

Engineering the User Experience: UX and the Usability Professionals' Association Whitney Quesenbery and Paul Sherman

Somewhere in the world, a customer service representative is on the phone with a customer. The customer has an easy problem—at least it seems easy to him. Unfortunately, it's not so easy for the rep. She has to negotiate three different applications—one for entering the caller's issue, another for searching the product's support knowledge base, and still another for making call notes—all while responding quickly and attentively to the customer's issue. She starts to fall behind, so she does what the reps have been taught to do—she puts the customer on hold while she struggles through the task. Minutes go by and the customer becomes impatient, finally hanging up before getting the help that he needs. Caught on audiotape, the customer was muttering about the terrible customer service.

What's the problem here? Is it outdated technology? A badly designed information structure? Misunderstood business requirements? Inadequate understanding of the rep's tasks?

Maybe it's simply that the design of the customer service systems did not start with an understanding of this simple context: two humans talking on the phone—one a customer, the other representing the company. That interaction *is* the customer's experience of the company. Or, as a popular saying quips, “to the user, the interface is the product.” Too many new systems and digital products fail because their creators were focused on the technology and assumed—either implicitly or explicitly—that users will adapt. However, people will only stay with products that meet their needs. Fortunately, as usability and user experience professionals, we can ensure that our products meet actual users' needs by starting with the people, their tasks, and their goals. This is the essence of usability.

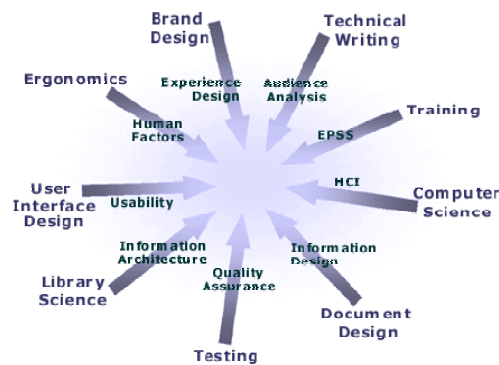
We can define usability—following the ISO standard—as the effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction with which a specific set of users can complete a specific set of tasks in a particular environment. This terse “standards language” represents some core concepts for usability professionals. The definition insists that we look at people, not just systems. It also directs us to define usability in the users' own terms.

Usability engineering, then, is a methodical approach to user interface design and evaluation, involving a practical, systematic approach, and the processes, techniques, and methods for measuring various aspects of a system's or product's ease of use. But *usability* often means more than just *testing*—that is, end-of-cycle testing to evaluate the success of a design. The word *usability* also refers to:

- a quality or result—the goal of [creating] usable systems or products
- a user-centered process for design and development
- a philosophy or approach that starts with users' needs

The UPA is a home for the body of knowledge—the skills, techniques, and methods—for user research and usability evaluation. We provide members with a place to develop and expand their skills in these areas. But we also focus on strategic usability and the importance of centering the design process around the people who use our products.

The user experience community brings together people from many different disciplines, with many perspectives on the design process and many different vocabularies. We see this diversity as one of the strengths of our field, because it provides many viewpoints, techniques, and methods for evaluating and creating product designs, allowing us to improve our products' usability and usefulness and make them more enjoyable to use..



The user experience community is diverse, converging from many different directions.

Imagine a different customer service call. This time, the customer service rep can stay focused on the customer's needs, because she's using a single new customer support application that

- makes satisfying customers' most frequent requests easy
- helps her find the information she needs during calls
- facilitates solving customers' complex problems
- tracks customer issues
- allows the rep to take call notes.

The product team that designed this new application not only analyzed the types of calls that reps receive and the information they need to do their jobs, but also observed how the best reps work with customers. Throughout their design process—starting with simple paper prototypes—the team tested both the overall task flows and interaction details. They designed a task flow that supports a natural conversation.

On rollout day, the customer service reps practically cheered with delight, nearly bringing tears to the eyes of the newly appreciated internal IT team. Let's listen in on a support call again. This time, the rep's "Hi, how can I help you?" is heartfelt...because her new tools really do let her help.

About UPA

Usability Professionals' Association
www.usabilityprofessionals.org

The UPA is a membership organization that supports usability specialists and advocates of user-centered design. Members come from all user experience disciplines, and over 39 countries. The UPA has 26 chapters providing local opportunities for networking and professional education. UPA:

- Publishes *User Experience Magazine* and [the Web magazine *UPA Voice*, and plans to launch a new online journal of usability studies in 2005.
- Hosts a Job Bank, Consultants Directory, and professional networking service
- Is developing a Usability Body of Knowledge
- UPA 2005: Bridging Cultures will be in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, on June 27–July 1.
- November 3, 2005 is World Usability Day—a celebration of the power of usability and user experience to change people's lives

Bios

Paul Sherman is Director of User-Centered Design at Best Software and a Senior Lecturer in HCI at the University of Texas at Dallas. He is a member of the UPA Board of Directors and founding President of the Dallas-Ft. Worth Chapter. Previously, at Intuit and Lucent Technologies, Paul designed and usability tested ecommerce and support Web sites and accounting, financial-planning, portfolio-management, and telecommunications-management applications. He received his Ph.D from the University of Texas at Austin, where his research focused on pilots' use of automated systems.

Whitney Quesenbery is a user interface designer and usability specialist with a passion for clear communication. As the principal consultant for Whitney Interactive Design (WQusability.com), she works with companies around the world to design usable Web sites and applications. Whitney is President of UPA, a member of the UXnet Executive Committee and manages the popular STC Usability SIG Web site. As an appointed committee member for the US Election Assistance Commission, she works to ensure the usability of voting systems. Before being seduced into the world of usability by a little beige computer, Whitney was a theatrical lighting designer on and off Broadway.



Usability Professionals' Association

The Usability Professionals' Association (UPA) is an international non-profit membership association, incorporated as under IRS 501(c)(6).

The Usability Professionals' Association supports usability specialists, people from all aspects of human-centered design, and the broad family of disciplines that create the user experience in promoting the design and development of usable products. Our goals are to:

- **Provide an international network** through which usability professionals can share information about the techniques and methodologies in the profession.
- **Create an inclusive community** for those interested in usability, whether it is their primary focus or a related discipline.
- **Change new product development** processes to include a concern for the people who use them by presenting the business case for usability in product development to colleagues, customers, the public and governmental agencies.
- **Increase the body of knowledge** about usability and user-centered design through professional education, meetings and conventions and other professional interchanges

UPA programs and services include:

Publications

- UPA Monthly – a monthly e-letter to members
- UPA Voice – a bi-monthly online magazine with short articles and industry news
- User Experience – a quarterly print magazine focusing on a range of practical and visionary topics
- A peer-reviewed online journal of usability studies, launching in the second half of 2005
- Web site
- User-centered design/user experience poster
- Design for People by People: Essays in Usability – a book with the best articles from Common Ground
- Conference Proceedings

Chapters

- We currently have 26 chapters around the world

Conferences

- Several of our chapters hold 1-2 day “mini-conferences” in their local area, sometimes in cooperation with other local organizations
- Our annual conference is held in June each year. This year’s conference is scheduled for June 27 – July 1 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. It includes leadership events, tutorials, workshops and a 2-1/2 day general program with panels, presentations, peer-reviewed papers, posters and invited speakers. The invited speakers are from outside of the immediate usability field and add breadth to the conference topics.

promoting usability concepts and techniques worldwide



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Projects

- Friends of Usability – a recognition program to allow members to acknowledge those who support their work
- Voting and Usability – an information and advocacy project
- World Usability Day – a new project, being launched in 2005 to bring awareness to the value of usability and user experience.
- Usability Body of Knowledge – a professional development project to document usability knowledge. This project is starting with a methods catalog and documenting curriculum topics and opportunities
- Usability in the Enterprise – a project to collect and publish information about adoption and ROI
- Usability and e-Gov – an informal discussion group for those working in government

Professional Networking and Career Development

- Job Bank – Ads paid for by listing agency run for three months on a publicly available page
- Consultants Directory – Open for a fee to UPA members
- LinkedIn – UPA identification in a third party networking group
- Voting Consultants Directory – Open to any user experience professional
- Member/Salary Survey – Last conducted in 2000, new version planned for 2005
- Membership Directory – Open to members only

Other

- Code of Conduct – this code is currently in a trial period and is schedule for full adoption in late 2005
- Representation at industry meetings – on an ad-hoc basis, members may be appointed to represent UPA at other industry groups or meetings

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