



# Three elements of effective User Experience research: The WUP philosophy

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We consider three elements to be key in any user experience research we undertake:

- The site strategy and how this fits with the organisational strategy
- User focused research that concentrates on the goals that users want to achieve
- Getting the research conclusions implemented by considering the results with the team who will be responsible for implementing them

## Site Strategy

A usable web site is not an end in itself; it is a means to achieving organisational and user goals. User experience research is only relevant in the context of the site strategy, the aims of the organisation, and the user goals that the organisation wishes to support through the site. We have tested websites that are highly usable, but that users feel are of little value: the goals 'on offer' are not relevant and users are left with a feeling of 'so what?'. More often, we have tested sites that are not usable, where users cannot work out who the site is aimed at or what goals they can achieve. However, the result is the same – users have no desire to revisit or recommend the site.

Therefore, the first questions we ask are:

- Who's the target audience for the site?
- What do you want the site to achieve?
- What goals do users want to achieve?
- Which user goals will you support?

User experience research needs to be seen in the context of the broader site strategy. What matters is that **target** users can quickly and easily achieve their goals, and that achieving these meets the site owner's strategy and aims for the site. Users wishing to achieve goals that do not support the site strategy should be 'sign-posted' away from the site at an early stage.

We, therefore, look at your web site as part of your 'bigger' strategic picture, i.e. to ensure the site is usable to target users wishing to achieve goals that support the site strategy.

## User Focused research

User Centred Design (UCD) is now generally accepted as fundamental to usable site development. However, this can mean anything from having a vague idea of a 'user' in mind through to rigorous evidence based research using real users. As research based consultants we obviously favour the latter. There are three key types of research:

- **Research to understand users and their goals:** Typically decisions relating to a web site's development are largely based on the opinions of those involved in the development process. However, it's difficult for any individual to really understand the mindsets of users with different experiences and backgrounds, and how those users will want to achieve a particular goal on the site. Rigorous research with users through depth interviews, focus groups and online surveys will provide meaningful and relevant information on those users and their goals. Furthermore, actively engaging those with responsibility for developing a site (managers as well as developers) in this research will challenge their assumptions in a way that will lead to a more user focused approach.
- **Information architecture research** - to organise content in a way that is meaningful to users: Many web sites have an information architecture based on an 'organisational' view of the site's content that does not reflect how users go about achieving their goals. Having a user-focused information architecture, and having labels that are understood by users, is key to getting users to their goals quickly and providing a good user experience. Research to develop this involves card sorting with users to see how they sort goals into and topics and categories meaningful to them
- **Usability testing** - to test and refine the site: Usability testing is the only way to find out if a site 'works'. Without getting real users to use a site (from prototype through to finished site), it is impossible to say that it is usable for the target audiences. However, the approach taken to usability testing can affect its usefulness. We adopt a user-led goal-oriented approach to usability testing that surfaces testers' behaviours and actions to help inform

thinking about both strategic issues (how users want to interact with the site) and tactical issues (the usability issues that enable or inhibit user goals being achieved). We do not use a highly scripted approach employing a set of tightly pre-defined tasks: a highly scripted task approach may 'usability test' but does not necessarily address the issues that users are most interested in. Relevant usability testing research is a 'must have' in developing an effective web site. And it needn't be time consuming and expensive – any testing is better than no testing.

## Action Oriented Process

But just doing the research and writing a report will often fail to bring about the 'right' change for three main reasons:

- Key individuals may resist change because it conflicts with their view of what's appropriate, and other team members may feel inhibited at challenging their position.
- Everyone who observes a usability testing session will develop their own tacit 'mental model' of what's happening based on their own experiences, values and prejudices.
- Recommendations made by external consultants may be impractical or inappropriate to implement in the client context for resource, technical or political reasons.

A key element of our approach is to encourage all those in an organisation who can influence the implementation of the research outcomes to attend at least some of the research and a discussion facilitated by WUP. This discussion facilitates the process of collaborative 'sense-making' (Weick, 1995), enabling the development team to take ownership of the research results, develop a collective articulated view of the priority issues to be addressed, and agree the appropriate actions in the context of the client's organisational environment.

Involving the client in this way is based on the theories of organisational development experts like Ed Schein (1997, 1999) and Chris Argyris (1970) who believe that the most effective way for consultants to help clients is to make the client part of the process: *"Most of what a consultant does in helping organisations is based on the central assumption that one can only help a human system to help itself"* (Schein, 1999). Argyris (1970) identifies three basic requirements for a successful consulting project: obtaining good evidence; facilitating free and informed choice on the outcomes by the client; and facilitating internal commitment to the outcomes of the intervention. His belief is that all three of these

elements need to be present in a consulting intervention – simply delivering an expert report will not bring about action.

The cooperative co-creation process helps to ensure that WUP delivers the appropriate solution to the client, in a way that the client can implement, and that the client assumes ownership and only agrees to a plan that is going to be actionable within the client's resources. This bridges the 'knowing-doing' gap and minimizes the chance that the feedback will be 'filed' without action. We believe that this approach enables the delivery of actionable results, identifying quick wins and longer-term developments.

## In Conclusion...

Our aim is to work co-operatively with our clients to undertake rigorous user experience research, focused on addressing the appropriate strategic and tactical questions, which will generate an achievable action plan. We see it as our role is to challenge clients' views about users and appropriate research methodologies, to ensure all projects meet our clients' objectives and provide value for money – we won't undertake a project if we disagree with the proposed approach.

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