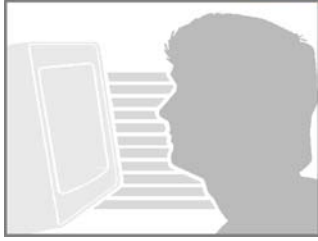


Usability Interface



The Newsletter of the STC Usability SIG

August 2003

Volume 10, Issue 1



The Search for a Well-Defined Usability Discipline

By Karen Bachmann, SIG Manager

The STC annual conference in Dallas included many sessions on usability, and the number of attendees in those sessions suggests that information about usability is valued and needed. Several of the sessions highlighted how technical communicators are finding innovative ways to add value through usability techniques. The message that “usability matters” is definitely spreading.

The message about usability is reaching other, general audiences as well. However, sometimes the message is garbled and sometimes it is overlooked entirely. Some recent examples of this that I have encountered include:

A seminar that included usability in its title but, in its description, derided the usability practices followed and recommended by most practitioners and experts, offering what was claimed to be an easier approach.

A couple of articles that explained business woes that clearly arose from usability problems, but never mentioned usability practices as the solutions or mentioned usability in very limited terms.

Narrow, short-sighted definitions of usability in job descriptions and by related professions.

A more general example is software project managers who dismiss the need for explicit usability work because the programmer is an expert with the GUI programming tools and, therefore, considered qualified to “inject” usability into the end-product. All of these have the danger of trivializing the scope and contribution of usability, thereby minimizing its effectiveness. Examples like these have led some usability professionals to lament that the usability community is not doing a good job communicating the value and importance of usability. Others have argued that the message is fractured and unfocused, exemplified by the number of possible job titles given usability professionals. Still others point out the

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www.stcsig.org/usability/newsletter/index.html

Features

Publishing Newsletters on Paper or Online
Contributions from Scott Wilson, Lanette Cornwell, and G. David Heath

Three Chapter editors recount their recent transition from paper newsletter publication to online.

Using Personas: Bringing Users Alive
By Whitney Quesenbery

Whitney answers important questions: How do we communicate what we know about the people who use our products in an engaging, efficient way? How do we get beyond statistics to a portrait of users that helps us use this information to make decisions?

Results of the Usability SIG Member Survey
By David Dick

A summary of the online survey conducted in February 2003.

How the Usability SIG Survey Was Developed
By Naomi Kleid
Naomi describes how she designed the Usability SIG member survey.

The Harmonics of Usability
By Adele Sommers

Adele describes the contributions of Thomas Gilbert, John Bowie, and Genichi Taguchi to software development.

Attending an STC Conference on a Shoestring Budget
By Kathy Bine

Kathy offers suggestions for attending the 2004 conference.

Columns

Thoughts on Publishing Our Newsletter
By David Dick

A summary of the online survey conducted in February 2003.

The Search for a Well-Defined Usability Discipline
By Karen Bachman

A reflection on the current definitions of usability, the challenges and opportunities we face as a discipline

Letter to the Editor about Our Article on “Crisis in the Profession”

SIG News

Scott McDaniel Speaks to the Washington DC Usability SIG

New Jersey Usability SIG holds Summer Picnic

Thoughts on Publishing Our Newsletter

By David Dick, Editor

Welcome to a new layout of Usability Interface. Many of STC's chapters and SIGs publish their newsletters online, either as PDF or HTML, to reduce time, effort, and costs. Publishing the newsletter online allows editors to publish more articles, and make better use of graphics and color, which increase publication costs.

- 33 replied that they would like a printed and mailed publication with simultaneous posting on the web.
- 13 replied that they would like a downloadable PDF file.
- 23 replied that they would like a web version with notification by e-mail.
- 12 answered "Other" (undecided).

Our budget is based on an allocation from STC of \$4 for every SIG member. This year, that gives us a budget of \$7,896. Last year, our costs, primarily for printing and mailing, was \$13,539. We recognise that many members still prefer hardcopy, reducing costs is not an option, but a necessity.

We have two choices:

1. Publish a four-page newsletter. The four-page newsletter will be hardcopy during this transition experiment. The consequence is that it will have only one feature article and advertise articles published on our web site. The benefit is that we drastically lower production and mailing costs.

2. Publish an e-newsletter, which contains highlights and links to articles published on our web site.

We will do both and select the best and economical solution. ●

Contribute to Usability Interface

Usability Interface is accepting original articles and case studies, anecdotes, cartoons, and book reviews on the following topics for the January 2004 issue: how to identify a bad GUI design, usability testing and EPSS, usability for online help, and case studies on applying usability techniques (and creative solutions to problems).

Submission deadline is 30 November. Send your articles to david.dick@swift.com. ●

Feature Article

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incompatibilities of the language used by usability advocates and the language of management. On the other end of the spectrum is the frequent use of "usability" as a buzzword, the latest quality of a product to serve as a product differentiator. Certainly, usability is among the top qualities that users will begin demanding from products. Good usability will help differentiate winners from losers in the marketplace. However, the shallow definition and lip service paid to buzzwords can have harmful repercussions.

Consider the fates of CRM (customer relationship management) and even B2B (business-to-business) e-commerce. Both disciplines became buzzwords that were detached from their fundamental requirements for success: understanding the underlying processes and the people involved with those processes. Instead, software tools that failed to account for human factors were released, and when those tools failed to provide a silver bullet, companies blamed the whole idea—not the poor implementation. Those disciplines are only now starting to recover some credibility but have a long way to go. Usability advocates need to be careful to avoid a similar death-by-hype fate as we continue to spread the "right" message to our employers, clients, and professional colleagues.

How do we make sure that the right usability message is heard and wins out?

First, we need to agree as a community of practice on a common definition of usability as a discipline—not exactly an easy prospect, but a number of our sister organizations are tackling these issues in key initiatives. The Usability SIG must support these efforts, providing our input and communication skills.

Second, we need to find ways to address those sending out radically different messages in a diplomatic, constructive way. Educate—don't argue.

Third, we need to deliver the message to our employers in the way that they can identify its value to their unique company goals. That means changing the presentation of the message, not the core, commonly agreed-upon content. Applying our communication and usability skills to our own message is essential to its success, but too often we do not take the time (or simply do not have time in jobs where one person does the work of many) to craft our self-promotion as carefully as we do our project deliverables.

In the Usability SIG survey at the beginning of the year, many respondents asked for better tools to promote usability.

Developing a consistent, positive message about the benefits and realities of usability is a first step in developing such tools. Usability practitioners (corporate and academic professionals) and advocates must work together to mindfully craft a unified message and to establish usability as an essential element to development. Those of us who have trained as communicators are well-qualified to help the usability profession craft and deliver a clear, useful, and usable message.

You also asked for information about usability techniques that you can apply to your work—whether you are writing user documentation, conducting usability tests of company web sites, or designing the user interfaces for software and web applications. The efforts to better define usability include defining the core competencies and practices for the profession. Reaching agreement about these foundation components will better support learning the profession and applying it to our jobs and deliverables.

As the usability community continues to develop a stronger, more consistent message, the Usability SIG will support and report the work of our sister usability organizations, and we will use the findings to improve our services to members. In the meantime, we will continue to provide the services some of you pointed out as especially valuable, including:

- Publishing case studies and applied techniques in *Usability Interface* (www.stcsig.org/usability/newsletter/index.html).
- Updating and enhancing the usability toolkit and bookshelf on our website (www.stcsig.org/usability/resources/index.html).
- Providing a community for discussion and support through our online discussion list (www.stcsig.org/usability/activities/listfaq.html).

We will also be working to provide new information that you requested and to address the concerns and needs that remain. The Usability SIG volunteers greatly appreciate the time and effort you put into your survey responses. We welcome your continuing feedback, suggestions, and experiences promoting the right usability message. ●

Quotable Quotes

“Giving customers features they are unwilling to pay for means you either have an overly expensive product or dissatisfied customers.”

Quoted from *Feature No Yellow Stickies* by Richard A. Moran

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Usability SIG Web site

www.stcsig.org/usability

Usability Interface Online

www.stcsig.org/usability/newsletter

SIG e-mail list

The SIG e-mail list is open to all members.

To join, send an e-mail to stcusesig_l-request@lists.stc.org. In the body of the mail message, type "subscribe stcusesig_l"

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Usability Events

Events



UPA 2004 will be held June 7-11, 2004 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Submissions for papers, panels, tutorials and more are now being accepted. The Call for Participation is available at www.upassoc.org/conferences_and_events/upa_conference/2004/call/, and includes deadlines for submissions and other information about the conference. Submissions in most categories are due by October 20, 2003. Complete information is available on the UPA 2004 web page, www.upassoc.org/conferences_and_events/upa_conference/2004/.

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