



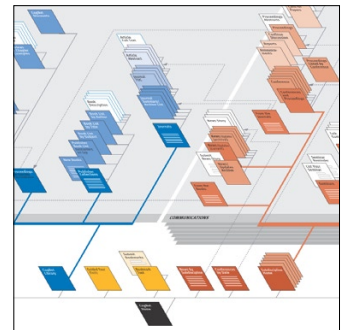
Dynamic Diagrams, Inc.

# Why Your Web Site Needs Information Architecture

A Dynamic Diagrams White Paper

by **Lisa Agustin**, Senior Information Architect  
and **Henry Woodbury**, Senior Web Designer

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# Why Your Web Site Needs **Information Architecture**

The first generation of corporate Web sites consisted mainly of online brochures—a few static HTML pages occasionally punctuated by an online form to request more information. Since then, the Web has grown exponentially in the number of sites and the amount and variety of content they contain. Company Web sites that were once a few static pages are now hundreds or thousands of pages in size, meriting their own budgets and staff.

If your organization's Web site has been around for some time, chances are that it has gone through its own evolution in terms of design (“It's time to redesign the site—again”), content (“This directory should really be put on the Web site”), and features (“Our customers want a personalized start page”). Your company may have even implemented applications such as a content management system to help keep track of it all.

## Why information architecture makes sense for big Web sites

Does any of the following sound familiar?

- **You know the information's there but customers can't find it.** Perhaps your staff has received email from customers saying that they can't find information on your Web site that you know is there. This problem of “findability” may be the result of unhelpful search results or a confusing site structure. Customers end up asking you for help, or give up looking altogether.
- **Your Web site's navigation and structure need improvement.** Maybe users can't visit any pages without being prompted to register. Or perhaps customers abandon your online checkout process because it's complicated. Key online tasks may have become confusing or require too many steps, and the customer's experience is not as intuitive and positive as it could be.
- **Information on your site is redundant, outdated, or missing.** If your Web site has grown piecemeal without a solid architecture, new content may end up in the wrong category or with the wrong label, while out-of-date information may inadvertently remain online. Some content may unintentionally be placed in several areas on the Web site, while dead links or content gaps result from content that has been misplaced or haphazardly removed.
- **Your site's look and feel gets lost at lower levels.** Your organization spent a lot of time, money, and energy into determining how to represent your brand online. The look and feel is obvious on your home page, on second-level pages, and maybe even third-level pages. What about at the lowest level within your site? Are your brand and visual design elements still strong and identifiable? Can visitors easily navigate back to their original entrance point without relying on the back button?
- **You're planning to add access control to your site.** Your organization has determined that some content should only be available to certain users (e.g. members or paid subscribers), but it's not clear which pages are affected and how this process should work.

- **Efforts to maintain your large Web site or consolidate several smaller sites seem piecemeal and unorganized.** Has your site grown from a few manageable pages into a sprawling maze with content that is difficult to track and update? If the site lacks an overarching vision and plan for growth, staff may be spending too much time shoring up existing systems, preventing progress. Or maybe your company has several different sites (each with its own content, navigation system, and visual design) that should be united as one, but there's no coordination between content producers. How do you proceed?

## How information architecture can help your Web site

Dynamic Diagrams relies on proven methodologies to determine how your users, content, and business model intersect on your Web site. Our information architecture (IA) process enables us to:

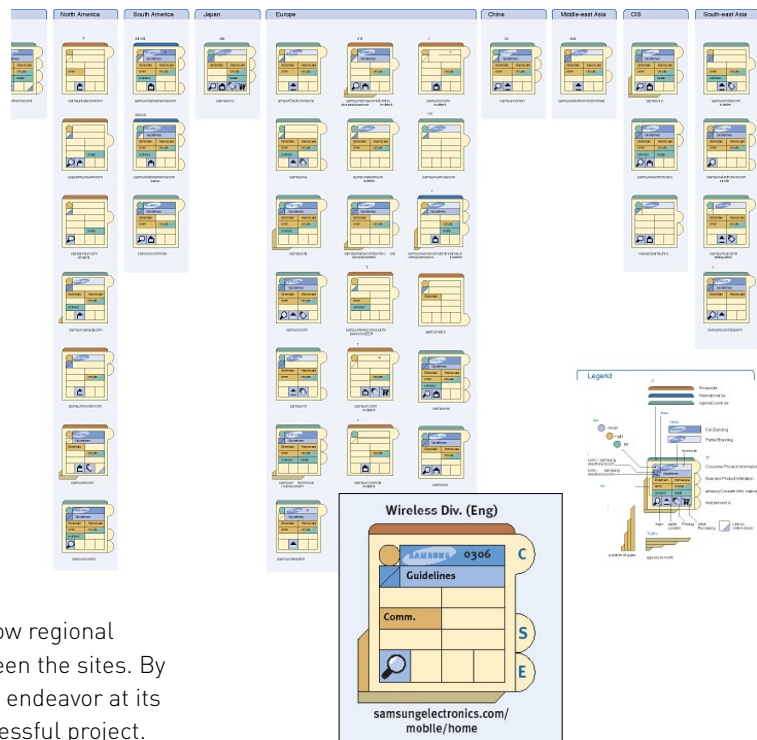
**Focus on findability.** Findability is about more than just search engines. It means organizing content in a way that makes sense from the user's perspective. This includes not only knowing the search terms most likely to be used, but also creating the right categories for content, the right navigational structure for browsing, and understanding how the pieces of information relate to each other across categories.

**Better define your users and understand their tasks.** People usually know what they want to do online and how they prefer to do it—they just need to be asked. User research techniques can include interviewing users to determine their needs

### Information architecture on the global scale: Samsung Electronics Corporation Web sites

Samsung Electronics Corporation (SEC), based in Seoul, Korea, provides office and consumer electronics throughout the world. SEC hired us to analyze their existing Web sites and develop an integrated information architecture, interface designs, page templates, and design guidelines for their global site and all regional and country sites.

We started the project with a thorough review of existing SEC Web sites. This work resulted in a wall-sized inventory diagram that profiled each site's language, content, features and other characteristics. We used these visual profiles in other diagrams to show regional groupings and navigational links between the sites. By establishing the complete scope of the endeavor at its start, we laid the foundation for a successful project.



and goals, as well as conducting one-on-one usability tests to determine how key tasks are completed. Once problem areas are identified, specific methods for improving usability can be applied.

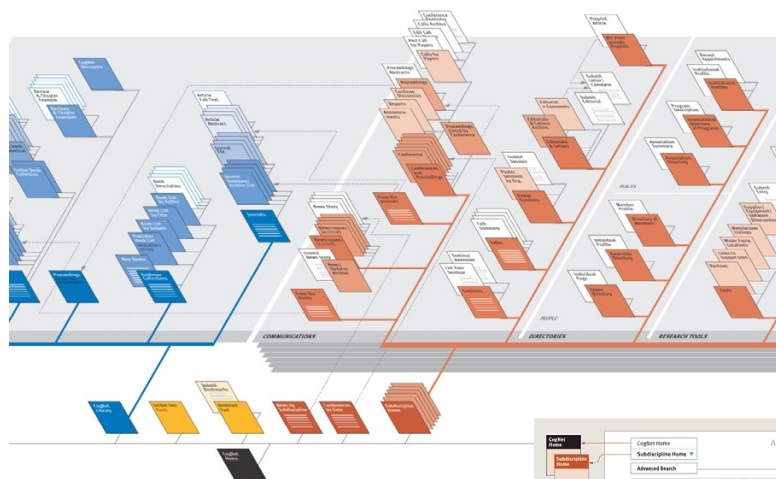
**Inventory and organize your content.** It is important to closely analyze the content that will populate your Web site. We take stock of the types and formats of content on your current site (noting redundant and outdated information), and determine where there are gaps, based on what users need. From such content analyses we recommend ways to organize information by category and hierarchy, and determine how content items within categories relate to each other.

**Create a foundation for a visual design system.** Successful execution of a site's look and feel is easiest on the home page and other pages that are relatively high within the hierarchy. Making sure that branding and visual design is equally as strong at the lowest page level is a bigger challenge. Defining the structure of a site

### Information architecture and visual explanation: MIT Press CogNet

We always use diagrams and visual explanations to make our information architectures clearer and more accessible. Diagrams bring out details and show connections that are otherwise easy to miss.

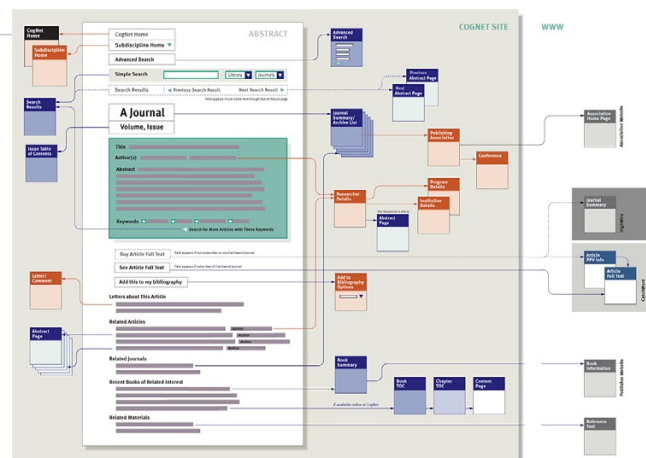
We created the following diagrams for CogNet, an online community of scholarly research in the cognitive and brain sciences, hosted by MIT Press, the publishing arm of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology



#### Web site planning diagram.

Planning diagrams illustrate the content organization and hierarchy of a site at a high level. This diagram shows our proposed information architecture for reorganizing CogNet's community features and more closely linking them to the rest of the site.

**Page block diagram.** Page block diagrams show an information architecture at the user's level. This diagram is one of several we created for different content areas of the CogNet site. The diagram shows the structure of a journal article abstract page with a complete map of its links to other parts of CogNet and to external Web sites.



in very specific terms from top to bottom (e.g., a publication's table of contents will offer access to abstracts which will then link to full text articles), is key to determining how the look and feel will translate at each level. This systematic approach also helps determine how new areas of the site should look as the site grows.

**Develop a clear plan for access control.** Premium or value-added content calls for an access control system that will be unobtrusive and reliable. We can identify which content areas should be available to which groups of users and then help determine the steps each type of user will follow to reach the content.

**Create a logical and scaleable Web site structure.** Because growth is inevitable for most Web sites, it is important to anticipate and plan for future expansion. By creating an information architecture that anticipates this growth, we ensure your Web site can respond to your ongoing needs.

## Information architecture pays off

Here's how Dynamic Diagrams process contributes to your bottom line:

- **By ensuring that your site is better aligned with business goals.** A successful Web site not only delivers what users want, but also addresses organizational stakeholders' objectives for the Web site.
- **By managing risk.** Establishing your Web site's business goals, user base, and content requirements allows you to identify from the start any risks or contingencies that may affect the cost or schedule of a project.
- **By controlling design and development costs.** Investing in a solid information architecture allows your Web site to be built toward a pre-defined price point, while limiting the need for costly last-minute design or development work.
- **By promoting efficient service.** For Web sites that provide a specific service, creating a responsive information architecture means helping customers help themselves. This translates into lower support costs in terms of documentation distribution and fewer emails or calls to the customer service department.
- **By increasing productivity.** For intranet sites, having a sound information architecture enables your employees to find what they're looking for quickly and easily. This can lower training costs and reduce time spent completing tasks.
- **By giving your Web site a longer lifespan.** The nature of the Internet means Web sites must evolve to continue to serve their audiences well. A strong information architecture serves as the roadmap that shows not only how your site works now, but how it will work in the future.
- **By promoting repeat business.** The information architecture Dynamic Diagrams creates for you will touch upon all aspects of the online user experience including navigation, functionality, interaction, and design. When these are all taken into account, your users will be able to locate information and complete tasks more easily, leading to repeat business in terms of visits and/or purchases.