

# A Usability Business Case: The Politics of Usability

## Organizer

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## Panelists

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## ABSTRACT

In this highly interactive panel we will present and discuss a Usability Business Case for professional self-assessment dealing with the Politics of Usability. A usability business case is a hypothetical but realistic scenario that serves to illustrate points of great importance to usability professionals. Our usability business case will focus on the politics of usability: The fundamental rules that apply when attempting to sell or even evangelize usability in an organization. This panel is particularly important since preliminary tests of our business case with experienced usability professionals shows that the general familiarity with our key points is limited.

## Keywords

Self-assessment, self-evaluation, self-test, business case, usability skills, usability politics

## BACKGROUND

Usability is more and more critical to the success of software interfaces and websites. Many usability professionals today master the tools of the trade and have acquired considerable experience through many interviews, observation, user tests, etc. They often find, however, that their enthusiasm, experience and in-depth knowledge of usability tools and techniques is not enough to ensure success in the usability area.

To ensure success any usability professional should have a solid knowledge about specific, practical and efficient actions that can be used to promote usability in a commercial or public organization. It is our experience that many usability professionals think they have this knowledge while actual testing shows that they haven't.

Discussions we have had at usability meetings and conferences also indicate that new and experienced professionals alike are looking for insights about how well they are doing, and what they can do to improve.

To help people understand their limitations we have successfully developed and used non-offensive self-assessment techniques, which are a viable alternative to certification. A self-assessment helps people appraise and develop their knowledge about a particular usability topic. A self-assessment is an educational experience for a participant. The questions and answers help the participant think about the concepts and decide whether to pursue the matter further.

In this panel we will use a usability business case for self-assessment. A usability business case is a hypothetical but realistic scenario that serves to illustrate points of great importance to usability professionals.

## USABILITY BUSINESS CASES

Many business schools employ the case study method of teaching. Probably the most famous are the Harvard Business school case studies, which started in the 1870's and became the prototype for modern legal education. These provide students with real-life business problems, and place the students in the role of the decision-maker. The cases lead to thought-provoking discussions about a wide range of topics, and teach students to think about business situations from an experienced executive's perspective. For example, at first glance the heart of a case might seem to be about a manufacturing process, but a closer look reveals that the main issue is the organizational structure.

After studying many Harvard Business case studies ourselves, we have tried to reproduce the following elements in our Usability Business Cases: presenting a real-life scenario for a usability professional; including various problems that the reader has to recognize, and eventually solve; and finally, allowing the students to do most of the thinking and work. If this model is successful, it could be an effective means to

evaluate, teach, and share ideas among usability professionals.

### THE POLITICS OF USABILITY

To be effective in introducing Usability Engineering into a product development organization, you must function as an *agent of organizational change*. Failing to take this view of your role will most likely result in a failure to introduce Usability Engineering into your organization in a pervasive and lasting way. Technical skills, good intentions and sound logic alone will not necessarily cause organizational change. Understanding what motivates organizations and causes them to change is key.

In any organization, there are inherent *obstacles* to change. Anyone who aspires to be a change agent must identify the obstacles that exist in their organization, and address them directly. Failing to do so will usually result in failure to effect the desired results. One must understand the *sources* of resistance to change in order to overcome them.

There are usually factors, techniques, tactics and strategies that can serve as *facilitators* in effecting change. Facilitators can be divided into two types, *motivators* and *success factors*. Sometimes *motivators* are present outside of the change agent's influence, and can simply be taken advantage of. Sometimes the change agent must create or draw attention to a potential *motivator*.

Once a *motivator* is present and recognized by the organization, then an opportunity exists, but the change agent's ability to effect change is still dependent on strategic application of pertinent *success factors*. It is entirely possible to fail in effecting change even when a strong motivation for change is present, if the appropriate success factors are not applied.

The usability business case in this panel sets up an organizational context including obstacles and motivators, and facilitates the discovery of pertinent success factors.

### PANEL GOALS

The main goals of this panel are to show a practical example of a usability business case and to demonstrate how a usability business case can be used for self-assessment.

The secondary goals of this panel are to discuss the politics of usability - specific, practical actions that any usability champion should be aware of to promote usability in an organization, and to allow participants to assess their strengths and weaknesses in the area of usability politics.

### FORMAT OF PANEL

- At the door student volunteers will give each member of the audience a self-instructing paper copy of our business case so they can start studying the usability business case immediately.
- Introduction to panel.
- Study business case.  
The audience will have time to read the business case, consider their suggestions and discuss them with neighbors.
- Presentation and discussion of our suggested solution.  
Each of the panelists will present part of our suggested solution. Other panelists and members of the audience will drop in when they seriously disagree.
- Compare yourself to your peers (self-assessment).  
Voluntary survey: How many of our suggestions did you find? This will help people understand how "good" they are in comparison to their peers. Before the panel, we will offer the exercise to members of usability discussion groups. We will prepare a survey of the results that indicates the current knowledge level in the area and let people compare themselves with the survey results.
- Concluding votes and discussion.

### OUR HYPOTHETICAL USABILITY BUSINESS CASE

#### Scenario

Mary Smith has been working as a usability manager at the headquarters for MassLink for about nine months now.

MassLink is an Internet and wireless service provider that mainly serves the North-Eastern US states. The company headquarters are in Cambridge, a suburb to Boston, Massachusetts, USA. For historical reasons about half of the development staff is located in Buffalo (New York State), about 500 miles west of Boston. MassLink employs approximately 1,000 people of which 150 are developers.

Mary has a BS in Computer Science from the University of Illinois and an MBA from the University of Chicago. Before joining MassLink Mary worked for four years as a software engineer and project manager for a medical company.

During her time at MassLink Mary has carried out a number of usability inspections and a "think aloud" usability test. Mary feels that the usability inspections have been somewhat successful. Some of the teams have followed her advice carefully and a few have asked her to come back and provide further usability advice. Some teams have invited her to drop in at informal team meetings and talk about usability for 20-40 minutes.

About three months ago, a product manager on the Boston-based MassMail product development team, a highly respected team responsible for MassLink's key e-mail product, asked Mary to do a usability test of their product. Mary conducted the think aloud usability test herself, shortly before the product was released. Since MassLink has no usability lab, the test was conducted in a rented lab about 20 miles from the MassLink Boston office. No team members observed because they were too busy developing the next release of MassMail.

Mary finished the report about a week after the testing. It highlighted a number of usability issues that Mary thought were important enough to justify changes. One recommendation, about the address book feature, recommended a complete redesign because 8 of 10 study participants could not find an addressee that actually existed in the book. The team was hostile to the usability report. A few people sent sarcastic emails to Mary and no changes were made to the interface.

Apart from this setback, Mary feels reasonably successful. During recent months the requests for her services have increased, but they continue to come from only from four or five of the approximately twenty project teams.

The marketing people that Mary have spoken to say that MassLink's biggest competitor is the somewhat larger MaineLink. Mary has taken a look at MaineLink's offerings and she was not impressed by their usability.

Sheila, the CEO of MassLink, is very interested in usability. Sheila has taken some personal interest in Mary and her work. Three months ago Mary was allowed to hire a colleague.

Tomorrow Mary will have her monthly two-hour talk with Gus, the VP of Research and Development. Gus is skeptical towards usability, but not hostile. Sheila and Gus get along very well and have done so for many years despite (or, perhaps, because of) their different backgrounds. Mary has learned that Gus, who has an engineering background, can be influenced by indisputable facts and logic reasoning.

Mary feels that she is repeating herself too often with basic usability advice. She feels that the product development teams that she serves know too little about usability. She therefore wants to educate her colleagues and at the same time put more focus on usability in the development phase.

Mary therefore intends to propose to Gus a compulsory one-day seminar for all programmers, designers and marketing people at the company, a total of about 250 people. People from the Buffalo office will be flown into Boston for the seminar.

Mary envisages the following contents of the seminar:

- Introduction to usability. The human sensory system (one hour).
- Examples of good and bad usability taken from Don Norman's book "The design of everyday things" (two hours).
- Guidelines for usable design (one hour).
- A usability inspection of an e-commerce website unrelated to MassLink based on the guidelines (two hours).
- A brief overview of other usability techniques, such as "think-aloud" testing, interviews and field studies (half hour).

In order not to take too much time from her other activities, Mary is planning that the seminar will be taught by a Ph.D. student from a local university, who is currently working on a usability research project at MassLink. Mary knows that this student is a reasonable teacher. Mary will supervise the development of the seminar and sit in on the first seminar to hear how her "users" are responding.

### Your Assignment

For her meeting with the VP tomorrow, Mary wants you to review her plans for the seminar. She's also interested in some frank, general advice on her situation in general.

- Comment on Mary's plans for the seminar.
  - Provide five to fifteen prioritized suggestions that could help Mary improve the seminar.
  - Point out any suggestions from Mary that you like.
- Comment on Mary's situation in general.
  - Provide the five most important suggestions that could help Mary improve her situation.

Assume that you are unable to get answers from Mary to any questions you might have before tomorrow. You must provide your advice based solely on the scenario, but you are welcome to include the questions you would have liked to ask Mary.

Be brief, specific and constructive.

*Although this business case is inspired by a number of real-world cases, many details have been altered so any similarity to real companies, people and events is purely coincidental.*

### PANELIST DETAILS

*Deborah J. Mayhew* is an internationally recognized author, teacher, speaker and consultant on software user interface design and usability engineering. She has been Owner and Principal Consultant of Deborah J. Mayhew & Associates since 1986.

*Kara Pernice Coyne* is the Director of Research at Nielsen Norman Group. Since joining NN/g, she has led several

intercontinental research studies about topics including: accessibility, senior citizens, public relations, intranets, site maps, and field studies.

*Ron Perkins* is Principal Consultant and Owner of Design Perspectives, a consulting firm specializing in usability engineering, design, and human factors.

*Rolf Molich* owns and manages DialogDesign, a small and successful Danish usability consultancy ([www.dialogdesign.dk](http://www.dialogdesign.dk)).