Intranet Information Architecture

A Prescient Digital Media White Paper

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Introduction

"I can't find anything!"

This is the number one 'intranet' complaint of most employees at most organizations, regardless of size, industry and geographic location. Notwithstanding the effectiveness of the search engine which, more often than not, is rated as being somewhere between 'awful' and 'piss-poor,' information architecture is often the top priority of most intranet managers when undertaking a redesign.

Information architecture (IA) is mostly science with a dash of art. As it relates to the intranet, the IA is best represented by a site map or organization chart of the major information or content categories (parents) and the sub-categories (children) and how they all relate to each other.

This white paper examines the art and the science of intranet information architecture, content classification on the intranet, and some of the techniques and tools, such as card sorting, for developing an effective information architecture.

This white paper was prepared by Prescient Digital Media's top two consultants: Toby Ward (founder), and Jonas Lood. Their combined experience on nearly 100 intranet projects serves as the foundation of the intelligence, analysis and recommendations found in this report.

Prescient Digital Media are consultants for hire and we help organizations build and redesign their intranet. We are a veteran web and intranet consulting firm with nearly 12 years of rich history. We provide strategic Internet and intranet consulting, planning and communications services to many Fortune 500 and big brand clients, as well small and medium-size leaders. We treat each client as unique; we listen to their needs, goals and challenges; understand a client's requirements and potential; and deliver highly effective and innovative website and intranet plans, designs and solutions.

Additional information on intranet information architecture including case studies can be found at:
- www.PrescientDigital.com (corporate website)
- http://www.IntranetBlog.com (dedicated blog on intranets)

For help with your intranet information architecture please see our Intranet Blueprint service or contact us directly (416.926.8800 or www.PrescientDigital.com).

Information Architecture: A Definition

Information architecture (IA) is generally defined as the content structure of a website or intranet, or the structure or framework for how content is categorized and labeled in relation to other content. In short, IA is the art and science of structuring, labeling and categorizing content.

The formal definition offered by the Information Architecture Institute is :
- The structural design of shared information environments.
- The art and science of organizing and labeling web sites, intranets, online communities and software to support findability and usability.
- An emerging community of practice focused on bringing principles of design and architecture to the digital landscape.

The ultimate goal of the intranet manager, architect and/or consultant is to create an 'intuitive' IA with information categories and navigation paths that are intuitive or easily understood at a glance. Of course the principal challenge of any information architect is that what is intuitive to one person is not always intuitive to another. In other words, you cannot borrow or replicate an award-winning intranet IA from some other organization at your company – it will not work.

When redesigning an intranet or portal, there is a natural inclination by some architects and consultants to reinvent the IA to best reflect 'best practices' and/or the IA or labels used by others with successful and intuitive IA's. This of course is a dangerous trap. No outside consultant or architect could truly appreciate and know intimately the culture and the formal and informal corporate nomenclature as those who have worked for an organization for years. Furthermore, legacy labels and nomenclature considered awkward or poorly named are in fact reinforced and validated by years of employee use. For example, the content category "HR" is not a very cool label, but most employees, if exposed to it for years, know exactly what "HR" means and would not want the section renamed.

Sadly though, many design firms, architects, and over-zealous intranet managers have begun to use cute, new millennia names and labels that are in reality not at all intuitive, if not downright confusing. For example, it's very hip to rename the HR section:
- People Place
- My Services
- @Work
- @MyWork

If you were a new employee to a company and saw the intranet for the first time, and saw a section called "@Work", would you intuitively assume this is the place for HR forms and policies?

None of these labels are wrong per se, but if employees have spent years finding benefits and compensation information and tools under the "HR" section, why would anyone change the label? Frankly, unless there is a solid, demonstrated reason for doing so, you risk further confusing employees who demand simplicity.

Simplicity Rules

Firstly, no two organizations are the same. Notwithstanding different industries and services, each organization (even closely related competitors) may differ dramatically in very meaningful ways. For example:

- Corporate priorities
- Corporate values
- Target audience & customer base
- Management
- Culture
- Geographic locations
- Personal life experiences and preferences
- Career path & development

All of the above factors, and many others (including dozens and perhaps hundreds of sub-factors), influence an individual employee's definition of 'intuitive.' Therefore applying labels and schema from one company to another makes absolutely no sense and is reckless in principal.

For example, two oil companies based in Europe, with approximately the same revenue size, employee base, services and products are likely vastly different in terms of culture and information use: one may have principle operations in the North Sea, the other in Africa, and South America. It does not take a genius to understand that African based employees have a vastly different culture, language, and set of needs than those that live in Scandinavia, and therefore the IA on the intranet should accurately reflect the needs of those employees, and not mirror a 'best practices intranet' (e.g. a North American technology company that won a number of 'intranet awards').

So while reinventing an intranet's information architecture from scratch, and removing common and generally accepted labels and information paths is counter-productive, there are some general lessons to be learned (though not always universally applicable):

- **Minimize the clicks** – the vast majority of practical content should be no more than 3-4 clicks from the home page (this is impossible with millions of pages of content, but note the emphasis on majority, or approximately 80% of the top 500 most requested files or pages).

- **Major parent categories** – (major sections or channels that represent virtually all the content on a corporate intranet) should be limited to 6 to 8, including sections for About Us, Products, HR, and News.

- **Beware the catch-all section** – such as "Resources" or "Tools" that become dumping grounds for everything that doesn't fit in other sections rather than finding it a true home.

- **Navigational / usability elements** – tools such as Search, Site Map, Help, Contact Us, Feedback, etc. need not be in a parent category per se, but should be available in the main navigation banner and/or footer.

- **Card sorting exercises** – that allow users to determine content groupings and labels are extremely valuable for fixing navigation and usability problems.

Do not bury or overlook highly desirable but not necessarily mission-critical items that are usually very highly sought by employees including:

- Cafeteria menus
- Buy-and-sell / Classifieds
- Job postings
- Weather forecast
- Office locations & maps

Most corporate intranets feature weak information architectures that require careful thought and some work to enhance. But completely scraping and reinventing the IA at the expense of years of common, learned behavior may further confuse and irritate your employees who are already complaining that they "can't find anything!"

Sample IA:
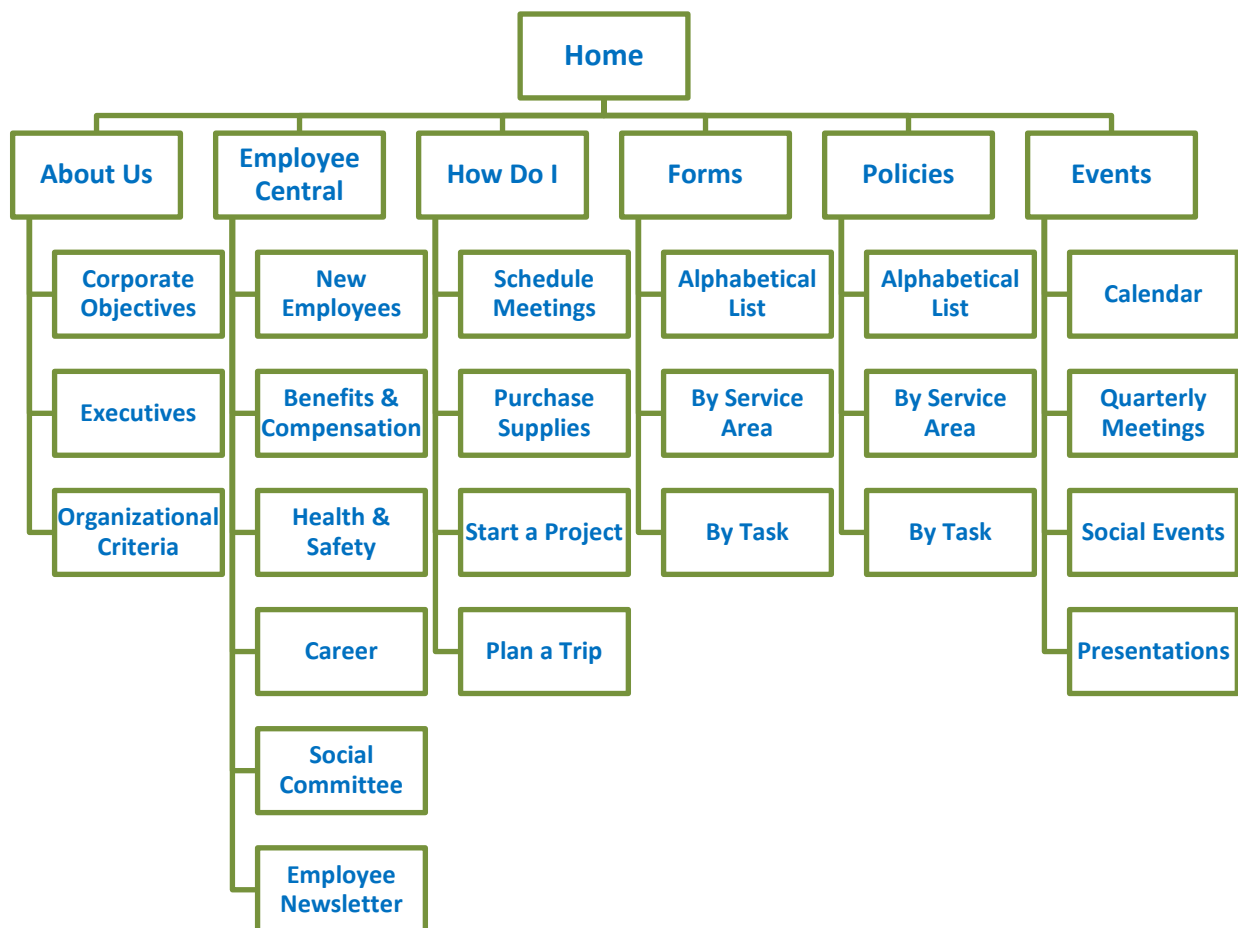
Parent Categories

An effective IA begins with the development of overarching, parent categories – the main categories or boxes under which all content is slotted (or categorized). On an intranet, common global parent categories might include:

- About Us
- News
- HR
- Products & Services
- Forms & Tools
- Manuals & Policies

Other common parent categories (relevant to some organizations but not others) include:

- Customer service
- Career / Learning
- Executive Corner
- Roles
- Library / Reference

The key to creating effective parent categories is to develop 6-8 categories which can comfortably host or be the pathway to all your intranet content. BUT to label these categories in a manner that is intuitive to the average employee. Therein lies the challenge: what is an average employee? Often, there isn't one, and the exercise of labeling these categories is that of finding the lowest common denominator, or the one label the greatest number of people will intuitively understand. To use an earlier example, "HR" may not be the sexiest term or label, but more people understand its meaning better than "@MyWork." Though a no truer more famous quote could be applied to IA than: "You can please some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time."
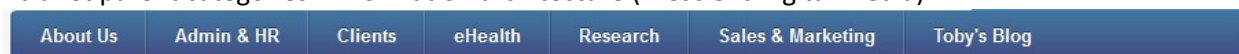
It should also be noted that the intranet IA cannot be simply copied from the external website; employees are a vastly different user audience, and far more demanding. In fact, the typical intranet contains 100 – 1000 times the content found on the website and is accessed far more frequently than external content.

IA Comparison:

Website parent categories - information architecture (Prescient Digital Media):

Home	About Us	Our Expertise	Your Issues	Our Solutions	Events	Articles, blogs, media	Whitepapers

Intranet parent categories - information architecture (Prescient Digital Media):

About Us	Admin & HR	Clients	eHealth	Research	Sales & Marketing	Toby's Blog

Card Sorting

In most cases, organizations look to redesign their intranet when it becomes outdated, difficult to navigate and cumbersome to use. Often the principal problem is the structure and quality of content. While the scope of these projects will always vary, a constant is the need to define the proper information architecture. The IA essentially defines the intranet 'site map' – the schematic flow chart or hierarchy of the site, and is the foundation of a site's usability.

An effective information architecture must categorize the breadth of content and catalog it in a manner that makes logical sense to stakeholders. In general, when content is organized around descriptive actions or events users have an easier time finding what they want, allowing them to act on it in a timely manner.

To accomplish a successful intranet IA, a card sorting exercise is a critical step. There are many variations and approaches to card sorting, but the ultimate goal is to ensure the content is categorized into logical chunks.

Card sorting is frequently used in social research. It is sometimes also referred to by the terms pile sorting, free sorting, or free grouping. It is a research method used to better understand how people label and categorize certain types of information. The approach is generally collaborative and the methods used are fairly commonplace. There are in essence two main styles for card sort approaches. The first style, called an open card sort, allows participants to work with cards that have been pre-populated with sample content. The alternative approach, the closed card sort, provides not only the pre-populated content cards but also a set of predetermined categories to sort these cards into. Your project requirements will help determine the correct approach for your card sort. In either case, the results are recorded, analyzed, and used to craft a new IA.

Although it sounds simple, card sorting can be a very powerful technique: you may learn a great deal how people think about categories and concepts, how they describe them, and what information belongs to a particular section or category.

Benefits of a Card Sort for IA Projects

For portals and intranets, the most common use for card sorting is to help define a high-level information architecture (IA). The IA is in essence the organizational system for the information that is represented on the site. When conducting a card sort, participants focus on grouping, organizing and labeling commonly used items, usually content. Card sorts involving IA projects are used to determine how people will ultimately use the information on an intranet or website, including how they organize, label and group it. This can be very useful when information needs to be organized in a way that is intuitive. The goal is to create a future state for this information so that everyone in the organization can find it easily.

Common uses for IA focused Card Sorts:

The following scenarios represent some common uses for card sorting:

- The top level categories for an intranet/website need to be defined

- When individual sections of the intranet need to be reviewed
- Alternative ways of structuring information
- Identifying potential categories for a knowledge-base
- Creating a classification scheme for a document management system
- Determining menu groups and subgroups for a portal application
- Identifying key steps and sub-steps in a process
- Structuring online help

When considering the content structure for an intranet information architecture the purpose may also include:

- Brainstorming different categorization approaches
- Getting a better understanding how people think about a certain topic
- Understanding what categories are similar or complementary
- Documenting a list of words people use to describe groups of information

How Card Sorting can provide fresh perspectives

Card sorting is useful in other ways as well. By providing insight into how other people might organize information, card sorting may lead you to question your assumptions. If you're working on the redesign of a large intranet portal and already know the content very well, it can be hard to develop a fresh perspective and create different, perhaps improved, organizational schemes.

A card sort can provide clarity and help you see the content from the perspective of someone viewing it for the first time. Card sorting can also assist teams in coming to a consensus. Imagine that you're part of a team designing a large intranet from scratch. There is no consensus regarding how to organize your site. By providing useful input from actual users, card sorting can help you decide which organizational scheme is most appropriate for your ideal needs.

Card Sorting - Best practice techniques

Key steps:

- Determine the information review requirement
- Select the method to apply (open or closed, in person or remote)
- Determine the test method: manual or software
- Develop the cards and choose content
- Choose and invite participants
- Run the card sort and record the data
- Analyze the outcomes
- Use them in your project

How to choose the best items to sort

To organize information effectively, the first order of business is to label it. This is the exercise of describing groups, categories and items. Organizing also requires labeling which is the exercise of reporting groups, categories and items. These groupings can be described in several different ways. There could be several idiomatic phrases, internal jargon and regional language considerations.

Identifying the right label can sometimes be difficult. If only a few people are expected to use the term, you can in essence name it what you prefer, as long as everyone knows your intentions and agrees to that approach. An example: if you lived in London and were taking the subway, you may refer to the subway by its most commonly used vernacular, The Tube.

IA construction relies on proper labels and supporting descriptions that are generally comprehended. One challenge with this approach is that many subjects have several common terms describing the same thing, i.e., photo, picture, snap shot and image. What term is best suited? Which do you pick? Another common dilemma is that of a multi-purpose terms where a term can mean more than one thing.

One key benefit of card sorting is that it helps you better understand the underlying classification schemes necessary for specific information, how people group this information, and how context can alter the meaning of this information. Since card sorts involves sample data, it won't tell you which content name is best for a particular category, it will however give you a gauge of how and when different terms are used, and which are the most common. It will also not tell you which terms are more jargon focused or whether or not it should be changed. It will help you detect patterns in the overall landscape of the terms used in a project to identify better ways to organize this information.

Your approach to how you identify the information you want to convey in a card sort is determined by the information you want to seek out. This outcome will likely specify the structure and patterns of the end result. For example, a hierarchical structure, is one where a group is broken up into subgroups, sub-subgroups, and so on. Or, looking at it from the bottom up, a set of objects can be assembled into groups, broader groups, and even broader groups. The operating file system on your computer is a perfect example of a hierarchy—folders have subfolders and sub-subfolders, often many levels deep. An organization chart approach is another common approach. The navigation of many websites and intranets are intentionally set up this way. This is because hierarchical structures are a natural way for humans to interpret and understand formal organization patterns. These are also commonly referred to as taxonomies.

Process

Gathering/Culling the data

To cull the content or topics for categorization, simply do a high level audit of the present site. Look for a range of 60-100 content items to use for your sorting exercise. This should include all the major components of your site such as news, about the company, HR forms, policies, etc., as well as some more buried or obscure items such as procedures or company awards that might be considered important or priority pages. A good cross section is required in order to ensure that, when the card sort is being conducted, discussion occurs on where each item belongs. It is not critical that all content items are culled as this will take too much time and be counter-productive.

As well, if a good cross section is gathered, and a third to fourth level information architecture is defined and agreed upon, the rest of the content items will fall into place. (This shouldn't be mistaken for a content audit in which each piece of content on the site is accounted for. However, a content audit is highly recommended to ensure old and no longer relevant content is purged. As well, if the audit is done

at project outset—which it should be—it will also assist in determining the 60-100 content items for your card sort).

User discussion: working through the model

For an intranet's IA, the crucial first decision is whether to place content in organizational silos or utilize an employee-central approach in which all the information is grouped by type or persona. Typically, organizations want to take the content items and put them back where they were on the original site: they simply are categorizing based on what they are used to, whether it is right or not. This of course, ignores the fundamental reason why the intranet was difficult to navigate in the first place. But while it is important to break down these organizational silos in order to improve navigation, breaking down silos requires addressing the political considerations that will accompany this effort.

In order to break out of the old way of thinking about categorizing information, there are a few methods for challenging site managers:

- **Show** – showing users how other companies organize their data illustrates what is possible. It allows them to "think outside the box" and look outside the organizational categorization (not that these other IA's should be copied, merely considered). Again, these best practice companies shouldn't be copied, only learned from.
- **Ask** – by taking a content item and asking a user's point of view. For example, in an intranet, if I wanted to fill out my expense sheet, would I like to go to Forms or a Tools section, or a Finance section, or by way of the department that created the form? There is no right or wrong answer, only preferred opinions.
- **Challenge** – challenge the status quo: using the intranet as an example, ask users to place employee tasks into a bundle and call it 'Employee Central' or 'Employee Tasks'. You will find that there is a mix of different departmental items that fall into this category: Time sheets and expense sheets from finance, ordering new business cards from admin, download pay stubs from H.R. This exercise forces the users to think outside their silos. However it is not easy. Many users cannot make this leap. Depending on the age of the site, user expectations, historical IA and other factors, this may be difficult for many users. The challenge then becomes adoption. Although this may be the more logical step in re-organizing your data, can the organization learn the new information architecture without getting frustrated?

Below is a simple IA developed for a government client, after conducting a card sort. The top bar represents the global navigation across the top of the site. The columns below are drop-down items that appear when a user mouses over the main navigation bar. This action allows the user to get a snapshot of the entire site without clicking on any particular item.

Although this is a simple site, developing the IA did take time utilizing the same steps described above, and there was much discussion as to where each content item should fit. The categorization and the content items did switch categories throughout the workshop. As well, the titles of each category continually changed. You will note that these titles are simply phrased titles that tell the user what is within. They are not forcing the user to guess at what "Asset Management" or "Features" mean.

Example Information Architecture

About Company	What We Do	Doing Business With Company	In The News
Corporate Profile	Services/Departments	Properties for Sale	Recognition & Awards
Office of the President	Policies & Procedures	Mapping to government buildings & properties	News & Headlines
Executive Team Profile	Government Initiatives	Area conversion tool	Media Articles
Board of Directors Profile	Partners	Bid Opportunities	Public Symposiums
		Careers	Presentations & Videos

Card Sort Lessons

While card sorting has become a generally accepted best practice, occasionally it has also been criticized as redundant or wasteful. For example, managers sometimes complain the research method does not give them the results expected. However, don't pre-suppose what the IA should be – keep an open mind, and ask employees what it should be.

Often the direct outcomes from a card sort are simply applied to a new intranet design, without the proper analysis or verification of the navigation. Unfortunately, in these cases, the outcome of the card sort exercise can create an IA with severe limitations. A renewed research approach with the proper post analysis techniques is necessary.

1. **Focus only on IA** – single out the IA from the wireframes and design. Ensure you do not try and get consensus on all aspects of a web page such as layout, graphic treatment and Information Architecture. Take each component on separately and ensure you have sign-off on each before moving onto the next. The suggested order of operations is: I.A., layout and finally design.
2. **Promote dialogue** – the first hour of a three hour card sorting exercise usually results in very little categorization. And this is good. Typically a good discussion ensues in order to determine "how to start". Don't think that this dialogue is unproductive. This discussion must occur to gain some consensus on moving forward with the categorization.
3. **Challenge the status quo** – do not accept the excuse, "this is the way we always do it." Try the opposite; you may be surprised at the outcome.
4. **No single solution** – people think differently and it is nearly impossible to get 100% buy-in. Recognize that someone will not be happy with where a specific piece of content lives or what it is named. If you can get 80% buy-in, move on.
5. **Engage a third party expert** – although facilitating a card sort sounds trivial, it is not. Humans are naturally adverse to change and stand by the old motto "we have always done it this way." By utilizing an independent external opinion, you will garner a different and newer perspective that may elicit far fewer complaints of "I can't find anything."

Although card sorting can be a rich source of insights, it should be combined with other research techniques to gain a better understanding of what your users need. As with any other research technique, it's important to apply the card sorting approach within the right context and timing for the project. Similarly, once the results are in, usage patterns must be properly analyzed and vetted before the new Information Architecture, and ultimately redesigns, are approved.

Layout

There are several IA layouts to choose from. The following are a few examples.

All in one

The simplest of IA designs, an All-in-one layout has all content living on a single home page location. This makes for a very simple and straightforward user experience.

This approach works well for small sites with little content, and has the up-side of requiring very little maintenance. Of course, this is not recommended but for the simplest, online brochure type intranets – which are virtually non-existent in the new millennium.

Flat

A Flat Information Architecture structure is laid out so that all pages are presented as peers. With no parent-child relationships, each page can be accessed from every other page. This style is also known as a "monocline grouping."

This design type is usually applied for sites with limited number of standard topics: Home, About Us, Products, etc…

Indexed

Similar to the flat structure, the Indexed IA design is organized intuitively (or at least it is supposed to be), and has the aid of a table of contents. The indexed design is a better choice than its simpler cousin when there is a moderate amount of data to be accounted for.
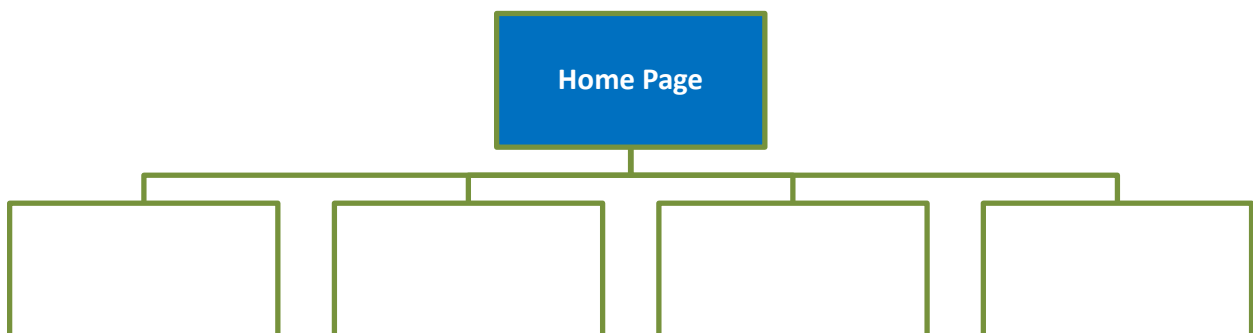
This design is best suited for data that can be easily and logically organized, for example, alphabetically, such as a phone directory, or parts list.

When a site has a large amount of data to be indexed, a search based design is a better IA structure selection. This is the most common approach to IA, and the one most often followed by intranet managers and consultants.

Hierarchical: Strict & Multidimensional

The bigger the intranet, the more complex the IA. A hierarchal approach to IA design is where protocols and permissions become tantamount to success. It is the most common choice for sites with thousands (or more) pages and files. With hierarchical designs, there are parent pages with multiple child pages for users to link to.

In a Strict Hierarchical design, access to lower level child pages is restricted through their parent pages. This model is used where there is a direct and exclusive relationship between the parent and child pages that is not shared with the site's other content. For example, a retail clothing site could organize its pages by product type – a shirt cannot be listed as part of the pants section.
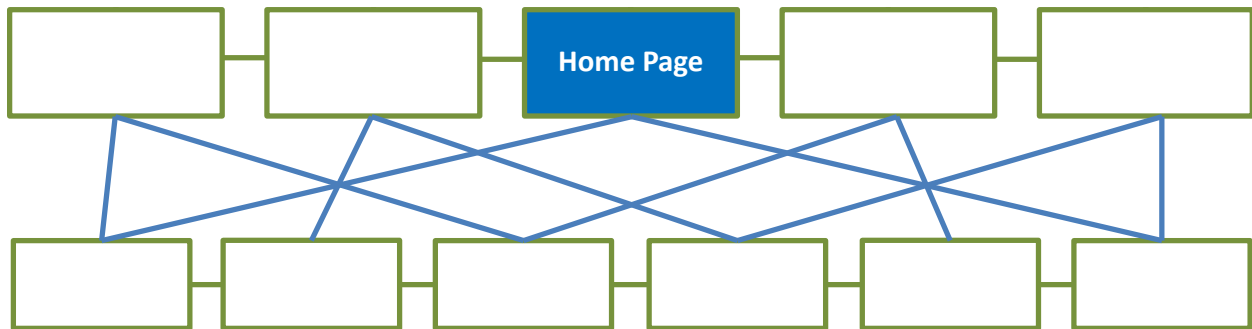
This style is also commonly used for sites with message boards.

A Multidimensional Hierarchical IA design provides a site map where content can be accessed from various pages and methods or search patterns.

This IA design relies heavily on the properties or metadata of the site's content. An example of this would be Indigo where the user can find a book selection through various search options: title, author, ISBN/UPC, Editor and Publisher.

Benchmarking

Examining and studying other intranets can be helpful in crafting a new information architecture (IA). However, copying other IAs is a trap that can lead to costly mistakes.

An examination of the IAs of leading intranets provides some clues, tips, and lessons for crafting an effective intranet IA, without falling into the trap of replicating another IA (and therefore replicating an IA based on another's culture and set of employee needs).

Thirteen leading intranet IAs were examined, documented and compared (conducted by Prescient Digital Media in 2008):

- Google
- Cisco
- HP
- Sodexo
- Microsoft
- British Airways
- Bank of America
- SAP
- Perkins Eastman
- McDonald's
- Simcorp
- Atomic Energy of Canada
- Ericsson

An examination of the top level parent categories of these 13 leading intranets reveals the following:

- The average number of parent categories: 6
- The intranet with the smallest number of categories: 4
- The intranet with the highest number: 9
- The most common parent: News (6x)
- The 2nd most common parent: About ___ (4x)
- The number of HR sections actually called 'HR': 1 (Google)
- The number of HR categories that use the word 'Employee' (as in Employee services): 6
- The number that have a dedicated category to 'Products' and/or 'Services': 3
- The number that have a dedicated category to 'Customers': 2

Most of these intranet home pages of course have more than just parent category links and often have other tertiary or navigation links that are not in fact 'parents', but rather are support links that might include the following:

- Search
- Site Map
- Feedback
- Help
- Contact Us

- Directory (Phonebook)
- Login

Of note, most of the examined intranets do not have consolidated sections for products and services, and/or customers. Most organizations leave product information to division or business unit silos, which can be a mistake. Of course, employee users despise content organized by business structure or hierarchy and most organizations should know better. Some, like Sodexo, understand this and give this information the royal treatment by breaking down their product lines and customers by group with individual parent categories (Corporate, Government, Health Care, Laundry, and Schools).

To the trained eye, some of the labels and IAs appear to be rather unintuitive and non-descriptive. However, outside readers are not employees at any of the companies and those organizations are not organizing content for external people, but rather for employees. The lesson is this: what is good or intuitive at one company, is not necessarily so at another. Every organization and supporting culture – and the accompanying vernacular or 'corporate speak' – is unique.

In no particular order here are the top levels (2nd level) or parent categories of the 13 leading intranets that were examined:

Google (6 parent categories):

- My Office
- Survival kit
- Internal News
- HR
- Company info
- Communications

HP (6 parent categories):

- Job Tools & Resources
- Benefits, Careers & Policies
- Organizations & Locations
- Business Performance
- Indexes
- Help

Cisco (6 categories):

- About Cisco
- Employee Services
- Learning & Development
- Support & Tools
- Products & Industry
- Security Information

Microsoft (5 categories):

- News
- Campus
- Employee
- Services
- About Microsoft

British Airways (7 parent categories):

- News
- Travel
- Our airline
- Company procedures
- Business info
- BA & Me
- Off Duty

Bank of America (6 categories):

- My Work
- Sales & Marketing
- Collaboration
- SAP Portfolio
- Employee Services
- Managers Services

SAP (6 categories):

- Our Company
- News
- Tools & Support
- Benefits & Pay
- Career & Learning
- My Division

Perkins Eastman (5 categories):

- About Perkins Eastman
- Design & Drawing Resources
- Project Resources
- Communities
- Company Resources

McDonald's (5 categories):

- McD Today

- My Page
- My McD Site
- Company Index
- Site Finder

SimCorp (8 categories):

- Topics
- News
- Project sites
- Corporate
- Customers
- Departments
- Management
- Employee

Ericsson (8 categories):
- Workplace
- News & Events
- Sales & Marketing
- Products & Services
- Projects
- Support
- Unit Info
- Employee Info

Sodexo USA (9 categories):

- Campus
- Canada
- Corporate
- Government
- Health Care
- Laundry
- Schools
- Spirit Cruises

Atomic Energy of Canada (7 categories):

- About AECL
- News
- How Do I?
- Employee Central
- Organization
- Processes
- Customers

Please note that each of these organizations may or may not be in the process of updating their information architecture, or have recently updated their IA and therefore the categories represented above are representative of the IA at the time the respective companies chose to make the information public.

The ultimate goal of the intranet manager, architect and consultant is to create an 'intuitive' IA – information categories and navigation paths that are intuitive or easily understood at a glance.' Key learnings from other leading organizations can provide superb intelligence and direction in preparing to re-craft your own IA. Of course, what works at Google or Microsoft, doesn't necessarily work at your organization. The key to success is understanding the corporate culture and how your employees work, relate to each other, and the 'accepted' nomenclature used to categorize and seek out information.

Key Lessons

Most intranets begin very small, with a very humble quantity of content: perhaps 10 or 20 pages. Veteran intranet managers know how quickly that content can grow, if not explode. It's not uncommon in a Fortune 500 company to have millions of pages and files on the corporate intranet.

When content explodes and outgrows the initial information architecture (IA), employees are left confused and frustrated. Simple content and files can be buried in an avalanche of content, virtually hidden by an outdated IA. Employees resort to the telephone and colleagues for finding key material that's buried under a category for a department they don't know exists. And when your boss requests new content to be added, you're not sure where it should live.

Information architecture is essential to a successful site. An IA provides a content blueprint for navigating the intranet. It is the science of labeling and placing information where it can be found and reused easily – and quickly.

Here are a few basic elements that all IAs should entail to make it the quintessential touchstone document for the development of a high performing intranet.

1. Simple Vocabulary

Whether the site in question is ultra-technical in nature (e.g. how to repair a nuclear reactor) or simple (e.g. how to lock the doors), you need to keep the language within the IA intuitive, straightforward and distinct.

The IA will be used by all your audiences: project managers, content providers, IT geeks, administrators, executives, field workers, etc. Each one of these groups share the need for vast amounts of information about the site, but differ in the specific information they require and the terminology they will use to find it. An information architecture plan with clear, consistent language and terminology is a critical first step for housing the information each audience segment requires and for determining how they will locate this information.

2. Show the "Big Picture"

An IA should depict a conceptual structure and organization of a site's content, and not be confused with a navigation map – which provides the full-blown navigational details of a site.

An IA provides an overview of the:
- paths a user can take;
- actions required by the user to follow the paths; and
- results of the combined actions and paths selected.

3. Be Clear

There are many options for how you can present your content to your site visitors: alphabetically, by subject area, and by author – the possibilities are almost endless. So what is the best way to organize your data? It depends on such things as:
- Target audience – management, new hires, shift workers, etc.

-         Goals (quantitative) & Objectives (qualitative)
-         Size – site size (both current and planned (growth)

Once you have answered these questions, you are better able to determine the labels you will utilize – as well as what type of IA design to use.

About Prescient

Listen. Understand. Deliver.

Prescient Digital Media is a veteran web and intranet consulting firm with 11 years of rich history. We provide strategic Internet and intranet consulting, planning and communications services to many Fortune 500 and big brand clients, as well small and medium-size leaders. We treat each client as unique; we listen to their needs, goals and challenges; understand a client's requirements and potential; and deliver highly effective and innovative website and intranet plans, designs and solutions.

Prescient was founded in 2001 by Toby Ward with the premise that the corporate website and intranet have business value, and should be planned and executed accordingly. Internet and intranet business consulting was and remains our focus today. First and foremost, we are business management consultants that have a superb knowledge of the technology, but we are technology neutral.

Prescient plans and builds highly effective websites and intranets that...
- Are demonstrably better than the competition.
- Secure stakeholder engagement and support management objectives.
- Deliver measurable value by increasing business results and employee productivity.

Prescient's web and intranet experience is wide-ranging and includes, for example:
- Planning, launching and managing all aspects of a consumer portal with more than 55 million hits per year;
- Transforming an existing intranet (SMB) into a high-powered business system with a two-year ROI of 700% ($1.5 million); and
- Transforming an enterprise's intranet and website into highly functional, user-friendly portals that prior to a redesign scored benchmarked ratings of 4 out of 10, and now score better than 8 out of 10, with many accolades from management and customers alike.

Prescient's focus includes the assessment, planning, technology selection, content and launch of intranets, websites, and web-based tools for:
- Health and life sciences
- Financial services
- Energy
- Government
- Manufacturing and High-Tech

Prescient services for intranet, Internet and e-Health include:
- Analysis (evaluation, business requirements, user research, benchmarking)
- Planning (strategic planning, functional specifications, information architecture)
- Technology (platform and application evaluation, selection, and implementation)
- Implementation (design, integration, content, tools)
- Marketing (communications, content management, operation, marketing, SEO)

Some of our clients include:

Prescient Digital Media has had the privilege to work with approximately 200 clients including: AMEX, CBC, Dow Chemical, Gartner, Fidelity, HSBC, Harvard, Liberty Mutual, Manulife, MasterCard, Nintendo, Pepsi, PNC Bank, Ralph Lauren, Royal Bank, and others. See our complete client list.

Why should you hire Prescient?
- Prescient boasts a full roster of satisfied, world class, Fortune 500 clients.
- We are the only known technology consulting firm that promises to build success measures (critical success indicators) into each and every project.
- Prescient owns no software or hardware; we are technology neutral. We find the best technology for our clients based on their business requirements.
- Prescient has an impressive and extensive list of global, expert speaking engagements with dozens of conference, seminar and webinar events every year.
- Prescient has the most published team of experts of any firm in its class with hundreds of published articles to date.
- Our work has won more than a dozen awards including a prestigious Webby Award.

Additional material:
- See our complete client list
- Read some of our case studies
- Read more about Prescient services
- Read Prescient articles and blog
- Download our free white paper, Finding ROI
- Attend an upcoming Prescient event