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Flashback a few decades to the data center where this pilot fish and his cohorts work, all with exactly the same advanced degree: OJT ("on-the-job training"). "Management decided to improve our expertise by hiring a gentleman with a Master of Computer Science," fish reports. "I could hear the fanfare when they told us. Barney arrived and seemed nice enough, if a little self-important. At the time we were in the midst of transitioning from punch cards to online editing for our source code. Barney was offered one of the new terminals, but turned it down. He was a staunch punch-card-based programmer, and quite sure online was an expensive fad." Barney starts in immediately on his first task, creating a new reporting program, and after three months has created a source deck that almost fills three boxes – nearly 6,000 lines of code. But he's very protective of his source, and does all his compiling and testing himself. One evening fish sees Barney in an argument with another programmer. Fred is pointing out that Barney's source cards don't have sequence numbers. Barney is standing on his degree and maintaining that sequence numbers are more trouble than they're worth. Fish weighs in, siding with Fred -- and is told that since neither of them have degrees, their opinions aren't worth much. "A few weeks later I came in one day -- and no Barney," fish says. "When I asked my boss, I was told it was none of my business. I later found out what happened: Fred was annoyed at being patronized and reported to the programming manager that this new project was card-sourced, had no backup copy and was not sequenced." That's all contrary to company programming standards. Programming manager calls Barney in, reviews the standards with him and instructs him to sequence the source immediately and read it into the source library. Barney makes a note to do that -- as soon as he has a stable source. Two weeks go by. Barney is carrying his source into the computer room when a swinging door apparently hits his elbow and suddenly there are 6,000 cards all over the computer room floor. Some days later, programming manager catches Barney still trying to sort out his source. "Run it through the card sorter? No sequence numbers," says fish. "Toss the cards and pick it up online from the library copy? No library copy." He probably would have survived this -- the manager would forgive one oops -- but Barney insisted his way was right and the programming manager wrong. This was not a well-thought-out tactic. "The ad for his replacement read, in part: Experienced COBOL programmer needed. Degree NOT required." Sharky doesn't require a degree either -- just a true tale of IT life. Send yours to me at sharky@computerworld.com. You'll score a sharp Shark shirt if I use it. Add your comments below, and read some great old tales in the Sharkives. Get your daily dose of out-takes from the IT Theater of the Absurd delivered directly to your Inbox. Subscribe now to the Daily Shark Newsletter. Copyright © 2015 IDG Communications, Inc. If you want to learn the concepts of information architecture and start practicing it yourself, you should come to Generate New York (opens in new tab) in April, where Abby Covert (opens in new tab) will run a full-day workshop and follow it up with a talk at the conference that will help you make sense of any mess. According to Abby Covert, the web need information architects. In her rescheduled Generate talk, Covert will reveal how to become one, what makes it challenging, and why it can ruin your life. Websites used to be reasonably straightforward things, but as the web marched forward from niche interest to omnipresence, things got more complicated. Not merely in terms of technology, but also in terms of volume. Back in the Nineties a corporate site could get away with being made out of flat pages and a sidebar navigation. Today, though, it might consist of hundreds of pages, if not thousands. Organising such massive web presences is an increasing challenge; not merely the nuts and bolts of taxonomy, but also the messier business of implementing it all within organisations where political and technological arguments can hamper the process. People can agree that they need a better website, but no one likes to be told that they've been doing it wrong. This is where information architecture – or IA – comes into play. It's enjoying a resurgence, and Abby Covert is one of the practitioners bringing it. Educated in graphic design, she had her first taste of information architecture at university. "It was mostly focused around distilling complex subject matter into graphics like a poster or an information graphic," she tells us. Then in her first job out of school she worked as an icon designer, which led to her first information architecture job. "I told the team that I was working on that the icons were not the way to solve this problem," she recalls. "They asked me if I knew what information architecture was and I was like, 'Yes, I'm a print designer, of course I do.' They were the ones that kind of clued me into the fact that this was actually something that was being applied to navigation systems with interfaces as well." So what exactly is information architecture? Covert herself sums it up as making the unclear be clear: taking a whole mess of information and figuring out the most effective structure and language for it, in order to build accessible, navigable and manageable systems, sites and apps. Covert explains that it's a fundamental skill set within practices such as UX or interaction design. "I would say the closest words that people may have heard of more recently would be content strategy, which is also a very close sister pattern to information architecture in terms of a practice," she says. Making sense of the web The reason IA is returning to prominence now? "If you look at the evolution of the web over just the last decade it's incredible how much has changed," she observes. "Even in the early days of websites, you used to be able to rely that people were going to start at your homepage and then they were going to go from there. When search engines came about and started to get very detailed in terms of crawling something more than just your URL then you had to start thinking about people landing on deep inner pages of your site. Then add to that the persistence of social media sharing content out of context. "All of a sudden you had to think somebody could end up on some random place on your application or your website, not knowing anything about you or even having intended to go there," she continues. "Having to think about it from a multi-channel and a more complex set of contexts, I think, has really just changed the way that we have to think about it. IA goes along with that." Discover 'How to make sense of any mess' with Abby Covert (opens in new tab) at Generate New York 2018 (opens in new tab) Persuasion, politics and facilitation If the science of IA is reasonably straightforward, however, the actual business of implementing it can be less so. Covert estimates that while 20 per cent of her job is the core business of drawing diagrams and mapping out fresh information structures, the other 80 per cent is what she describes as persuasion, politics and facilitation. "It's hard to go into an organisation and critique something that somebody spent years creating," she notes. And it's this that can make IA a tremendously difficult discipline to teach, something that Covert does alongside her IA practice. "I was terrible when I first started doing this kind of work," she recalls, "because I just thought that if I came up with something that made sense to me, and I tested it and it made sense to users, that I could then give it to other people in an organisation and that they would believe me." In reality it's not that cut and dry. That other part, the persuasion and the understanding of your stakeholders and the understanding of the environment that you're working within, that's something I haven't figured out a way to teach without the element of time. I think that's something that most of my students get theory on, but they really have to get out of their education and into their working world to discover the realities of practising it. Everything changes As with web design and development, it's a job in which you never stop learning. "I feel like every time I've got my hands around this thing and I think that it's solid and I can grasp it, it changes. "I remember when I was three or four years in, I was very focused on software at that point, and I thought, man, this is great. I've finally got a grasp on this, I know the patterns, I know how to test things, I know all the questions to ask. Then rich internet applications changed everything and all of a sudden you couldn't rely on a click and a reload for things to happen any more." Without any set qualifications or career path, information architecture can be a difficult business to learn about and establish yourself in. There are quite a few books on the subject – with Covert's own book, How to Make Sense of Any Mess, serving as a great introduction. Tickets for Generate New York 2018 are out now (opens in new tab) Abby will be one of the speakers at our web design event, Generate New York (opens in new tab), on 25-27 April 2018. You can view the full star-studded lineup, and book your tickets (opens in new tab) now, at generateconf.com (opens in new tab). This interview first appeared in net issue 292 (opens in new tab). Related articles: Thank you for reading 5 articles this month* Join now for unlimited access Enjoy your first month for just £1 / \$1 / €1 *Read 5 free articles per month without a subscription Join now for unlimited access Try first month for just £1 / \$1 / €1

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