

The Architects of the Information Age

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



Too much information. In today's high-tech economy, 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.

On a strategic level, information architects need to understand and address both a company's business model and the needs of its customers, says Reiss. On a tactical level, that means creating the right metadata—information about the information—to help search engines return more

accurate results. 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.

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 Kent State University comes in. Since 2001, its master's program in Information Architecture and Knowledge Management (IAKM) has benefited from the expertise of six faculties—including Kent State's business, library and information science, and communication studies schools—to create a new generation of data specialists that have already been hired by the likes of NASA and Marriott International.

Kent State's program is unique in that it trains students in three distinct areas: information architecture, which focuses on designing the data systems and interfaces companies use; knowledge management, where the goal is to make the collective know-how and experiences of an organization available; and information use, which focuses on how, and whether, the goals of access, usability, and efficiency are met.

"We're unusual in that there is no other school putting

More universities are offering degrees in order to create a new generation of data specialists.

these three things together," says Professor Thomas Froehlich, the director of Kent State's IAKM program. "But they're all related, and they're all coalescing into the modern view of information architecture." Ease of use is key, and the most technically innovative systems don't mean much if they trip up users. So in Kent State's Usability Lab, students employ sophisticated technologies to see just how user-friendly their designs are. The lab makes use of an instrument developed by Tobii Technology that even tracks eye movements, pinpointing where, and when, users are having trouble navigating a site.

"A lot of people come in and say they want to do pretty web design, but there is so much more to helping companies succeed online," says Froehlich. "There has to be an underlying structure of information. We're training people how to do it—and do it right." ■

Information Architecture and Knowledge Management

EXCELLENCE in Action

"I wanted to move out from behind my computer and collaborate with colleagues in solving larger information problems. Kent State's IAKM program made that career change possible."

Brady Bolyard, IAKM graduate

Helping employees and customers find information that's important to them is a skill set that's in high demand. Become more valuable to employers by continuing your education in information architecture and knowledge management. Many online options are available, from individual courses to a graduate certificate or a master's degree program.

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