

Viva Usability!

Ian Fleming, d-Wise Technologies, San Francisco, CA, USA
Kristin Nienhuis, Happiness Engines, San Francisco, CA, USA

Usability: *The extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use. Or in common language; is the user able to use the product to accomplish a specific task?*

Everyday, we interact with a slew of software products, from our mail client to our coffee machines to the atm; all designed to make whatever we are trying to accomplish easier. To this end, some are more successful than others. However, most would agree that the best products in our day-to-day lives are simple to use and even a times, a joy with which to interact. And yet, our workday is often filled with tools and software products that are laborious, at times frustrating to use; most requiring specialized training. Why in a world so focused on good design; better functioning and even, heaven forbid, better looking products, do ours seem so tied to old models? Is there no learning to be garnered from the wider world of software development? Is there something that could change the focus of time invested on training and becoming an expert in our tools to doing more with our specialized expertise?

Often, we identify our jobs as much with what tools we know and use than by the breath of knowledge we possess or the products we produce. Our current tools require intimate knowledge of both inputs and outputs along with the various tool intricacies, often resulting in inefficient, operose work processes. As users, why do we need to define ourselves so closely with these tools and why do we continue to insist on maintaining overly complex workflows? As software developers, why do we continue to produce tools that not only expose unnecessary complexity, but often tout them as advantages? Our common goal, as both users and developers, should be to make tools that are focused on accomplishing the tasks that users require, in the simplest way possible.

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There is a considerable amount of research and notable examples of financially successful products forming the argument for great design and ultimately, great user experiences. In the past few years alone, every major business and technology publication have written on the power of design; calling it an integral part of any successful product. And yet, this fundamental change in the development of software and tools has not yet penetrated our industry. It is to the detriment of us all that we are continuing to work with tools that often force us into workflows that are not suited for our specific task. In other industries, the introduction of designers and user experience professionals into the software development process has fundamentally changed the approach and methodology of software development. How can we learn from these successes to make better tools focused on the needs of individual users in our industry?

In many ways, what the business and technology journals have led in their declaration of usability's importance is the charge for including design professionals into the software development process early, and often. The resulting collaboration creates a user centric model that fits into more fluid requirement gathering; emphasizing use cases in the creation of business requirements and defining the successful completion of the project by it's usefulness to the people who will actually interact with the tool. In effect, moving the design of the product from what has been done before into the realm of what will actually work for the people using the tools or software being developed.

Waterfall development methods, the de facto standard in our industry, have a tendency to minimize the involvement of design and user experience disciplines, and restrict user collaboration during the development process. The tools built using these methods tend to force users to act as fortune tellers and product designers of the eventual solution, whereas iterative development methods offer the ability to integrate usability as a core development concept and business goal. As part of iterative development, rapid prototyping and piloting encourages users, designers, and developers to collaborate together, allowing each discipline to have input into the final product in a way that their expertise is maximized. User adoption for projects using iterative methods tend to be more successful as well, because users have been engaged throughout the process and can then act as advocates for the resulting solution. Moving towards new ways of development, and questioning why we allow older methods to persist, is key to creating tools that are more suited to our tasks and respectful of users.

Our hope, in this presentation, is to create a curiosity for what is possible, a desire for something better; to fuel questions around why we are still working in the same way as before and to open up the floor for learning from what other more collaborative, user focused models of development offer. We do not mean to present a singular approach to which should be mapped to our industry, but instead, present a view point of what can be learned through years of Human-Computer Interaction research & the rise of the user experience profession, that user centric design is an integral part of creating successful products. How we start to bring these skills and methodologies into our development is a conversation long overdue, and one we hope to set into motion with you.