

The Web is a Social Medium: Redesigning a Community Website

The Challenge

The web is a social medium. Most Information Architect and User Experience professionals dream of building the next exciting Web 2.0 site, and look for ways to incorporate tagging, Ajax, syndication and so on into their projects.

This poster discusses a real world project for a corporate client (a technology corporation), and the challenges involved in delivering an entirely revamped information architecture for a site with an demanding, technically savvy existing community bursting at the seams of the preceding, organically grown site.

The client's program management office recognized the need for a ground-up rebuild of the site to incorporate collaborative tools and community services and commissioned Extractable to do the job.



All notifications and updates can be received at the site, in a **portlet**, via **email**, or as a **dynamic RSS feed**, based on user preferences.

Expert groups are given a custom **wiki-like** tool for collaborating on spec text, a private mailing list / discussion, notifications of deadlines and milestones, and the ability to assign and complete tasks.



We determined that there was no need for **blogging** in the traditional sense, but the design incorporates hybrid email lists / discussion boards both sitewide, for specific member types, and around interest-group areas.

RSS feeds are generated dynamically to create notifications of list updates and changes to any specification that a site participant chooses to "watch."

The People Involved

Part of the challenge involved serving a community with many different types of constituents:

- Casual visitors
- People researching the spec
- Press and analysts
- CIOs
- Junior architects
- Senior developers
- Technology experts
- Spec leads
- Executive committee members

Members of the community range from Fortune 500 companies to universities, to individuals. The site architecture had to accommodate all of them, while at the same time providing workflows adhering to a 75-page requirements document drawn up by the client's program management office.

A major audience constituency less directly involved in the development or consumption of specs is the **Press and Analyst** community. They are provided with a press room that functions as their portal into the overall site.

In later phases, this section will scale to become more dynamic and to enable the press to **watch spec development by subscribing to updates**.



The Background

We had to analyze best-of-breed collaborative services without being carried away by the trends.

Example: We discussed incorporating user-generated tags (keywords) but frankly they didn't fit the needs of the client.

We did work out a plan for Spec Leads (people running expert groups to develop proposed specs) to indicate how their spec was related to other specs at the site, because aside from some impoverished top-down hierarchical taxonomies, there was no convenient way for visitors using the site as a reference to navigate horizontally from one spec to other related ones.

So, we did try to solve the problems that traditional IA can't address, but we couldn't necessarily choose one off-the-rack from the latest popular fad.



The site also has to function as a reference for developers looking to download the latest specifications, software test kits, and reference implementations.

To enable this we incorporate a **global site search**, the ability to go to a spec directly by number (community members remember the numbers) and **multiple browsing paths**, organized by platform, technology, and what stage the spec has reached in its development process.



Regardless of the search method, all roads lead to detail pages about the specs, where a **user-editable list of related specs** provides horizontal navigational paths not anticipated in the development stage by the IA or the program management office. This enables users to develop blaze their own trails through the data and follow the paths established by others.

The Process

Extractable analyzed the existing site and interviewed administrators, executive committee members, casual visitors, registered participants, expert-group representatives and Spec Leads to determine which community features should be incorporated into the new site, launching March, 2006. In order to rebuild the site, we produced unusually detailed wire frame schematics, along with an unusually structured multilevel site map, adapted to both the reference and community purposes of the JCP.

The **36 strategic wire frames** (7 of which are included here) showed the custom views of four different user types and a number of customizable portal and collaboration spaces within the authenticated area of the site.

Perhaps most importantly, an ongoing maintenance plan will enable the new site to evolve based on user acceptance and user requests for additional features. The core **data model** for the community process has been entirely revamped and thoroughly normalized and an application standard has been established so that new **modules** can be brought online without tearing up the original site.

The program management office administrators are also provided with a streamlined **blog-like interface** for adding new new and event items to the site. Community members and casual visitors can subscribe to RSS feeds featuring these updates.

