

An absence of voice: Web information architecture in small and medium enterprises

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Abstract: Practice narratives of web information architecture (IA) in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are investigated. Although web-based information delivery is ubiquitous, research and practice remains focused on larger organisations. This research attends to SMEs, revealing that the dominant voice in practice belongs to the communications and marketing practitioner, not the information professional.

1. The research problem in context

As in many countries, all sectors of Australian society – from government and private enterprise to education and community – use the web for information delivery. The increasing importance of information and the growing prominence of the web as a platform for information provision are current and universal phenomena. Coupled with a strong competitive impetus to provide and effectively structure online information (Evernden & Evernden 2003) is the rising expectation of an organisation's client base to find information on the web to support varied interactions with the organisation (Gunter 2008). However, information seekers do not always encounter optimal design and presentation of digital information. Dissatisfaction and anxiety with the quality of information and its structures continue to frame the user's experience. A disconnection between the desire to inform effectively using the web and the demonstrated ability of organisations to achieve this outcome is claimed by Wodtke and Govella (2009, p. xiv). This paper explores this disconnection by analysing the practice narratives of web information architecture (IA) in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

SMEs (defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as organisations with less than 200 employees) are a dominant form of business in Australia and around the world. These organisations exist in an intricate coalition with larger enterprises. Economies of scale mean that SMEs are frequently challenged to innovate and flourish in the information economy

and in using the internet to communicate and inform (Burgess 2008). The formalisation and documenting of the practice of web IA have largely been driven by practitioners (Campbell 2007). In 2006, Fast (para. 2) considered “that IA is characterised by its practice: not by its research”. Professional information architects are more likely to find full-time employment or consultancy in large organisations, thereby privileging that context as theoretical stances emerge from practice. This paper addresses this gap in the research literature by focusing its enquiry on the activity of web information architecture in SMEs.

Burford (2011a, 2011b) examined the practice of web IA in large organisations and Morville and Rosenfeld (2006) propose a methodology for web IA in large organisations. To date, SMEs have not received the same scrutiny. Little is known about the use and usefulness of generalised design methods and best practice guidelines for web IA within the situated realities of SMEs. The extent to which the internal environment may deter or contribute to success in effectively structuring online information remains unclear. This grounded research project explored the genuine realities, needs and practices of SMEs to create new understandings that SMEs can utilise in approaching and improving capability to build effective online information-rich environments. The project adds to the research literature by giving voice to the individuals who drive IA practices within these organisations.

2. Web IA: an overview

Web IA is a term used to describe both the information design process and its outcomes. Dillon (2002, p. 821) proposes a broad definition: “IA is the term used to describe the process of designing, implementing and evaluating information spaces that are humanly and socially acceptable to their intended stakeholders”. In focusing on users’ needs, web IA draws on the philosophies of user-centred design to “help maximise the value of new technologies and minimise the negative effects” (Morrogh 2002, p. 97). The practice of IA, according to Dillon (2002) and Morville (2004), is a value-based craft discipline and as such has its weaknesses. Consistent results and outcomes are not assured in a predictable timeframe. Yet evolving and maturing representations of best practice are proposed to guide the work of web IA.

Pioneered by information professionals Rosenfeld and Morville (1998), an evolving methodology for web IA is widely acknowledged in the literature, in education and by practitioners in the field. Morville and Rosenfeld (2006, p. 231) deconstruct an IA into component systems of organisation, labelling, navigation and search, as well as any

controlled vocabulary and metadata that may be used and provide generalised “structured development processes” for practice in large organisations. They draw on the expertise and theories of prior information traditions in an attempt to take control of this emergent information space (Dillon & Turnbull 2005). In contrast to methodological recommendations, some scholars and practitioners prefer to steer the development of effective web IA by providing guidelines. The value of guidelines remains contentious. Milne et al. (2005) claim that adherence to published guidelines does not ensure a high quality outcome for creative work, which should be undertaken with deeper understanding of practice.

After much introspection about the role of information architects (for example, Morville 2011) and even more attention to definitions of IA itself (Madsen 2009) from scholars and practitioners, it is noteworthy that Davis (2011) now calls for attention to shift to the practitioner of IA. This research heeds that challenge and examines the activities of practitioners of IA in SMEs. It gives voice to those who engage in the structuring of online information within smaller organisations.

3. Research Design

The activity of online information design in SMEs is described by the research participants in this investigation, with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of the practice and its localised demands. Framed by a case study methodology, this research used SMEs as units of analysis. Yin (2009) defines the case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and Hartley (2004, p. 323) claims that “case studies can be useful for exploring new or emerging processes or behaviours” and understanding “how behaviour and/or processes are influenced by, and influence context”. A case study approach to knowing more about how organisations are designing online information structures is applicable because contextual insights and patterns will be revealed only by examining situated practice.

SMEs with websites that are publicly accessible and predominantly used to inform clients, were invited to participate in the research. Organisations were not drawn from a particular sector; rather, they were selected to establish a diverse range in purpose and business model. The researchers scrutinised the websites of a number of SMEs known to them, to confirm that they were information-rich and that the organisation could be classified as a SME. A person in a leadership position within each SME was contacted with a request that

the SME participate in the research. With that agreement in place, a dialogue between the researchers and the person in authority pinpointed the individual/s who had most input to the creation of the information structures of the website. Six organisations were approached and five agreed to participate. This study, with a small sample size, is exploratory and does not claim theoretical saturation.

A qualitative approach to data collection was used. The person or group of people with responsibility and involvement in structuring online information were recruited to tell the story of practice within the organisation. In one organisation two people participated and in the remaining four only one research participant was nominated. The data, resultant of the narrative groups conducted on location, was captured in digital audio format, and was transcribed using a professional transcription company. In an inductive approach to analysis, the data were coded using NVivo as a supporting analytic tool to reveal patterns and themes across SMEs. Thematic analysis captures some level of patterned meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke 2006), and provides a theoretical freedom to approach a complex body of data and reveal themes and insights without pre-existing expectations or existing coding frames.

4. Findings

The data demonstrate that the voice of the information professional is silent in the organisation of information on SMEs' websites. The expertise of professional information architects is absent in practice, which is counter to the best practices literature. A strong and dominant narrative is issued by the organisations' marketing/communications professionals, who claim that expertise in digital marketing, experience in website construction, and a background in communication qualifies them to organise online information for smaller enterprises. Intuition and common sense replace the skills and theoretical underpinnings of the information professional within SMEs. A naïve confidence in this approach is evident in the collected stories. Further, what is not known about web IA does not concern the organisation. The studied SMEs do not isolate and detail the information work that takes place, and information expertise (either in-house or externally commissioned) is not employed. This paper claims that the consequences of this absence are significant and reports the details of practice in two of the SMEs with recent website launches that are claimed to be successful. Potential problems and obstacles lurk in the unknown and this paper identifies and predicts the challenges that lie ahead for these SMEs.

Communications professionals are typically the practitioners of web IA in SMEs and were thus the majority of participants in this study. In reality, expert information architects have minimal involvement in the practice in SMEs and those who practice have little knowledge or expertise in web IA. This paper casts a light on the absence of information voice and expertise. It addresses the CAIS conference theme in exposing a dominant marketing/communications narrative in an information space devoid of the benefits information professionals can offer.

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