

Creating a UX Profession

Nigel Bevan

Serco Usability Services

22 Hand Court

London, WC1V 6JF, UK

nbevan@usability.serco.com

ABSTRACT

Current aspirations to coordinate the UX community should be complemented by a coordinated series of professional initiatives to raise the status of the UX profession so that it can take its rightful role at the heart of the development process.

Author Keywords

UX, usability, profession, international.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.7.2. The computer profession: organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Despite compelling evidence of the benefits of employing user centered design methods to produce more usable products [2] most development activity still does not use these methods consistently, with the result that most interactive systems are unnecessarily difficult to use. Surveys have shown that a staggeringly high percentage of big development projects fail or are only partially successful [6]. In a study of 15 large commercial sites, users could only find information 42% of the time even though they were taken to the correct home page before they were given the test tasks [5].

Relatively simple user-centered techniques could provide major benefits, but they are most often used too little and too late.

A series of specialist professions have emerged to help meet the demand for user centered contributions to development: ergonomics, human factors, usability, information architecture, information design, interaction design, user experience, etc. Although originating from different professional traditions, they all share a common goal of helping produce design solutions that meet real user needs.

This presents a challenge: how can we both support the needs of individuals who identify with multiple closely-

related and overlapping professions, and at the same time reap the benefits of a strong multidisciplinary profession?

One challenge for the Development Consortium is how professional organizations can coordinate their activities in a way that better supports the needs of their members.

But the organizations also need to collaborate to have a more effective voice in raising the status and visibility of the UX professions. This paper considers the challenge of how one could move towards a strong internationally respected professional organization that takes the lead in representing and championing the role of UX professions so that they can take their rightful role at the heart of the development process.

This would increase the motivation and incentive for the constituent professional organizations and their members to collaborate through UXnet to achieve common goals.

A PLAN OF ACTION

A starting point would be to compile a comprehensive audit of the current status and role of UX in every form of professional activity, to identify what would need to be done to give UX the same status as established professions. Each discrepancy could be analyzed to identify short- and longer-term initiatives that would help close the gap and gain greater respect and influence for UX professionals.

There are two complementary areas of activity:

- to formalize user centered knowledge and techniques to provide a firm foundation for the UX profession, and
- to incorporate user experience as an integral part of other relevant professional activities.

FORMALIZING USER EXPERIENCE KNOWLEDGE

There is currently little consensus on what constitutes established good professional practice in UX. Educators and practitioners are mainly dependent on personal experience and their selection of textbooks. One of the reasons that the initiative for professional accreditation of usability failed [1] was because of the perception that usability is still more an art than a science. The UPA is now sponsoring the first steps towards a usability body of knowledge and curriculum [8] to help fill this gap.

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There has been more success in the area of international standards in the field of usability, with a series of respected standards (ISO 9241, ISO 13407, ISO 18529 etc.).

But ironically documenting this knowledge in the form of expensive international standards has limited its distribution and influence in an age when information is expected to be freely available over the Internet. The established basic principles in the standards need to be extended and translated into more practical methods and techniques.

INTEGRATION WITH OTHER PROFESSIONS

The existing standards and principles together with an emerging body of knowledge will help strengthen some of the existing UX professions, but are largely inaccessible to more traditional design and development professions that have different priorities, terminologies and professional frameworks. This presents the biggest challenge: to integrate UX knowledge, methods and techniques at all levels in fields such as computer science, software and web development, design, quality, procurement etc. This will involve a lengthy process of revising and extending existing textbooks, syllabuses, training courses, codes of practice, standards, etc.

There has been a start in some areas: for example the new ISO 15288 standard for systems development now incorporates user centered activities (unlike its predecessor for software development). This is not an easy area to work in: it needs multi-skilled individuals who are as confident and respected in the traditional domain as they are in the UX field.

DEMAND A GOOD USER EXPERIENCE

Traditional professions need pull as well as push: both customers and users need to demand easier to use systems that provide a user experience better matched to their needs. Fortunately ease-of-use is now widely recognized as a desirable characteristic of systems intended for use by the general public. Curiously this enlightenment has not reached many of those responsible for developing big professional systems. Despite coherent accounts of the major economic benefits [e.g. 4] entrenched IT departments continue to turn out systems that have had little effective user involvement.

The UPA is in the process of organizing a World Usability Day as one contribution to raising awareness.

Another important target is to provide major commercial, military and government purchasing organizations with a practical way to include user experience requirements in their tenders: developers will only provide what the customer asks for. The Common Industry Format is one small step in this direction [3].

MOBILIZING SUPPORT

The emerging UXnet organization could provide the infrastructure, coordination and vision to mobilize

volunteers to work on a range of initiatives. This should build on the initiatives of existing UX professional bodies.

It would primarily be a voluntary professional activity, but professional initiatives are notoriously difficult to manage. Similar initiatives in the past [e.g. 7] have failed to make progress for the lack of a supporting infrastructure. Key success factors are:

- Each initiative should be led by a committed enthusiast, with support from a small team of volunteers.
- A loose management framework could be recommended to sustain progress: for example an agreed work plan with deliverables and monthly telephone meetings to maintain progress.
- An infrastructure to monitor project progress and ensure that another member of the team steps in if the leader is unable to devote enough time and energy.

UXnet could initially motivate and coordinate a series of initiatives sponsored by its constituent organizations, unless and until it has the resources to launch and manage its own projects.

WORKING INTERNATIONALLY

It is important to harness the enthusiasm of the rapidly growing international UX community. The benefits would be:

- To significantly increase the number of available volunteers.
- Have parallel work each addressing a different national audience, but sharing experience.
- To invigorate the work with the insights from different national cultures.

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