

# The Case for Business Analysis and Information Architecture

## The Problem

Web users frequently have trouble locating relevant information and transactions. As one of our clients says: “Our customers go to our web site for information that is important to them now. They want it fast and easy. Nothing more...” To conduct business on the web, companies must focus on user-centered design and place meaningfully labeled content where customers can easily find it, for a predictable cost, with technology that doesn’t stand in the way. Whether your business attracts people directly to your site, or whether you are found through search engines, information architecture and a focused business analysis process addresses this planning challenge.

## Definition of terms

*Business analysis* refers to a discovery process. The process for either web site or application development involves interviewing key internal and external stakeholders, including important customers and partners. The output of the business analysis process is a strategic document that clearly explains who the audience is and what their viewing, interaction, and buying characteristics are; what goals the site or application will accomplish; how and when those goals will be measured; and what business processes will be impacted. Consensus on potential organizational obstacles to a successful project is carefully articulated. Business analysis may also include research on the competition.

*Information architecture* is the art and science of organizing and labeling web sites, intranets, online communities, and software to support usability and findability. It involves drilling down into the business analysis results. For each of the strategic goals, the project team brainstorms specific content and interactions. The items are labeled and arranged in such a way that audiences and search engines can easily find and use them.

Business analysis provides the *who*, *what*, and *why*. Information architecture explains the *how*. Both components are necessary to ensure an optimal user experience.

*Information architecture is not the same thing as systems architecture. Information architecture is not concerned with hardware, networks or software—it’s about structuring shared information in a way that makes sense to your visitors. Some people use the terms information design or taxonomy instead.*

## Creating consensus

The Web is interactive, easily customizable, and extensible to many sources of information. Whittling down all the available or potential interactions into an achievable set of what your audience really cares about is a facilitative and collaborative challenge. But it is critical to the success and ROI of any information-based project.

The web has a complex technological component. In many cases, a designer’s vision of the site will be limited by the availability and affordability of technology and skilled resources. As a consequence, marketing and technical members of the development team may find themselves at odds.

Business analysis and information architecture help to identify and resolve conflicts by orienting the team toward common objectives and audience needs. The marketing team understands who will use the application and what the customer expectations are. The technical team understands what technology is appropriate to achieving the goals. Both have should have input into the vision. Both should have ownership of the ultimate success.



Team consensus ensures an efficient and successful development effort. Through experienced facilitation, conflicts are resolved before building and implementation begins. Terminology is defined and agreed upon by everyone involved. Technological limitations and requirements are documented up front, so no resources are wasted on development efforts that are not achievable. Design requirements are driven by audience analysis and real business problems, so each design idea will be both appropriate and technologically feasible.

## The right content for the right people

The web generates revenue or lowers cost for your firm in one of these ways:

- Selling products or services on-line.
- Shortening the time needed to establish your credibility as a potential partner.
- Providing a place for paid advertising.
- Providing on-line support for web and non-web sales.
- Lowering service costs for existing customers and partners.

In each case, it is crucial that development be relevant to a specific audience segment. You can only sell products and services that your audience knows and cares about. Service costs will be lower if it is easy and convenient for visitors to use.

Business analysis clearly documents the goals and audience in relationship to the company's overall strategy. Information architecture arranges the information so that it makes sense to the company's most important customers, prospects, and partners. The end result is a maximized return on your development investment.

## Saving money now and later

A large percentage of development costs are front-loaded. In most cases, it requires more dollars to create a web application from scratch (or to completely overhaul one) than to update or expand a well-planned one.

Business analysis articulates long-term strategy as well as short-term goals. Information architecture structures the solution for expansion and new business imperatives. When the time comes to add additional content, features or display devices, your firm can direct its resources toward developing and refining the feature itself—not overhauling an entire site.

Business analysis also documents the technological capabilities and direction of the company. The application is subsequently developed with these factors in mind. The result is a web application that is easy to maintain and expand within the company's infrastructure and resource limitations.

## Conclusion

Business analysis and information architecture provide a critical foundation for the success of any business problem needing a technology solution. Your company must understand and articulate for whom the solution is intended, what information it will include, how that information will be presented, why the company is doing the project, and how the solution will be maintained. Documenting the answers to these questions will drive consensus, ensure relevance, and save money.

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