

The Architect's Toolbox

December 10, 2009

Originally published November 29, 1996 in Web Review magazine.

In a former life as a computer technician, I once ended up in a hospital emergency room after a messy attempt to remove a failing motherboard. The cause of my injury was two-fold. First, there was a hidden screw which had escaped my notice. Second, I was attempting to use my screwdriver to pry loose the motherboard. The screwdriver slipped and my finger was sliced open by a razor-sharp metal edge in the guts of the machine.

As any self-respecting professional would do, I swore vehemently for several minutes, then wrapped my bleeding finger in toilet paper, identified the offending screw, and removed the bloody motherboard. After successfully completing the motherboard transplant operation, I went to the emergency room for stitches.

From this experience, I gained a valuable lesson in the importance of using tools appropriately, a lesson that has served me well in my new life as an information architect. In recent years, I have filled my architect's toolbox with a suite of useful tools. I hope that by sharing my knowledge of these tools and encouraging their proper use, I can help my fellow information architects to be more productive or at least keep them out of emergency rooms.

White Boards

At Argus, our office walls are covered with white boards. White boards are the canvas upon which we paint our architectural visions. We even own a couple of portable white boards for use on beaches and in hot tubs.

White boards are easy to use and conducive to brainstorming. The ephemeral nature of white board scribbles permits a creative freedom not found in other media. The technology disappears and inhibitions fall away.

Armed with a colorful selection of scented markers and an eraser, the information

architect can share ideas with clients and colleagues in a highly collaborative and interactive manner.

Flip Charts

Flip charts are the instant coffee of creativity, practical but lacking in taste. They're environmentally hazardous, difficult to write on, and ugly to look at.

The supposed advantage of flip charts derives from the greater permanence and portability of flip chart scribbles. After brainstorming with a client, you can tear off the pages and review your notes back at the office. More likely, you'll drop them in a corner somewhere and use them as wrapping paper when the holiday season hits. There may be some advantages to flip charts, but give me a white board any day.

Blueprints

[Blueprints](#) are the primary medium of communication for the information architect. Blueprints are useful during the conceptual design phase of a project for conveying high-level organization schemes. They are useful later in a project for mapping out the complex web of hierarchical and hypertextual relationships between content items and applications.

Blueprints also serve the information architect in a subtle yet important way. By fixing the architect's ideas in print in an attractive and seemingly logical manner, blueprints convey a degree of authority and permanence upon the architect's ideas. Blueprints can be useful tools for convincing trouble makers to trust in the wisdom of the architect.

Blueprint Design Software

An architect without blueprint design software is like a painter without a brush or a surgeon without a knife. Operating without the appropriate tools can be a messy or even fatal exercise.

I rely heavily on a blueprint design software package called "[Visio](#)" to communicate my architectural visions. This multi-purpose tool for creating business diagrams such as

organization charts, maps, flow charts, and space plans proves highly effective for representing information hierarchies.

I have found information architecture blueprints to be most useful in printed form as a tool for communicating ideas and inviting discussion. However, Visio is facilitating and encouraging the use of simple blueprints as interactive Web-based [Site Maps](#).

Unfortunately, Visio doesn't guarantee that your Site Map will be useful. A surgeon's knife in clumsy hands can be a [dangerous](#) tool.

Intelligent Architects

In [Stupid Agents](#), Lou Rosenfeld compares the race to create intelligent agent software to Monty Python's *Quest for the Holy Grail*. A similar quest is underway in the information architecture business where companies are rushing to develop and market intelligent architect software.

For example, NetCarta sells a product called [WebMapper](#) that allows you to automatically generate a hierarchical map of a Web site. Concerned yet intrigued by this product, I have downloaded it twice, experimented for a while, tried to envision exactly how I might use it in a practical way, and then deleted it to free up disk space.

NetCarta proclaims that their WebMapper software provides "the tools you need to solve all your Web-management problems." I remain open to the idea that I might one day find a problem that WebMapper does solve, but I doubt it will ever solve all my problems.

Tools and Fools

As I discovered the hard way, it is foolish to use tools improperly. If I'd used a hammer instead of a screwdriver to pry loose that motherboard, I'd probably have avoided the hospital.

It is also foolish to believe that the complex and creative work of information architects can be easily replaced by automagical software tools. The day I'm willing to have my appendix removed by Intelligent Doctor Software is the day I'll surrender my architect's

toolbox.

As we race through the early hours of the information age, the panoply of tools to support the work of an information architect is growing by leaps and bounds. I advise you to use these tools and use them wisely.