HCI: Whose Job is it Anyway?

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Abstract

A panel of experts on human computer interaction (HCI) argues about who is best placed to 'own' HCI and the user centred design process. The experts come from a range of private and public sector organisations, both large (like Microsoft and the NHS) and small (System Concepts). The format of the panel will be loosely based on the popular radio and TV panel game "Whose line is it anyway?"

1.0 Introduction

Slightly anarchic, not clear who is really in charge, could be a shambles but creativity usually makes it work in the end. No, not just the eponymous panel game "Whose line is it anyway" but the state of human computer interaction (HCI) in many organisations. Well, apart from the last bit about creativity making it work in the end – we were lying about that. In fact, even hard-nosed business leaders agree that many (some say most) big IT projects fail to deliver real business benefit because they take insufficient account of the people who are expected to use them. Making such systems more usable is one of the key objectives of human computer interaction practitioners and user centred design is one of their main tools. But who 'owns' HCI and user centred design?

1.1 The Discussion

Now that HCI has been recognised by many organisations as 'a good thing', lots of stakeholders want to claim it as their own. Since it should be part of the software development process, software developers might seem to have a good claim. However, with their inevitable focus on technology, there is always a risk that people will come second. Project managers might seem to be ideal since they not only allocate resources but also worry about the sequencing of the various activities. And we all know that fixing HCI issues late is much more expensive than getting them right early on. But maybe Project

Managers are already overloaded and HCI will just be one more thing they don't have time to do properly. In System Concepts, we have even found that the HCI lead can be in more than one place in the same organisation. A project for a mobile phone company concerned with 'packaging' and the 'out of box experience' was led by someone from marketing. A related project, on physical handset design was led by a product designer. The risk in both these cases is that the focus may be too much on visual and aesthetic issues to the detriment of

deeper effectiveness and efficiency issues. We have also been successful leading projects ourselves where we combined the usability lead with the project management, but not all usability experts have credibility in this area.

The aim of this panel is to discuss these different viewpoints in a lively, informative and thought provoking way. The panelists have a wealth of experience of HCI in both the private and public sector and are known to hold, and not be afraid of sharing, strong opinions.

1.2 The Panelists

Tom Stewart (Chair)

Tom Stewart is Joint Managing Director of System Concepts, one of the UK's leading user experience consultancies. He has thirty years of experience in human factors consulting and has an international reputation as an expert in usability standards. He was project editor for the human centred design standard (ISO 13407), which has become the industry standard approach to user centred design. He is currently leading the ISO team which is revising the standard. The revision has two objectives. One is to update it to take account of current thinking in user experience and the other is to incorporate it into the ISO 9241 'ergonomics of human system interaction' standards series. The new standard will become ISO 9241 Part 210. He argues that usability experts ought to be good owners for HCI but that without good project management skills and experience they may not be credible in the rough and tumble of business.

1.2.1 Jarnail Chudge

Jarnail has been working in the field for almost 20 years and has been involved in all areas of user and business focussed design. His experience has been gained both in academia and the commercial sector across a variety of industry sectors spanning the UK, EMEA, and North America. He has worked both as an individual contributor to delivery teams and has led large user experience teams on a range of client engagements. Jarnail has been at Microsoft for just under 7 years and am responsible for envisaging, scoping, planning and delivering the UX on our projects.

Thanks to the World Wide Web, the proliferation of mobile devices, and the digitisation of media, we now live in a society where we are inundated by information – more than we can possibly hope to handle yet somehow we manage it...thanks to the coping strategies we each create. The range of information we have to deal with has also sensitised us to what we like or dislike and coupled with our willingness to share our thoughts

and opinions with friends and colleagues alike it means that everyone now has something to say about ‘design’. So, by extension ‘everyone’ is an owner, to a larger or lesser degree, of design. However, in the real world it is of course not practical to get everyone involved so we have developed research and analysis techniques to address the matter of representation but irrespective of how well that is done it does, I feel, ultimately come down to envisaging, creating, and then delivering a thing of ‘beauty’. Hence the job of UX is to facilitate this process in order to tease out something that is inside them, inside the people they are working with, and inside the people they are designing for...call it training, call it rigour, call it intuition...whatever it is called...! it takes people with a rare combination of skills and empathy whose job it is to ‘bring it all together’...such that the designer and the designed are one and the same!

1.2.2 Stephen Corbett

Still relatively new to the role in the NHS, he has accumulated twenty years of software usability and UI design experience working in various development organisations. The greatest influence on his thoughts about software usability was the nine years he spent working for the software firm, SAP AG.

Now in a procurement organisation, a company that buys software, he faces a predicament. Who owns usability? In his previous roles, it was easy, he would work with development teams to create usable products. Now in an organisation that buys and implements software: typically commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) products the answer is more complicated.

Can an organisation that buys and implements software be responsible for creating usable products? The obvious answer would be no - they don't have the necessary skills to create usable software - they just buy software.

Therefore he will argue that most of the responsibility lies with software vendors. They have to have the right capabilities and processes in place with the right UI technologies to produce usable software products. However procurement firms have a minor role to play: they can give software firms access to their end users, they can raise awareness of usability within their organisation, and they can tweak their procurement process so that software vendors who produce usable products are favoured over those who do not.