

The Content Audit: Who Should Conduct It?

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A CONTENT AUDIT is an assessment method widely used in content strategy to identify, describe, quantify, and evaluate the content quality of a website or of a larger information space (social media, Web application, newsletter, intranet, etc.) (Abel and Bailie 2014; Halvorson and Rach 2012; Land 2014). The use of content audits has grown in the last several years, mainly due to the increasing complexity of digital information ecosystems (websites, social media, wearables, etc.). To this day, very little research has been conducted on this method. However, the content audit is widely described and discussed in a large body of literature, mostly written by content strategy, information architecture (IA), and user experience (UX) professionals (Sperano 2017). These publications can constitute a rich ground for initiating a more formalized reflection about this method. This realization led us to a further examination of a corpus of 200 publications (books, Web pages, blog articles, journal articles) about content audits. These results are part of a larger study about content audits that aimed to present an in-depth examination of them as a digital information assessment method. Many dimensions of the method were analyzed (audit definitions and types, audit activities, audit criteria, etc.).

In this article, we focus on one aspect of the study: the auditor. What is their field of expertise, and what are their required characteristics and skills? Because auditors are the main actors in charge of conducting a content audit, they are also largely responsible for the quality and the credibility of the audit results (ISO 19011 2011). This confers to them great power, as well as a large responsibility. As Land points out when talking about the auditor:

By the end of a content audit, you will probably know more about the content on the site than anyone else in

the organization. You may be the only person whose knowledge spans all the organizational content silos. This puts you in a position of power. If you can back up your story with data and informed analysis, you can move change forward (2014).

This is what led us to focus on the different characteristics, expertise, and skills of this central actor.

An Auditor's Field of Expertise

The professional skills needed to carry out a content audit are indirectly addressed in the corpus through the identification of the fields of expertise that come into play when setting up, executing, or presenting an audit. This aspect is addressed in 49 publications of the corpus (24.5 percent of the publications).

Information Architects and Content Strategists as Auditors

Two fields of expertise stand out among the 49 publications: information architecture (22 publications, 11 percent of the publications) and content strategy (20 publications, 10 percent of the publications). However, there seems to be no consensus on how these two fields of expertise come into play when conducting a content audit. Some authors grant the central role to the IA professional:

The IA on the project normally does the content inventory, so I'm not suggesting here that this be taken over by the content strategist entirely. In performing the content inventory, the IA not only learns about what content is on an existing site, but also how the site is structured and a lot about the business. It's an important job for an IA to perform. But it is certainly not unheard

of for a content strategist to help out with this very tedious activity to speed up the process (Sheffield 2009).

In other publications, authors suggest that the content strategist should be responsible for the content audit.

Usually, the content strategist or content manager sets the scope and starts the spreadsheet at the highest levels. If the project (unfortunately) does not have a content strategist or content manager, the task falls to the information architect or other team member (Marsh 2012).

Sometimes, it is suggested that both fields should play an equal role:

If your site uses a content management system, a content strategist works closely with the information architect (on smaller teams, this can be one and the same person) to first identify all the different content types a site has and then determine which content types go on each page (Lopuck 2012).

And in other cases, both fields are identified but seem to be conducting different tasks:

Perhaps you're an information architect who wants to get a sense of the overall structure. [...]

Are you a content strategist [...] [...] In addition to the structure of the site, you may be assessing the different content types and the relative quantity and depth of types ("Website Content Audits").

Other commonly identified fields of expertise are content manager (13 publications, 6.5 percent of the publications), Web designer (7 publications, 3.5 percent of the publications), and site manager (7 publications, 3.5 percent of the publications).

Client as Auditor

We observed in the 49 publications that the client is identified as an auditor in some cases (6 publications, 3 percent of the publications). Anderson et al. even identify the client as the sole auditor.

This task is best done by the client, because they know their content best (Anderson et al. 2010).

Others identify the client as the main actor responsible for the audit.

Ultimately, the content audit is the client's responsibility. You may have to help with this, but only the client can truly analyze their own current content and determine what needs to be rewritten or created from scratch (Goto 2005).

Several factors may influence the role given to the client. The goal of the audit, the size of the organization, and the amount of content to audit could influence the client's responsibility in conducting the audit.

Necessary Level of Expertise

The level of expertise required for conducting a content audit is very weakly addressed through the corpus. A few publications, however, refer indirectly to this dimension. For example, Martin suggests that some knowledge related to organization and information is necessary.

The content inventory and auditing process assumes two things: first, that you have content to index, and second, that you have someone on staff with an affinity for organization and information (Martin 2012).

For *Content Insight*, showing some interest in content and its management seems sufficient.

Who performs content audits? Anyone with a stake in how content is created, organized, and displayed can conduct a content audit ("Website Content Audits").

Others, like Nichols and Chesnut, clearly indicate that no particular expertise is needed:

But you do not need to be an expert to complete the audit exercise (2014).

It seems highly likely that the level of complexity of the selected criteria will affect the auditor's required level of expertise. Indeed, some audit criteria require a higher level of expertise than others or require specific knowledge. It may also be that the size of the information ecosystem will affect the level of expertise required. For example, conducting a content audit on the entire information ecosystem of a university or government entity with thousands or even millions of units of heterogeneous content will likely require a greater expertise than carrying out the content audit of a small business website with a few dozen pages.

Internal or External Auditors

ISO 19011 (2011) divides audits into two categories: internal audit (first-party audit) and external audit (second- and third-party audit). The former is carried out by or for the organization, and the latter is carried out by or for parties related to the organization, such as clients and partners (second-party audit), or by independent audit bodies, such as regulators or certification-granting organizations (third-party audit).

In our corpus, audits seem to be only first-party audits (internal audits), and this dimension is addressed by only a few authors (13 publications, 6.4 percent of the publications) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Auditor within or external to the organization

Auditor within an organization (by the organization)	Auditor external to the organization (for the organization)
8 publications (4 percent of the publications)	8 publications (4 percent of the publications)

We observed that eight publications suggest that the auditor should be within the organization (by the organization) and that the same number of publications suggests calling on a consultant auditor (for the organization). The type of audit, its complexity, or the necessity to understand the content could determine whether an internal or an external auditor is required.

Alone, or as a Team

Finally, we wanted to identify the number of auditors suggested for conducting a content audit. Some authors throughout the corpus suggest carrying out the audit alone, and others advise employing more than one auditor, thus to constitute an audit team.

We noted that in 11 publications of the corpus (5.5 percent of the publications), it is suggested that an auditor should conduct the audit alone, and in 27 publications, the auditor should set up an audit team (13.5 percent of the publications). Mainly, it seems to depend on the complexity of the audit and the amount of content to audit.

Personal Characteristics of an Auditor

Throughout the corpus, the personal characteristics of the content auditor are mentioned only twice. Leibtag says that auditors need “an incredible amount of patience and curiosity” (2013). Spencer also argues that conducting the method “require[s] patience, persistence, curiosity, and attention to detail” (2014). Patience and curiosity seem the

two most important personality traits for a content auditor. However, more research is needed to address this aspect more exhaustively.

Conclusion

Although an auditor’s professional skills are discussed in our corpus of 200 publications, the topic is rarely addressed in-depth. Also, our results highlight a significant disparity between authors. IA professionals and content strategists seem to be the main specialists involved in the content audit process, but many other fields of expertise are also mentioned. The data also suggested that there is no real consensus on other important aspects regarding the auditor, such as the necessary level of expertise, the number of auditors, and whether the auditor should be internal or external to the organization.

This study not only informs the wider body of knowledge about content audits but could also support organizations in forming an auditing team or selecting individual auditors. Furthermore, results of this study could foster an evolution of content audit practices or at least encourage reflection on practices, particularly with regard to auditors’ required expertise. The disparity in authors’ discourse and the lack of in-depth reflection on the topic found in our results seems to call for more research on the skills needed to carry out a content audit, in order to ensure the quality and the credibility of audit outcomes. ■

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