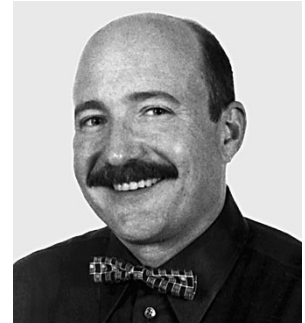


Profile of Thom Haller



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Thom Haller is an Information Architect with Info.Design, in Washington, D.C. He structures information by first considering the rhetorical situation: Who will be using this information and for what purpose? In response to my first question, Thom responds with an entertaining “backgrounder story” to which many of us can relate.

Interviewer: How did you become an information architect?

Haller: I wasn’t born an information architect. I couldn’t even figure out what I was going to do when I grew up. I thought, somehow, a career would materialize in a dream—that I would wake one morning and say, “I’m going to be a management trainee!” I felt like it was only a matter of time before I would don a dark-colored suit, surround myself with facts and figures, and hammer out business decisions that were good for the organization. But this urge never struck.

Instead, I took job inventory tests. I wrote book-length descriptions of classes I liked and classes I didn’t. My career advisor returned one book-length inventory with the comment, “excellent inventory, but obviously you don’t know what you are going to do.” All I knew was that I wasn’t quite “getting it.” By the time I completed undergraduate and graduate school, I decided I had failed at the ONE THING that I was supposed to get out of college. I still didn’t know what I wanted to do when I grew up.

Nonetheless, armed with an education and a desire to do... well... something... I packed up my 1977

yellow Hornet hatchback and headed for Washington, D.C. In D.C., I found a dumping ground for people like me—college graduates who don’t know what they want to be when they grow up. In D.C., I discovered the government contracting industry.

In the early 1980s when I moved to D.C., the U.S. Government had started contracting professional services to small corporations, “beltway bandits.” Washington was quickly becoming riddled with these firms—most of them identified by TLAs, three letter acronyms.

I worked my way through the alphabet. ETI. CTA. SSI. CCI.

Twelve years: four acronyms.

During this time, I learned that contractors make their living by supporting efforts. It’s a kind of government-speak that refers to providing professional services. Contractors support efforts by completing tasks and submitting deliverables.

I became the king of deliverables. I could write, organize, and photocopy—three skills for creating deliverables. I was young, idealistic, and ready to help my companies support efforts! So, in support of

EPA Contract 68.01.7030, FEMA Contract EMW-5-C2075, and multi-agency Contracts OPM-89-76 and OPM-87-9037, I prepared deliverables. I became absorbed by deliverables—providing reams of paper for federal agencies. “You know all that work you did for us?” a government contracting officer later told me, “we had to hire a contractor to come in and tell us what we had.”

This didn't quite fit my sense of things. I'd studied rhetoric in school because... well, not knowing what I'd “be” when I grew up, I applied to two different schools in two different fields. One said, “I'll take him,” offered me some bucks, and I fell in with a cult of rhetoricians. Rhetoricians are communicators. They direct thought and language toward action. I liked that. I was an action kind of guy. That's how I felt about my schoolwork. I wanted to relate it to the real world but, at that point, didn't know how. My advisor suggested a different strategy: “stop wanting to make a difference.”

I tried that strategy. “OK.” I told myself. “Work is work, and life is life.” They're not supposed to connect. Besides, in the workplace, I found some structures that fit my spirit. Specifically, I latched onto instructional systems design models and other action-focused strategies for improving human performance. On the job, I structured all kinds of information and received some rewarding “thanks... you've made my life easier” comments from people who used my documentation. So... well... it was a living.

At the same time users offered their appreciation and my direct colleagues valued my work, I saw that many people I worked with did not see much worth. Upper management especially. They viewed my organization as folks who could take information and “pretty it up.” They saw us as a “nice addition” to the organization but not really as

employees who could contribute much to the business itself.

I wonder now if my employers knew what I did. Or what I could offer. I do know they tried to disguise my role as a writer. During my stint with the TLAs, I carried around business cards that identified me as a Research Associate, a Senior Scientist, and a Corporate Communicator. My mother stuck the cards on the refrigerator and tried to figure out what I did for a living. I remember a comment she made at that time: “You know, Thom, I showed one of those little books you created to the girls in the bridge club. They told me you were a technical writer.”

Oh.

Of course, I didn't feel like a technical writer. I suspected I could better represent what I did, if only I had a label I could use. I wanted a label that incorporated my performance strategies, with my writing skills, my visual understanding, and my belief that the end-users of information mattered.

“I don't get it.” I recall saying to a technical communication colleague. We were standing at the top of the escalator at a Washington, D.C. conference, grabbing some air between sessions. “I'm a writer and rhetorician, but my real interest is graphically presenting the information so others can use it. Maybe I'm a data stylist.” “Oh, no,” he responded. “You're an information architect.”

That's the first time I ever heard that word. Information Architect... I liked the sound. And I liked the image.

My colleague directed me to the writing of Richard Saul Wurman, who coined the phrase, and within a week of the conference, I had inhaled Wurman's book *Information Anxiety*. It's one of those books that now lives on my “special shelf.” My text remains starred,

marred, and underscored. I found a lot to like in the book, but one idea struck home for me. Wurman asked us to build understanding businesses—organizations devoted to making information accessible and comprehensible. He challenged us to identify new ways of interpreting the data and building new models for making it usable and understandable. One sentence said, “Here you go, Thom. Here's your sentence.” Wurman asked us to “re-educate the people who generate information to improve its performance.”

And that was me. Information structurer. Performance guy. Educator. Well, educator... in my heart. I'd begun teaching classes and begun practicing what I preached. But that was only part time. Most of my workday was still spent creating deliverables. By the time I discovered *Information Anxiety*, I'd been “supporting efforts” for almost 12 years. It wasn't exactly empowering...

In fact, it was becoming downright annoying. By the time I discovered the ideas of information architecture, I was beginning work with my fourth TLA. And although I believed the position offered new opportunities when I accepted it, the job evolved to meet our client's “we'll use you to put out fires” management style. I spent my days sitting in a three-foot by five-foot cubicle rented from a federal agency. “How,” I wondered, “could someone who has gusto in his soul, be spending his days surrounded by mauve-colored carpeting, busily preparing deliverables? How could I work with people who do not respect understanding and instead chose to wear their because-we've-always-done-it-this-way buttons?”

I needed a plan. So I sought some advice from a former boss. “How do I get out of a mauve cubicle?” “How do I find something I truly believe in?” “How can I work in some way that really makes a difference?”

She directed me to a lifework class. "It's ten weeks. It's cheap. Take it. You'll love it."

During the first week of the lifework class, we talked about our jobs. Most of us were government contractors. During the second week, we took time to dream what we would be doing if we could do anything. No limitations. Only dreaming. Weeks three through eight, we examined our pasts and reviewed our goals.

Week nine, I quit my job.

I hadn't planned on quitting my job exactly. It just sort of... well... dissolved. Contracts, in the professional services industry, come, and contracts go. Mine went (contract dispute). My TLA boss took me aside, told me I did good work, and offered to find me another role. "Perhaps," he said in all seriousness, "you could work for Norm. Would you like that?" In other words, I was nearing week nine of a lifework class... searching for work I loved... and I was asked, "Would you like to work for Norm?"

Well. I thought about it. I liked Norm. But I checked over my notes from my lifework class. I combed through my descriptions of dream jobs I had constructed. No where did I find the words, "You would love to work for Norm." So I quit. I felt in my heart that I wanted to improve human performance and that I liked the notions of building an understanding business. So, in one "I cannot stay on my current course any longer because if I do, I will surely bust," I became a full-time information architect.

Of course, there were some difficulties. No one, for example, knew what an information architect was.

I'm reminded of the last moments of *To Tell The Truth*, the consummate game show that shaped my youth. I still envision the discovery of the mystery guest, the moment when Arlene Francis would pull

off the mask that covered her eyes to learn the secret identity of the celebrity who stumped the panel.

"Of Couuuuuurse!" Arlene would cry out.

Yea. Of course... Information architect.

Not even Arlene Francis could have figured out my line of work. But from the moment I learned about this emerging field, I felt "that's me." For me, information architecture was a way to improve people's ability to find and use information. I felt it returned possibility to information. It fit me. It coincided with what I'd learned in my lifework class. In class, I learned I had to teach possibility. And from my lifework training, I knew I had to teach possibility.

Unfortunately, it took me a little time to believe this in my gut.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!!!!!" I screamed at myself soon after leaving my job. (I had been raised in a small town in a protective environment. I was raised to accept a good job with a good corporation. And wear gray. Instead, I had quit my job to enter a field that didn't exist yet. So I questioned my decision with shrill, terror-stricken howls.) I borrowed the "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!!!!!" line from the movie *Harold and Maude*. In the film, Harold's mother becomes unnerved at one of her son's staged suicides and screeches an ear-splitting whelp. It seemed to fit the "positive" way I stepped into independent consultancy.

"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?????" This howl also ricocheted round my head. I decided it must be my mother's voice. She had often expressed concerns about work I would do. So, what would I do? I could still type. I could write. If worse came to worst, I could always create deliverables. Why, I could even find another job.

"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO BE?????" That was the question that had pestered me for years. Somewhere along the way I had learned that people ARE their occupations. You ARE a fireman. You ARE a lawyer. Can someone really BE an information architect?

I felt I could. I've always been slightly belligerent—the kind of guy who asked "why" far beyond the point where it was considered cute. "Whyness" always pervaded my professional self. "Why is it I wondered, that writers, people with tangible skills, cannot present themselves to corporate America in such a way that others could understand their value? Why is it that business is so content to offer documents-from-hell to their customers and users? Why don't users care?"

I suspected they did. I left the mauve cubicle just at the time electronic communication began to change our lives. I recall being shown my first Web page soon after venturing on my own. At that time, I was tempted to become another "communication product developer" especially as salaries for product builders grew and grew. But I just couldn't quite go there. I felt I couldn't spend day after day building communication products. Yes, I could do it. And yes, I loved the response I got when I created documents that worked. But developing communication documents takes time. Working for Norm takes time. And for me, it wasn't lifework. Lifework was teaching possibility. Lifework was taking the "gut feeling" I carried around inside me and offering it back to others.

My gut has a message to share with others—"Uh... hello there... you don't HAVE to accept documents that you can't read. You don't HAVE to spend your time wandering around a document trying to figure out what the hell was going on." It's POSSIBLE to do things differently if you just step

back and think a little differently. You can focus on improving your user's understanding.

Users are at the core of good information architecture. After all, information is data that's meaningful for the user. To offer meaning, information requires an organizational framework. For example, a great Web site doesn't just happen. An organizational framework provides users of information with a clear, obvious structure that does more than just look pretty. Information architects create an invisible framework that increases the overall usability, efficiency, and usefulness of information... especially electronic information.

Information architecture used to be a tough sell. People would stare at me blankly. I'd explain by saying, "I structure information," and people would go "huh?" Fortunately, times are changing. Now that we're beginning our fifth year of electronic infoglut, people are beginning to notice structure. Why? Often because they are lost in information. Internet and intranet users can't find their way through electronic documents. And none of us, not even technical readers (certainly not me), want to get stuck in any document, asking "where am I now?" We don't want to work to interpret the information, not at any level... not even the sentence level. As users of information, we want to use documents as performance tools. We want to find information,

use it, and get on with the rest of our lives.

I find this exciting. If we do our job right, thinking about the people using our information, and if we help our organizations do their job right, supporting audience analysis, I believe we can improve the performance of business.

Think about it. We explain complex information. We build performance tools. We create communication products. And to build them successfully, we analyze. We try to know our users and why they are using our document. But this takes time. We seek to discover the "inner logic" of information. This takes lots of time.

Why? Well, when I think of discovering the inner logic, I think of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Not the details of the story... just the act of journeying to the center of the earth... adventuring... exploring. You don't pack an overnight bag and say, "Hey, I'm journeying to the center of the earth, and I'll be back tomorrow." It takes time. And dedication.

Maybe that summarizes my travels into information architecture too. It's taken time. It's now been five years since I left my mauve cubicle and climbed into the guts of information architecture. It's taken five years to begin to really understand the users of communication products, to feel their annoyance and frustrations. And it's taken

five years to build a vocabulary to effectively support the users of information—to say, "let's do things differently." And effectively explain why.

As technical communicators, we enable doing. It doesn't matter if we call ourselves technical writers, document designers, or even information architects. We must be user advocates. And we must share what we know. If business truly cares about their customers and if information publishers really care about their readers, they need to support their users' doing. But they can't do it without us. We must show why improved user performance matters. It's our job to help.

I like helping. I perceive my role as a user advocate. I like teaching people to see—to see structure. To see details. To see possibilities. It's a tough sell, "...here, buy this. It's invisible." But I'm also selling improved human performance. And understanding. I believe that's our role as professional communicators: work as hard as we can so someone can use the information. It's an important job. Someone's got to do it. For me, it's the kind of work I'd like to do when I grow up.

If you find this story intriguing and want to hear more, visit Info.Design's web site (<http://www.infodn.com>), reach Thom directly via e-mail: tehaller@infodn.com, or leave your story at <http://www.useradvocate.com>.