

Recommendations on Recommendations

Rolf Molich

DialogDesign
Skovkrogen 3
DK-3660 Stenlose, Denmark
molich@dialogdesign.dk

Kasper Hornbæk

Dept. of Computer Science,
University of Copenhagen
Universitetsparken 1,
DK-2100 Copenhagen, Denmark
kash@diku.dk

Josephine Scott

TechSmith Corporation
2405 Woodlake Drive
Okemos, MI USA 48864-5910
j.scott@techsmith.com

ABSTRACT

This interactive session discusses the quality of recommendations for improving a user interface resulting from a usability evaluation. Problems with the quality of recommendations include recommendations that are not actionable, ones that developers are likely to misunderstand, and ones that may not improve the overall usability of the application. The session will discuss characteristics of useful and usable recommendations, that is, recommendations for solving usability problems that lead to changes that efficiently improve the usability of a product.

To make the session as useful as possible we have deliberately left 2-3 panel seats open for people with demonstrated abilities in writing useful and usable recommendations. We intend to fill these seats through a pre-conference contest.

Author Keywords

Usability recommendation, usability comment, usability testing, evaluation, usability test problems.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.2. Information interfaces and presentation: User Interfaces: Evaluation/Methodology.

INTRODUCTION

While there is substantial literature on how to conduct usability evaluations, little attention has been paid to the way that usability evaluations lead to recommendations for change. Creating high quality recommendations for change is a critical part of making sure that the results of evaluations have an appropriate impact on product development. If the translation from problem to solution is flawed, or if the recommendations are not taken seriously by the product team, a usability evaluation is a costly step that may have little impact on the product.

This interactive session will discuss the quality of recommendations for improving a user interface resulting from a usability evaluation. The session is sparked by results from the Comparative Usability Evaluation 4 (CUE-

4) study [1], [2]. In the CUE-4 study, 17 professional teams simultaneously and independently evaluated the usability of the web site for the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York, www.hotelpenn.com. Particular focus was put on the OneScreen reservation system by iHotelier (www.iHotelier.com), marketed by TravelClick (www.TravelClick.com). The system is being used by hundreds of hotels.

Each team selected their favorite evaluation method: expert review or usability test. A few teams left it up to the organizers to select a method. We used this freedom to ensure that the two evaluation methods were about equally represented. Nine teams used usability testing while eight teams used their favorite expert review technique. The CUE-4 study was conducted in March 2003.

The analysis compared usability comments written by different authors but describing equivalent usability issues. The study found that only nine of the 79 studied comments (11%) addressing six usability problems contained fully useful and fully usable recommendations. Twenty-four of the 79 comments (30%) were not useful at all. Quality problems include recommendations that are not actionable, ones that developers are likely to misunderstand, and ones that may not improve the overall usability of the application.

The analysis led to guidelines for "useful and usable recommendations," that is

- Recommendations that efficiently improve the usability of a product.
- Recommendations that are actionable, succinct and comprehensible.

SESSION GOALS

The main goals of this interactive session are to

- Allow participants to assess their own skills in writing usable and useful recommendations.
- Demonstrate the difference between good and bad recommendations through examples written by experienced usability professionals for real-world web sites under realistic conditions.
- Discuss the differences between good and bad recommendations, and present guidelines for creating useful and usable recommendations.

- Provide advice from practitioners with demonstrated experience in the field on how to create good recommendations.
- Discuss when to provide recommendations.

INTERACTIVITY

The interactivity of this session falls in two parts: Before the session and during the session. The interactivity during the session is described in the following section, "The session format."

Before the session we want to give members of the usability community a chance to participate actively. We will do this by publishing six usability problems without recommendations and ask interested members of the community to submit recommendations for at least four of the problems to us. Submissions will be by e-mail to one of the organizers.

We will select four usability problems from each of two real-world web sites. We will use confirmed, non-trivial usability problems from web sites or weblications that have been extensively tested in previous CUE-studies: The IKEA PAX Planner (CUE-5) and the Enterprise Rent-A-Car web site (CUE-6). By using real-world web sites we allow participants to take the context of the usability problem into consideration in their recommendations. Participants from CUE-5 and CUE-6 will be permitted to participate in the contest.

The proposers will evaluate the usefulness and usability of submitted recommendations based on their extensive experience. Since there's little knowledge about quality criteria for recommendations, we will evaluate submissions in an ad hoc fashion and formulate our criteria afterwards as part of the essence of this session.

The proposers will invite the 2-3 authors of the submissions containing the most useful and usable recommendations to participate actively in the session. These authors will be seated on the podium together with the organizers. In this way the proposers will ensure that demonstrated practical skills in creating good recommendations are represented in the interactive session.

THE SESSION FORMAT

- At the door student volunteers will give each member of the audience a self-instructing exercise with the six real-world usability problems used in the pre-conference contest. Audience members are encouraged to write recommendations for as many of these problems as time permits before the discussions start. Since members of the audience will hardly have the time to consider all six problems, we will present the problems in a prioritized order.

- Introduction to interactive session. The session theme and format is briefly introduced by the moderator. Invited participants are briefly introduced by the moderator using one slide per participant.

Time: 5 minutes.

- Study exercise. The audience will have time to read the exercise, consider their recommendations and discuss them with neighbors. We will encourage small group discussions in the audience.

Time: 25 minutes.

- Presentation and discussion of the solutions that the invited participants consider optimal for each of the six problems. The invited participants take turns presenting. Other invited participants and members of the audience will drop in when they seriously disagree. We will also present examples of commonly proposed solutions that we consider less than optimal.

Time: 25 minutes.

- Discussion: Guidelines for useful and usable recommendations. Based on the examples we will discuss what makes a useful and usable recommendation. We will also discuss problems not illustrated by the examples.

Time: 30 minutes.

- Summary and conclusion. Each invited participant gets 45 seconds to summarize the main points of this session.

Time: 5 minutes

During the discussion period, student volunteers will distribute paper copies of the suggested solutions for the six problems. Each member of the audience can compare their solutions to the suggested solutions and thus assess their skills in writing useful and usable recommendations.

The moderator will ensure a lively discussion by limiting speaking time to 60 seconds for anyone, including panel members.

CITATIONS

1. Dumas, J.S., Molich, R., & Jeffries, R. Describing Usability Problems: Are We Sending the Right Message? *Interactions*, XI.4, 24-29.
2. Molich, R., Dumas, J.S., Comparative Usability Evaluation (CUE-4), *Behaviour & Information Technology*, accepted for publication in early 2007. Preprints are available through www.dialogdesign.dk/cue.html and from the Behaviour & Information Technology (BIT) web site.
3. Molich, R., Comparative usability evaluation - CUE. <http://www.dialogdesign.dk/cue.html>.