# User Experience: An Umbrella Topic

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## ABSTRACT
This position paper represents my views on how we address the multi-disciplinary needs of the user experience industry. While each profession struggles to deepen its core skills and membership offerings, it also needs to branch out beyond its traditional borders to serve its members' needs within a broader industry. "User experience" should be the topic that unites all of various professional organizations under an umbrella. Because each organization has its special contribution to the network (some at the core, some as specialists and others as interested parties), and each person will have different needs, a personalized portal should be built for the UX topic to help individuals cross over existing boundaries.

**Keywords**: User experience (UX); UX network
**ACM Classification**: K 7.1 Occupations; K 7.2 Organizations

## CONCEPTUALIZING THE NETWORK
The name "user experience network" arose in part from a local chapter prototype I built. I collected the URLs of all of the US local chapters for ACM, AIGA, AIP, ASIST, HFES, SIGCHI, STC and UPA. I organized them in a database by state. Users could select a state and see all of the local chapters serving that state. My purpose was to mainly address a common pain point I had felt from various people: not knowing what other professionals were in the same geographical area as them.

There was a "'pecking order" to the local chapters. SIGCHI, UPA, AIGA, ASIST, HFES and STC chapters were listed first (in alphabetical order). If any of these local chapters existed, they were your best bet to find others interested in user experience. ACM and AIP chapters were listed last. In some states (like Alaska), these were the only local chapters, so one's best defense against being lonely would be to see what ACM & AIP had to offer.

The overall concept was simple, however: take the silos of each organization's local chapter directories and merge them into a single directory. This was a simple way to help individuals cross over the professional society boundaries in a "local" way that they could take advantage of. There were shortcomings to the prototype, however:

1. Organization by state was not very precise – people usually think of their *metropolitan* area as "home".

2. It took quite some time to collect the information about each local chapter. This could not be automated because each organization had completely different technologies for their directories. It was hard to maintain (and is why I never did the rest of the world).

3. It was hard to categorize some local chapters. One example: the Cleveland AIGA chapter had members who lived 2 hours away in Toledo, Ohio – yet every meeting took place in Cleveland. There was also an AIGA chapter in Detroit, Michigan, which was only 1 hour away. Do I list the Detroit AIGA chapter on the Ohio page? Or do I make Ohioans check out the Michigan page?

4. Having a single web page for a state that linked to a half-dozen chapter web sites was useful for awareness, but not for repeat visits. What people really needed was a *deeper level of integration of chapters*: for example, a unified calendar of events. "I live in Austin, Texas, show me what is happening this month across all of these local chapters."

Others took the local chapter network concept and applied it at the organizational level – linking the various professional organizations that are related to user experience at a high level. See figure 1 for a screen mock up of how we might convey this network to users.

## THE UMBRELLA TOPIC
As individuals started talking about fostering these collaborative efforts, we avoided "the naming problem" for this over-arching idea. Eventually we decided on "user experience" because it was the least politically-charged and seemed to be emerging as the preferred term in the industry. "Usability" was very often interpreted very narrowly (right or wrong) and "Experience design" was already associated with AIGA. AIfIA adopted "information architecture."

It is important to note that user experience is still not the "ultimate" term for this umbrella concept. "User" as a term has its legacy. "Experience" will probably endure – but I am less concerned with the "perfect" label than with the best label that promotes collaboration today.

The other important aspect of "user experience" for me is that I consider it a "topic" – a topic that many different professionals are interested in (or at least should be). When
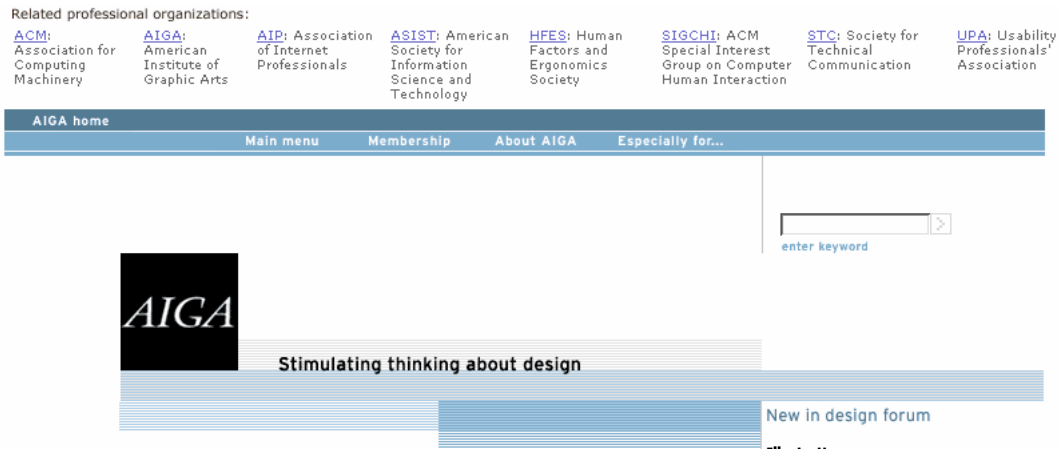
Figure 1. "Related professional organizations" (at the top) start to build the user experience network

organizing some local UX meetings, I did not take the approach that the meetings were for UX professionals (there just are not enough in Toledo, Ohio, yet) but instead they were events where we would meet and talk about UX – and that anyone interested in this common ground was welcome. I tried to explain why UX would be interesting to many different types of professionals: from Computer Science professors, to IT managers, to public relations officers, to technical communication students, to webmasters, etc.

I believe this is one way to temper the "territory" problem – thinking of user experience as something that everyone has an interest in, can contribute to, and has responsibility for. Over the long term, I believe the folks who gather to talk about the topic of user experience will start to think of themselves as a semi-cohesive industry and we will be able to start to address the economic impact of our work.

**USER EXPERIENCE DISTANCES**
If you think of UX as a topic, then you can make a map of various professional organizations and how interested they are in the topic. I have 4 classes of "distances" that make up *my personal view of user experience*:

1.  Core: These are my core professional organizations that I have been a member of since "day 1." (SIGCHI, UPA and AIfIA) How active I am in these organizations changes over time, but I track what the groups do closely.

2.  Specialize: These groups have origins in other areas but have recognized specialties that interest me. (AIGA > Experience design, STC > Usability & Information design, ASIS&T > Information architecture, ASIS&T > HCI) I rotate memberships in the parent organizations over time (currently, ASIS&T, before that AIGA, before that STC). Ideally for me, I could become a member of only the specialty group. When I present at events sponsored by these groups, I feel an immediate synergy. When I look over their list of local events, I see often connections to user experience.

Sure, sometimes the STCers are talking about something very specific to their profession that I do not relate to, but the members overall are open to the broader discussions.

3.  Applies to: What the group does is important to UX – but I have not made the personal connection yet, for various reasons. (HFES, IDSA, IIID, SIGGRAPH, IxD) The reasons these groups are still "distant" for me varies. For IIID, they have no local groups and I have never been to one of their large events. For HFES, their local chapters near me are not that active or not that much into the broader user experience topic. Any of these could move into group 2 – for example, HFES has its Internet Technical Group, which I used to be connected to, but I have lost track.

4.  Interested in: These groups are interested in UX as a topic because they realize it matters to what they do, but they have other foci so UX may just be something they think about on occasion. There are many professional groups that fall into this category, such as ACM, IEEE, any IT group, and any marketing group (e.g. AMA, PRSA). To me, UX will never be central to what these groups do, but there is plenty of common ground that can be found.

Who belongs into each group is open to debate – above are my personal views. Even though I have been searching out various groups for several years, I am continually amazed to find more and more groups which should be included in this framework. Raising awareness of UX issues among those that are not interested today but *should be* is an important initiative for the UX industry as a whole.

One use of the these "conceptual distances" is to help me understand the probability that any given organization will be doing something that I am interested in – something about user experience. I pay attention to everything that happens in the core, while I only check in on the "interested in" parties every once in a while to see if they are putting the UX spin on whatever is their hot topic.

**Applied geographically**

My original local chapter directory is no longer online, but I am working on a new version. This one is narrower in the sense that I am focusing on the Ohio-Indiana-Michigan geographic area. It is broader in the sense of being more than local chapters – more of a personal link directory about user experience, with events one key component.

The prototype is at http://user-experience.org/links/

The most fleshed-out part of the prototype so far is the geographic distance x conceptual distance aspect for local chapters (see Figure 2). The more local and more central to my core, the more interesting it is to me. But "farther away" things are also on my radar: a local ACM chapter or a local PR society might have 1 meeting a year that I am interested in, for example. I regularly drive 1-2 hours for SIGCHI and UPA meetings, so I need to plan ahead. If the topic was very targeted, such as about UX as an umbrella topic, I would travel all of the way to Indianapolis (> 4 hours).

Thus, things in the upper left have the greatest probability of being interesting to me; things in the lower right the least chance; all is worth tracking.

At this point, this is a simple directory of links. The links need to be expanded from just professional associations to companies (e.g. firms that offer UX services) and academia (e.g. professors who are teaching UX topics in their courses).

Ideally, my geographic component would also include the New York City area, where I travel on occasion for work.

A feature that needs to be added is to more precisely assign "weights" to these distances – conceptual and physical distances. It should be easy for me to find things that are local and on topic. Things that are on topic but farther away, plus things that are local but not quite on topic, should not be presented as urgently. I am sure there are many visualization techniques around to do this.

This view of the world still has limited value to others. Even better would be a system that covered all geographies and the whole spectrum of UX. Then any individual could input their locations of interest AND their UX-related topics of interest, and get their own visualization of the UX world for themselves. The profile should include what organizations they are members of (which would cause some added weighting for items sponsored by that group). This could be the next stage of the UXnet calendar / directory initiative.

For example, this *personalized user experience portal* could support a technical communication professional in the Washington, DC area. She would make STC and STC usability and STC information design as her core. AIfIA, UPA, AIGA and SIGCHI could be her specialties (e.g., SIGCHI is "research specialty" in her view). HFES is tagged "worth keeping track of." She flags usability, accessibility and IA as topics of interest. She marks the DC-area geographically.

The result will be her personalized view of user experience. Since the local HFES chapter is active, their events will appear in her local calendar, but sorted to the bottom under the local STC, UPA and SIGCHI events. A local IDSA event would not normally appear in her calendar (she has not included that organization in her profile), but when a local IDSA meeting is tagged "usability" because they are talking about user testing applied to traditional product design, then it shows up as something she may be interested in. A national accessibility conference taking place in DC next year – sponsored by a group she has never heard of – appears on her calendar early so that she can plan ahead.

| Geographic distance | Conceptual distance | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | **My Core** SIGCHI UPA | **My Specialities** AIGA ASIST STC | **Applies to UX** HFES IDSA SIGGRAPH | **Interested in UX** ACM AMA IEEE CS PRSA |
| Less than 1 hour  Toledo Bowling Green | -- | BGSU STC | -- | BGSU ACM NWNUG PRSA NwO |
| 1 hour  Ann Arbor Detroit | MOCHI MIUPA | AIGA Detroit MI-ASIST STC-SM | SIGGMO | AMA Detroit |
| 2 hours  Cleveland Columbus Dayton Ft. Wayne Lansing (East) | BuckCHI NEOUPA | AIGA Clev CO-ASIST CO STC Hoosier STC NEO STC SOASIST SWO-STC | CSCA CO HFES IDSA CO IDSA NO NEO SG SOCHFES | Clev AMA COACM ColAIP Col AMA Dayton ACM Dayton AMA PRSA Dayton Web Assoc |
| 3 hours  Akron/Canton Cincinnati South Bend | -- | AIGA Cinti STC-SJVC | AGFA | A/C AMA Cinti AMA Michiana AMA |
| 4 hours  Athens Indianapolis Other outskirts | INUPA | AIGA Indy | -- | CI ACM Indy AMA SEOMUG |

Figure 2: My User Experience distances