

Intranets: Do You Really Need an Information Architecture?

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My career has been shaped by the staff of the library in Devizes allowing a 10-year-old schoolboy access to the adult section. Not only was I given six precious [Browne book tickets](#) I was also given a guided tour of the library. The librarian asked me about my hobbies. At that time I was a keen railway spotter, with the GWR main line just thirty minutes away in Swindon. He then revealed a deep mystery of libraries. Books on railway matters could be found in the section on Transport and also in the section on Engineering. As time went on I found other examples but my knowledge of library classification was immensely helpful until I reached the Library at the University of Southampton which used the Library of Congress classification and I had to start all over again.

The challenge of finding the “right” place for a content item is one that webmasters and intranet managers will be very familiar with. Many hours, and much patience and frustration, will have been devoted to organising the information architecture (IA) of the intranet, probably using card sorting. Always the outcome is a compromise, so usability testing is then carried out to justify the decision and persuade others that in the interests of time they should accept the consensus. For years I have been fascinated by the fact that IA designers see any attempt by a user to use “search” as indicating a failure on their part to optimise the IA, resulting in further work and delay to address the apparent failure. I should at this point highlight Chapter 9 in [Information Architecture for the Web and Beyond](#), which sets out in fifty pages exactly why search is a core element of an information architecture. This is the 4th Edition of what is widely known as the Polar Bear book (in reference to the animal O’Reilly publications have included on the cover.) Every information professional should have their own copy. Of course the problem with any IA is that the moment it is launched something changes in the organisation to render it obsolete. Even if only a small element has to be changed the overall integrity of the intranet will probably be lost.

I am writing this column shortly after returning from the annual [IntraTeam](#) intranet conference in Copenhagen. Over the last decade this has become the meeting point for intranet managers from the Nordic area and beyond and has a community feel to it that the [Intranet Now](#) event in London has emulated with great success. (The 30th September has just been announced as the date for the 2016 Intranet Now event). This year at

IntraTeam over 210 delegates turned up. One of the themes this year is that the majority of the intranets on display were search-driven and had only a minimal menu system. It is easy to recognise a search-driven intranet - the home page has a large search box and little else. Two good examples were described by Philips (Netherlands) and DNV-GV (Norway). Typing the name of a person into the Philips search box brings up contact details as a preview using predictive search, without the need to press a search button. This does not need magical technology. [DNV-GV](#) uses SharePoint 2013 pretty much out of the box.

There are a number of advantages to this approach. The first is that an item of content only needs to be stored once, along with associated metadata, and can be displayed whenever the user needs it in response to a query. Secondly, it is very easy for a wide range of other applications and repositories to be integrated into the intranet. This enables Google-like search cards to be presented to a user who is looking for details about a customer. Contact details, billing status, office locations and the names of the sales team responsible can be garnered from a number of different applications and presented in a standard format. A third benefit is that it is possible to customise the presentation of news, corporate documents and other information for staff in specific roles and locations without the need to have very complex IA designs.

Although the technology is well established the requirements for high quality information management are perhaps higher than a conventional web architecture. The metadata has to be fit for purpose and so has to take into account the way that the organisation works and the business language that it uses. If someone queries [EMEA Sales] just which countries should be included in the European, Middle East and Africa acronym, or is there a pre-integrated sales report? It is not uncommon in global organisations to find that South Africa is not regarded as EMEA. User research still has to be undertaken but the focus has to be on how people work and not in the information they claim to be looking for. This is where personas have a very important role to play, but they can never summarise the requirements of every single employee. That is why search is so important. Either it can be used to deliver highly customised information or provide an effective application for people with very specialised needs.

Search-driven intranets are not for everyone, if only because it is far too common to find that there is no skill base in search to work with in their development. I cannot stress enough that these skills are not IT skills but information professional skills in applying metadata to business requirements and then tracking the performance of the system in many different ways to optimise the user experience and the business impact on the organisation. As well as a focus on search-driven intranets there were also very good examples of enterprise-wide search from PwC UK and Astra-Zeneca. It was interesting to note that this year the search-focused presentations were allocated the main conference room rather than one of the smaller side rooms, a further indication of the increased level of interest in search. This might be prompted by [Google exiting the enterprise search business](#), leaving companies to find alternate solutions at fairly short notice.