

Information Architecture

Guidebook



Premier Leadership
Personal Growth
Career Success

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

Information: (n) *in*fer*ma*shen*

A collection of facts or data: *statistical information*.

The act of informing or the condition of being informed; communication of knowledge:

Safety instructions are provided for the information of our passengers.

Computer Science. Processed, stored, or transmitted data

Architecture: (n) *ar*ki*tek*cher*

Orderly arrangement of parts; structure: *the architecture of the federal bureaucracy; the architecture of a novel.*

Computer Science. The overall design or structure of a computer system, including the hardware and the required operating software, especially the internal structure of the microprocessor.

If we don't understand the information needs, behaviors and vocabularies of our users, how can we organize content in a way that works for them?

Information retrieval is inherently messy. Authors struggle to convey complex concepts by stringing together words and phrases into documents. Users try to articulate their information needs with a keyword or two. For years, attempts to connect the right users with the right content have been thwarted by the ambiguity of language, organization and the subjective nature of relevance. Classification has been content-centric, focused solely on organizing content into folders, ignoring the broader picture of information architecture.

Information architecture is the process of organizing, labeling, designing navigation and searching systems that helps people find and manage information more successfully. It is used as the blueprint for websites, publications and content management upon which all other aspects are built - form, function, metaphor, navigation, table of contents, interface, interaction, and visual design. Good information architecture makes a website easy to use. Good architecture keeps customers happy.

HISTORY OF INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE AT FFA

The main goal of the FFA Information Architecture project was to provide a single integrated infrastructure to meet the challenge of organizing distribution of content from the National FFA Organization to its customers. Flexibility of the structure was essential so that it could be adapted for use across all platforms of communications including CD ROMs, brochures, magazines, publications and the Internet.

The National FFA Organization has operated in a decentralized mode across its various programs and services. In this active and challenging environment there was a great need for the definition of a single information structure that could be used to organize a wide variety of communications. We needed more than simply a data model of the IT system, an organization chart or a list of product lines. By developing the Information Architecture model for our organization we hoped to provide more structure, enhance use, develop consistency and streamline access to contextual information distributed by the National FFA Organization.

In the development of Information Architecture, the cross-team asked the following questions

1. **Who am I** in relation to the National FFA Organization?
2. **What information am I seeking** from the National FFA Organization?
3. **What are the delivery method and security concerns** of the information?

FIRST LEVEL: WHO AM I?

In identifying our customer groups we can then lead them more efficiently through the process of finding the information they seek. The next focus was on the question of 'What do I need?' In serving four consecutive customer groups we identified that though they do sometimes require different content and assistance from the National FFA Organization, the broader categories of types of information was consistent. How we approach delivering this content was determined by adapting several structures already being used within the National FFA Organization. By adapting these structures we maintain familiarity and trust that has been developed within our current customer groups, while presenting new visitors with a logical, easily interpreted structure of content. Who are the National FFA Organization's Customer Groups?

1. **Student Members:**
Middle school, high school, collegiate/PAS/ATA, state officers, chapter leaders, future (non-members)

2. **Supporters:**

Alumni, individual and corporate sponsors, family, community and local volunteers, industry, government agencies, FFA foundation, AERO, professional associations, general public/media

3. **Educational Partners:** Identified as groups who assist with making agriculture education teachers successful.

Teachers, university faculty, state leaders, volunteers (experts), school administration (principals, counselors, school board members), technical administration, vocational coordinators, Team Ag Ed

4. **Ag Ed Teachers:** Focus to support our local teacher programs as they follow their career path as an Agriculture Educator. Future, new (0-5years), career (5+ years).

SECOND LEVEL: WHAT DO I NEED?

The second structural level following the “Who am I?” primary level, handles the organizational aspects of content dispersed from the organization, “What do I need?” The existing LPS model presented a flexible structure that could be used with all customer groups

What information/assistance do I need from the National FFA Organization?

1. **Instruction** (prepared curriculum, lesson plans, promising practices, resources & materials)
2. **FFA Information**
 - a. **Programs** (defined as programs the National FFA Organization offers)
 - b. **General Information** (defined as FFA organizational information and how it relates to Agriculture Education)
 - c. **Merchandise & Services**
3. **Experiential Learning** (SAE)
4. **Partnerships** (How to develop partnerships, who can I partner with, materials)
5. **Marketing** (Resources for developing plans, why market, how and benefits to marketing, best practices)
6. **Professional and Personal Growth** (Opportunities, career growth, developmental resources)
7. **Planning for the Future** (Future trends in agriculture, future growth, grants and funding sources, anticipated challenges and impact of government legislation.)

The final structural level relates to identifying and categorizing the actual content itself and how it is handle through our systems. If it looks familiar, it is. The secondary level incorporated the “seven keys” of Local Program Success to utilize an existing information structure many of the customer groups already recognize.

THIRD LEVEL: WHAT IS THE DELIVERY METHOD AND SECURITY CONCERNS?

When information is exchanged, certain aspects of the information may require confidentiality. In identifying the category of information, we can then identify the best delivery mechanism to handle the sensitivity of the information. This affects the necessary security and appropriate methods of distribution.

1. **Informational:** One-way exchange of static information such as documents, articles, lists, etc.
2. **Interactive:** Two-way exchange of information in a public forum. Discussion boards, e-mail, etc.
3. **Transactional:** Two-way exchange of information which contains private, personal or financial information. FFA Unlimited store, online lesson plans, contracts, Peoplesoft system access, etc.

By identifying our customer groups, content available and the method of distribution we have completed the first step to controlling the mass amount of informational resources for we have ownership. Again, this architecture provides flexibility for different applications and future growth of the organization.

Using Information Architecture

You are probably already using Information Architecture in your every day communications. It really isn't that difficult; it just sounds imposing. Here are a few steps to help simplify the use of Information Architecture.

1. Define the audience (customer group)

for your communication. If you're working on a handbook or established FFA publication, there's a good chance the audience is defined by the title or in the use of the document. If your audience is well defined, skip to number 4.

Examples:

- Local Program Resource Guide for FFA Advisors (It is clear the intended audience is FFA advisors, and perhaps agriculture education teachers).
- FFA Student Handbook (It is clear this is a handbook for student members).

1a. If your customer group is not defined by the title of your communication, it may be a multi-audience piece. If this is the case, you'll have to use a little more effort to tailor the information to your different readers or users.

Examples:

- FFA Manual (This could contain information for advisors, students and even parents).
- News releases (These often are directed at the general public, an audience not as familiar with FFA, but other interested readers, including students, teachers, parents and supporters, may read them).

1b. For multi-audience pieces, you need to start at the top of the IA structure and provide information based on your audiences. Consider breaking down your information into sections based on the audience. If multiple audiences will find the exact same information useful, consider adding a table of contents or callout boxes that make it easier for them to know that. For instance, adding a "For Students"

list of topics interesting to students is a good way to incorporate information architecture.

2. Once your audience is defined, **categorize your communication according to the seven LPS keys**. As with your audience, you may only be providing information in one of these categories, or you may have broad-ranging topics that fall under multiple LPS categories. Simply follow good organizational rules and group like information with like. As a reminder, here are the slightly modified seven keys of FFA Information Architecture:

- Instruction
- FFA
- Experiential learning
- Partnerships
- Marketing
- Professional and personal growth
- Planning for the future

3. After you've categorized your information according to the seven keys, take the final step and **differentiate between information, interactive elements and transactional tools**. Normally, this happens naturally in small communications vehicles. Under Marketing, for instance, you'll present information followed by interactive (directions for two-way communication, "learn more on ffa.org") elements and concluding with transaction tools such as forms, checklists and scoring sheets. Remember, information is one way. Interactive and transaction are two-way communication.

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE >

QUICK SHEET

FIRST LEVEL

Customer Groups

Student Members:

Middle school, high school, collegiate/PAS/ATA, state officers, chapter leaders, future (non-members)

Supporters:

Alumni, individual and corporate sponsors, family, community and local volunteers, industry, government agencies, FFA Foundation, AERO, professional associations, general public/media

Educational Partners: (Team AgEd on ffa.org)

(Identified as groups who assist with making agriculture education teachers successful.)

Teachers, university faculty, state leaders, volunteers (experts), school administration (principals, counselors, school board members), technical administration, vocational coordinators, Team Ag Ed

Ag Ed Teachers:

Focus to support our local teacher programs as they follow their career path as an agriculture educator.

Future, new (0-5years), career (5+ years).

SECOND LEVEL

What information/assistance do I need from the National FFA Organization?

Instruction (prepared curriculum, lesson plans, promising practices, resources & materials)

FFA

- **Programs** (defined as programs the National FFA Organization offers)
- **General Information** (defined as FFA organizational information and how it relates to Agriculture Education)
- **Merchandise & Services**

Experiential Learning (SAE)

Partnerships (How to develop partnerships, who can I partner with, materials)

Marketing (Resources for developing plans, why market, how and benefits to marketing, best practices)

Professional and Personal Growth (Opportunities, career growth, developmental resources)

Planning for the Future (Future trends in agriculture, future growth, grants and funding sources, anticipated challenges and impact of government legislation)

THIRD LEVEL

What kind of information exchange do I need?

Informational: One-Way exchange of static information such as documents, articles, lists, etc.

Interactive: Two-way exchange of information in a public forum. Discussion boards, e-mail, etc.

Transactional: Two-way exchange of information which contains private, personal or financial information. FFA Unlimited Store, Online lesson plans, contracts, Peoplesoft system access, etc.

EXAMPLES:

Information Architecture In Use:

1. ***“I need an American Degree Application”***
 - a. **Who am I?**
Student or Ag Ed Teacher
 - b. **What do I seek?**
FFA Programs
 - c. **How is the content delivered?**
Informational or Transactional
 - i. Informational – downloaded application or CD-Rom
 - ii. Transactional – Online application
2. ***“What is FFA?”***
 - a. **Who am I?**
Supporter, Educational Partner
 - b. **What do I seek?**
FFA Informational
 - c. **How is content delivered?**
Informational or Interactive
 - i. Informational – online, CD-Rom, Magazine, Brochure
 - ii. Interactive – online, email, discussion boards
3. ***“How do I find out about local sponsor “sales” techniques for support?”***
 - a. **Who am I?**
Teacher, Supporter, Sponsor
 - b. **What do I seek?**
Partnerships or Marketing
 - c. **How is content delivered?**
Informational, Interactive
 - i. Informational – online, CD-Rom, Magazines, Brochures
 - ii. Interactive – downloaded “how-tos”, Powerpoint documents, email, discussion boards