A Day in the Life of an Information Architect
Stacy Merill Surla, 9-16-13, UX Connect
Transcript

INTRODUCTION
[image of Eddie]

This is Eddie James. He's the owner of a small IA and user research company in Jacksonville, Florida. Eddie spoke with me about his business, his practice, and his work/life balance from poolside at his home and office a few weeks ago. I'd caught up with Eddie at the IA Summit earlier this year, and his story really inspired me. I'm conducting this research project, called "A Day in the Life of an Information Architect." I'm talking with people who I think are doing interesting things, in interesting ways, in the face of big challenges. With Eddie, I wanted to learn more about how he'd crafted a career that lets him to do contradictory things. How he went from being an innie at a large corporation to running his own one man consultancy. Like working 12 hour days, getting on a plane to spend time with a client, but also being able to take a week or a month off to hang out at the beach. Like sticking to the role of a consultant while also working with his clients as though he were on their staff. Like moving from a metropolitan area to rural central Florida, where there was no user experience community and he had no contacts, and then getting as much work as he could handle, immediately.

[image of research instrument]
Through this interview and the others I'm going to talk about, I was looking for two sorts of insights. The first is kind of practical and down to earth. I asked people to tell me what they do. Questions like: What sorts of things does your company deliver? Do you manage staff? How much hands-on IA do you do? How much business development are you responsible for? What skills do you use? How do your city, country, and economy impact your opportunities?   I was motivated by the idea of teasing out the magic combination of skills, circumstances, and approach that would lead to a successful IA career.

[image of concepts]
The second sort of insights is kind of conceptual. Each person who I asked for an interview is doing a splendid job with their career, in my view. I wanted to find out who this person was *being*. I want to understand who you have to be to do that. Maybe that sounds airy-fairy. But it's something substantial. What is the "career-way" that enables people, that will enable us, to craft a worthwhile career story?

I looked for the conceptual insights through asking those practical questions. "Tell me the story of how you arrived at where you are," and "walk me through a typical day." I've learned more in a half dozen interviews so far than we can cover here in 30 minutes. I'll share some of the case studies, and offer a few takeaways. But my key finding so far is, it's all about approach. The journey, the path, the way. Here's what I keep seeing. When you know something about yourself, when you have the nerve to be true to that knowledge, then you can stay centered on what's of core importance to you. That will drive your approach. You'll use your strengths, deal with your weaknesses, manage your particular circumstances. When you roll like that, you have

surprising power to make things work. For yourself and others. As Cennydd Bowles says, to make parts of the world better, and create personal value for other people.

My goal over the next year and more is to interview many people and present their stories in a useful form. I look forward to your comments and questions today. I'm hoping they'll help shape my project. Right now, let me go a little further into some of the case studies I've been gathering. After that I want to touch on the employment outlook for IA.

CASE STUDIES

Eddie James
[image of Eddie]

Back to Eddie. Quote: "I'm incredibly lazy, so I don't do a lot of marketing, which will bite me in the butt someday. I need to devote time to reaching out. This is common among UX people. We're busy, so ongoing marketing and reaching out goes by the wayside, sometimes."

There may be some truth in this. But here's Eddie's description of how he launched his business.
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"I thought if I'd stayed in Philadelphia, it would have been easier. I had connections, I knew everyone. In Florida, user experience is not common. I knew no-one, and thought it would be difficult. But I found it was the reverse. The need was great. I talked to people and got work immediately. You don't have to be in San Francisco. Even if there aren't necessarily jobs, that doesn't mean there's not work.

"I started a MeetUp, UXOrlando. I thought it would be just me sitting at Panera alone at the table. But there are 180 people in the meetup. Product owners, enterpreneurs, people wanting to see about UX. I would recommend doing that to anybody who's where there isn't a group. It's shocking who will jump on board. It's helpful knowing those people. They know who I am, and got the word out. I got a call 3 days after I started the group."
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Here are some of the other things I learned in this conversation:

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Eddie is basically a one-man shop. As such, he's high level and detail oriented at the same time. But he also brings on people to do specific jobs. For instance, he has an Hispanic market project, so he brought someone in who understands marketing and speaks Spanish.

He's often asked to advise, be a resource his client can access, be on the calls, become a subject matter expert on their teams.

In each of his sequence of jobs Eddie seemed to discover and practice additional dimensions of his work. For instance, he did interaction design for Kozmo.com, an ecommerce startup that delivered local goods instantly to people by bike messenger. He had to design more than the

website, he had to design warehouse layouts, design a better bike bag so ice cream wouldn't melt, figure out how to card customers for alcohol deliveries - in other words, service design. In similar ways, he's learned enterprise IA, designing for financial services, and mobile.

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A typical day for Eddie might go like this. He wakes up at 7:30. He sleeps with his ipad and smartphone so he checks email before he gets out of bed, maybe responding to clients in England or Australia. When he gets downstairs, he's at work. Eddie's home and office are in a large house built in the 1800s. The family room is the dedicated office. There's a fireplace, two desks - the second one for whomever might be working with him - a meeting space, a loveseat and chairs, and a huge whiteboard. Eddie works from this office 75% of the time, and encourages his clients to pull him onto the client site at least 25% of the time. He tries to keep only 1 or 2 projects going at a time, plus a retainer project.

Every day can be different - it's not 9-5. Sometimes clients need him to turn things around overnight. Sometimes he takes the day to get other errands done, or to go to the beach. He likes the flexibility. One key thing to making this work is that he's always clear with his clients on his conditions. For instance, his first client wanted him full-time, even double-time, and wanted him 100% onsite. He said No, and they said Fine. According to Eddie, "you HAVE to negotiate. Even when they make a demand, it doesn't mean it's a deal breaker."

Naoko Kawachi
[image of Naoko]

Naoko Kawachi is a Communications Manager for a design firm in Tokyo called Concent, Inc. She does internal communications, media relations and marketing. She coordinates IA and UX events. She writes articles for the in-house magazine, and has her own column, where she talks about IA and UX events - for instance, conferences she's attended overseas, or workshops the company has held in cities outside Tokyo. She also sometimes works as an assistant to her boss, Atsushi Hasegawa, a well known IA, speaker, and author.

Interestingly, Naoko is also a personal stylist. She says, "I look at fashion as a communication tool. Each item and detail have metadata and context. Fashion is very interesting from an IA point of view. 'How-you-wear' has something to do with your user experience - the messages people get from you. Perhaps this line of thinking could lead to a new pattern language. I hope I can describe more about it, maybe at an IA Summit in the future."

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In a similar thread to Eddie's career, Naoko has made observations about her work experiences and discovered her core values. This has guided her decision making as she went along.

Naoko happened to start her career in the PR sector. In the Japanese hiring culture, people apply for a company, not a position. After college Naoko joined Japan's leading telecom company. And she found herself assigned to the public relations office. There she edited the in-house

magazine, assisted with media relations, and worked on the corporate website. After several years, she left to get a BA in multimedia communications at a university in Iowa.

At the university she studied computer graphics and website design. Naoko remarked that the curriculum was practical, not conceptual. It emphasized how to use graphics software. She discovered her interest was not on visual design but on invisible structures, like website structure, navigation, and the relationship among content objects. But, as she said, "I didn't know the term IA at that time, so I couldn't find my way into the appropriate program."

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Back in Tokyo, she registered with a temporary staffing agency and worked on a number of editorial and web design projects. Then she was assigned to Toyota, and was part of the startup team on the G-Book project. This groundbreaking telematics system provides interactive services between car owners and dealers via an onboard terminal. It was interesting, cross-channel service design work. Naoko did screen transitions and structures for the G-Book device, and enterprise-level work across the Toyota and Lexus websites, still not knowing that people call this information architecture. The hours were demanding, and the schedule was intense. The development and implementation teams delivered features, but without user research or appropriate design processes. Telematics was a challenging and experimental concept, but Naoko still didn't feel enough was being done to think about users. She began to feel very guilty about it. So she quit.

Naoko began to explore "the right way to do it." She researched IA and UX design for over half a year. Then she came back to work at a company called Loftwork. This is an eBay-like marketplace to connect creatives with clients. One shareholder is Joi Ito, director of the MIT media lab in Massachusetts. At Loftwork, Naoko did wireframes and structures. While there she met Atsushi, her present boss. She said: "I finally arrived at the truth. I felt that Concent uses an appropriate design process in IA and UX. So I decided to join."

She negotiated her schedule before joining Concent. She wanted to "pace down" and achieve a balance between personal and work life. So her core work schedule is 4 days a week. On a typical morning she might be working with her husband at home on his business management company. At 1:00 pm she's at the office. Her regular end time is 6:00 pm, though she usually works till 8:00 or later. At work or home, she's always online, on Facebook, SalesForce, Yahoo Messenger, Skype, and so on. Many of her coworkers work until very late at night, and people message her constantly. For instance, Atsushi will share his ideas and questions with Naoko as soon as a thought comes to his mind, and she'll respond back.

Talking about opportunities and challenges, Naoko says that working as an IA or UX designer is easier in Tokyo than in other cities in Japan. Tokyo is the headquarters of major companies. Many of them understand the importance of IA and UX, and spend money on user experience. This is not necessarily so in local cities.

Naoko said: "Every time I go to the IA Summit, I'm surprised at the level of discussion. I can assume that people who work in New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco can have a high level of discussion. It's just like Tokyo, it should be easier to practice IA in these big cities because

there are lots of opportunities. But at the IA Summit, people who come from local cities still have enough skills, knowledge, and experience to practice IA. It doesn't matter where they come from. In Japan, we can't do that. I feel there is a deep information gap between Tokyo and local cities. They want to learn something. They seem to hesitate to offer ideas or topics, or talk about what's going on. Probably it's because they don't have enough opportunity to practice IA themselves."

Matthew Milan
[image of Matthew]

Matthew Milan is the Design Leader at Normative, a 20 person design studio in Toronto he began 5 years ago with his business partner, Jon Tirmandi. They created the company as a means to explore things they want to learn and things they want to do - under the role of a client-focused organization.

Normative builds enterprise software to drive organizational change. IA is a strong thread through what they do. They invest in IAs with classic skills, like library science and computer science. And they also hire people with a systems background, including soft sciences like economics. Matthew says, "If we have these different defintions of what IA might be, we can get a good perspective over the years of what it *should* be."

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When Matthew graduated from high school he planned to have a serious career in the ski industry. At that time, ski area design was a huge growth industry and involved a lot of different skills, like environmental assessment, planning, and engineering.   He got into a university in Toronto that was one of two schools in the world that taught ski area design. While he was there, however, the regulatory environment changed, so by the time he graduated there were no jobs. So he went back to school. He still wanted to do something that involved computer science, environmental science, design, and engineering. He found that the software tools they had to work with were hard to use. The interfaces were bad, and he wondered why that was so. The tools themselves were basic, while the scope of the problems to be solved were large. After some research he decided to study this field. He said, "I went to the library and got 'The Lunatics are Running the Asylum.' I read Victor Lombardi's post on traditional architects versus information architects. I cold-called anyone with background in the field, for instance Lou Rosenfeld, and said 'you don't know me, but I have a whole bunch of questions.'" Matthew ended up getting an interdisciplinary graduate degree in Human Factors, Information Sciences, and Environmental Planning.

Matthew describes his typical day this way. "At 6:30 am, my 2 daughters come in and wake me up. I hang with the family for 20 minutes, put on my running shoes, and run 5 kilometers to work, 365 days a year. I have a shower and I'm at my desk at 8:30. I deal with emails around high level client questions. At 9:30 I chat with my business partner and maybe other senior leadership.

"We run on a pod-based model. We reconfigure 2-5 person teams based on the project, and can combine pods for larger projects. People work on at least 2 projects at a time, by design, to have multiple problems to solve and multiple perspectives at a time. There are no account managers or project managers. These functions are owned by the pods. There's no broken telephone at out business - the client can talk directly to the designer, IA, and engineer.

"Often clients come in to work with the design teams. We work on live prototypes and do rich mapping and sketching. We go straight to HTML or IOS prototypes, and do graphic design as early as possible. I might be hanging out with clients or a team. Conversations are fluid, there's a lot of trust with clients on the team, and a lot of teammember autonomy. I'm demanding on outcomes, not on how the work gets done.

[transition]
"At 5:00, I get in my running shoes and run home. At 10:30 I check email and fire off emails.

"It's less frantic than it sounds, because we're used to it. Intensity is part of our culture. We work hard but rarely work late. We limit people working past 6:00 pm."

Jason Hobbs
[image of Jason]

Jason is a design consultant who owns his own business. His project work includes research, strategy, and design, and he also does corporate training. He works mostly on large projects with fairly big teams, with multiple phases and a high degree of complexity. So his first step is to "design the process that will be the creative journey over the next few weeks or months."

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Jason's consultancy is only one aspect of his work. Equally important are his academic and community dimensions. He teaches a course in UX design to second year undergraduates at the University of Johannesburg. He conducts research into the intersection between open problems and information architecture. He sees IA as a powerful tool to help people solve open problems, also known as wicked problems or indeterminate problems. He publishes with his research partner, Terrence Sven, through the University of Johannesburg. He and Terrence are also writing a business case to start a design center for open problems. Jason speaks at conferences around the world, and publishes articles. On the community side, he began the South Africa Experience Forum in 2006. He works with the IA Institute as an advisor to the board, he's chaired their research grants program, and participates in the mentoring program.

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A typical day finds him up early, exercising, having a coffee, then at his desk between 8:00 and 9:00 am. He sits at the dining room table with papers spread out all around. He's got design books in the library at arm's reach. He stays there and stops at 5:00 or 6:00. He'll carry on working at night, but by 5:00 or 6:00 he likes to know how much he's billing.

Jason says: "You need to be disciplined. People think working at home in their studio must be great - you can muck off in the middle of the day, start late, and so on. Not so.

"You have to be adaptable. You have to be able to work in any environment. Forget the modern idea of the artist who works in a space and has 'divine inspiration.' You have to be able to sit client-side in a horrible, stagnant environment and deliver the goods.

"Equally, important, it's very useful to know yourself soon. Some people work effectively in a hierarchical situation and thrive in a bank. Others thrive in an agency environment. Some are lone wolfish, and can work alone."

According to Jason, user experience in South Africa is not doing well. He says: "There remain only a handful of senior UX people and true UX agencies in South Africa, and we need more. A lot of people are coming back, having gained experienced abroad, and hopefully more will come back. The fields of IA and UX are desperate for skilled new entrants. Some of the schools and universities are responding, but more need to come on board.

"Clients are getting smart on the topic and are often ahead of agencies claiming to do UX. Many of the agencies are just offering sitemaps and wireframes. To help clients, we need standards and better industry organization – a professional body of some kind would help.

"IA and UX are heavily bound up in innovation, driven by user-centered methods. The commitment to this path by clients is often more than they realise. Designing a corporate website, for instance, using user-centered methods, usually has far reaching implications that influence organizational culture, processes, marketing, and other channels… so it's important for both service providers and clients to pay more than lip-service to design and innovation."

When asked for his advice on people considering a job in IA and UX design, Jason offers the following: "Work on as many projects as possible from as diverse sectors as possible. Get a mentor as soon as possible and have as many as possible in your career. Get experience in an agency, client-side, and working for yourself. Work in different social, political, and cultural contexts. Learn as much as possible from other fields of design. Read voraciously about the topic. Develop your business acumen. Be uncompromisingly ambitious. Really love doing it, as an end in itself, or try something else."

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EMPLOYMENT OUTLOOK
[image of Salary Survey]
I'm going to take a few minutes now to point you to some resources you might find valuable.

Every year the IA Institute carries out a salary survey about compensation, daily work habits, and demographics of information architects. The results from the 2012 survey, and trends from previous years, show that the employment outlook is good overall and looking better. My own

experience as a hiring manager for a large consulting firm tells me the same thing. Here are some highlights from the latest IAI survey.

The global median salary for an information architect is $95K, that's a $6,000 per year increase over 2011.

The median freelance reate is $95/hour, which is a $5/hour increase from the previous year.

By region, the highest median salaries are in Australia and the Pacific Rim, at $125,000. The median in the US is $105K. Canada, $85K. The United Kingdom, $55K. South America, $35K. Asia (except India) $25K. India $15K.

The highest paying organizations include game developers, financial services, and retail ecommerce. The next highest paying are consulting firms and freelancing. The lowest paying categories are educational institutions, with a median of $75K/year, and the government, at $65K/year.

These are just a few of the findings. I suggest you read through the summary on the salary survey page, and also download the report.

HOW TO GET A JOB
[image of Russ's deck]

On the topic of how to get a job, the best quick advice I can give you is to attend one of Russ Unger's Career Workshops. Russ offers these as half-day events at the IA Summit, and probably in other venues. The latest one was delivered by Amanda Schonfeld and Russ at the IA Summit in 2013. Or if you don't have an opportunity to do that, work your way through the slidedeck. It's absolutely practical advice, aimed at IA and UX professionals. Russ talks about preparing for your job search. Networking. Getting your resume and portfolio into shape. Interviewing and follow-up. And quitting your current job.

TAKEAWAYS
[image of takeaways]
In summary, let me offer a few ideas.

Get to know yourself; learn your own core values. Use your self knowledge to guide your career choices and your focus.

Even where there are no jobs, there is work.

You have to negotiate for what you want and need.

Solid skills are important, but those are just the start. Building strong relationships with your clients, thinking strategically, and developing domain expertise will take you to the next level.

Our electronic devices can connect us to work at all times. But staying always on versus taking downtime is a matter of choice, and you can make either mode work.

People have different levels of comfort with different organizational settings and situations. So find what works for you.

Don't settle for being locked in somewhere that doesn't work for you.

REFERENCES/QUESTION
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Once again, this project is part of an ongoing exploration of the context for IA development and practice. I'd be interested to hear your questions and comments.