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There is a story behind every link
Tales of information architecture
from ibm.com

Keith Instone

07/06/08

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What keeps me awake

- Ever wonder how a large corporate web site navigation system is designed, and how it evolves over time?
- How certain links find their way to the corporate home page, while other ones do not?
- How major changes in the corporation's business affect the web site navigation?
- And how the IA of the corporate web site can give clues about how well the business is doing?

Sample topics for stories

- The evolution of sitewide navigation categories like "solutions" and "services"
- Worldwide information architecture challenges
- The cultural shifts required to do something as (theoretically) simple as adding a "sign in" link to the masthead
- Tracking the evolution of a single web page as it signals fundamental shifts in how the business is operating "behind the scenes"
- The effect of selling off a key division of the company on the navigation system
- Balancing the strategic goals while handling day-to-day requests for changes to the navigation
- Techniques for dealing with executive home page link requests

A little out of practice

- **MOCHI, March 2001**
- **BuckCHI, August 2001**
- **Puget Sound SIGCHI, September 2002**
- **CHIFOO, September 2002**
- **NEOUPA, September 2006**

One thing I have learned over the years

- **The audience has better questions than I could ever think up to talk about myself**
- **My on-the-spot answers are just-as-good (if not better) than whatever I could have prepared ahead of time**

Questions & topics from the audience (summary)

- Sign in / register, country location in the masthead today (logic for placement today, and in the future)
- Who owns what, how to manage the millions of pages
- Solutions, services, products and corporate strategy over the years
- Masthead sign in challenges and compromises
- My IBM: use as anonymous user, gateway to various applications
- Who does the 3 prongs of user feedback: User research studies, analytics, qualitative user feedback
- Search challenges: technology/budget, tagging, UI (easiest of the 3)
- User-generated content (silos likely initially, integrated over time)
- Accessibility challenges overall, why the link in the footer
- Role based navigation (home page Learn about tab), task based navigation
- Standards for page design ("what we offer" module as an example)
- Content management, sharing, the "4th tab owners" of a solution page
- Tactical, medium-term, long-term planning for changes (add 1 link now, work with groups for better tactical changes later, save some things for a big, strategic redesign)

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Current (US) high level IA

- **Masthead categories**
- **Category rollovers**
- **Category pages**
- **Home page tabs**
- **Footer categories**

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 - Business consulting
 - Financing
 - Service oriented architecture (SOA)
 - Small business solutions
 - Medium business solutions
 - More

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Solutions

Solutions

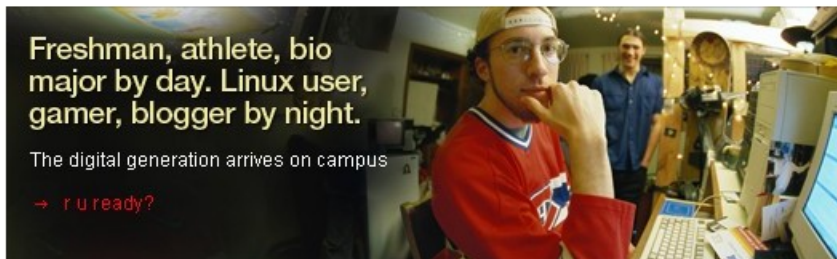
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By business need



By top Business Partner



By IT issue



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→ Medium business

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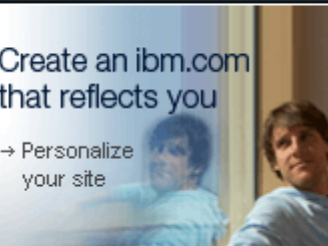
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Worldwide IA challenges

- **Different business models in different parts of the world**
 - Very different resource allocations
 - Distributed ownership
 - Local and “headquarters” challenges
- **Local content, linking to other locales**
- **“Worldwide” content (bottom) with no “worldwide IA” (top)**
- **Get a user’s preferred locale**
- **Translations (of subtle terms)**



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Business changes, IA changes

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- **IBM Global Services → IBM Global Technology Services + IBM Global Business Services**
 - Site used “consulting” before used internally
 - Site split IGS into “business” and “IT” before happened internally
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So you want a link on the home page?

1. **Translate to “Improve access from high level information architecture”**
 - Meetings to understand their users/tasks and pain points, their business/what they own/business challenges, US vs. global vs. Worldwide
 - “If I add a link to your section, who else within the company would come to me next and ask for a link right next to yours?”
 - **Document current high level paths**
 - **Make list of IA improvements needed within their section** (frame nicely)
 - **Make least-effort list of possibilities to improve access** (the narrow view of the request)
 - **Document paths to related / overlapping content** (expose warts)
 - Invite related groups to participate
 - **Make ideal-user-experience recommendations** (ignoring some organizational realities)
 - Encourage everyone to submit ideas, and actually listen
 - Pro/con comparisons
 - **Educate on search optimization (internal & external), cross-links** (HPs matter less and less)
 - **Possible outcomes** (one or more of the following)
 - OK tactical fixes, within IA strategy
 - Acceptable tactical fix, not really within strategy, good enough for now
 - Months of clean-up on their end (“You have to earn the link”)
 - Initiate a “strategic effort” – e.g., groups work together for united destination
 - Defer to “the business” to hash things out when opposing business strategies are encountered
 - Never (so far): Escalation

“Secret” elements

- **Teaching IA concepts all along the way**
- **Listen and LEARN**
- **Leave holes in the IA for expansion and changes**
- **Extended “internal” team that meets every week**
- **People like pictures**
 - PowerPoint: Screen grabs, Red circles, Red arrows, Annotations
 - Lots of mock-ups of different ideas (even if bad ideas)
- **Ask questions: why are things the way they are?**
 - There is always 1 good reason
 - There are usually several bad reasons
 - Let them reach their own conclusions (“You know what, Keith, we do not want a link after all...”)
- **“You listen, ask good questions and treat everyone equally”**