency world, I believe that this word *integration* is the key to persuading my friend's bosses that "information architect" is what they want for an integrated agency. Not to the exclusion of "user experience" or "user experience designer," but as the starting point for delivering on the idea of *integration*.

Integration, Like Information Architecture, Is Horizontal

So as you may have already predicted, I never did the re-write. My original copy is what I ended up sending, and the deciding factor for me was the particular context of *integration*. There's a fair amount of cynicism at this agency and probably many other "traditional" agencies that are transitioning to the "integrated" model – skepticism that true integration is possible in a context where work has always taken place in a silo world of departments and handoffs. This unease is why an expansive, Wurman/Morville sort of IA seemed to me to have the best chance at connecting with the executives who are shaping their agency for an integrated world where print and broadcast and PR and web are united by a common choreography that creates and sustains success for the client and profits for the agency.

Wurman's idea of an information architect is particularly well-suited to the integrated advertising agency because, as he envisions it, the IA works independent of specific tools and modalities, and the IA's work obtains in all communications media. It's also always (for Wurman, at least) been posited as the role for a single person. Not that you wouldn't or couldn't have Wurmanite IAs working in teams, in a business climate where significantly more jobs are being shed than filled and created, arguing for the creation of a role for a single IA with an expansive horizontal authority is perhaps a more plausible proposition than hiring in and creating roles for the "big umbrella" UX professionals whose expertise has nevertheless been winnowed into Garrettesian buckets of IxD, IA, visual designer, information designer, content specialist and so forth.

There may currently be no such thing as information architects in these "integrated" advertising agencies. But I believe that if you posit the idea of an information architect within an integrated agency context with the requisite degree of muchness and horizontalism, the VPs and C-levels will quickly realize the value, and you can call it whatever you need to. ■