The Usability of Usability

Having been a usability professional for almost 35 years, I am concerned that many usability professionals' deliverables are hard to use or don't meet their users' needs.

Project teams and other users of usability products such as field reports, personas, and usability test reports have a legitimate claim for usable products.

Good usability professionals should follow the principles that they preach to others, including knowing users, designing with users, evaluating their products with users, and using the knowledge gained from evaluation and other user feedback to improve their products.

This article presents examples of usability problems in conferences, presentations, usability test reports, usability test labs, and more.

This article raises the question: Isn't it fair to expect usability professionals to deliver usable products?

Conferences

You might expect usability conferences to set a gold standard for usability. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

At several recent usability conferences I have used some of the breaks to informally interview a number of participating usability professionals about their likes and dislikes regarding the usability of the conference. To my surprise, I found that the very idea of considering the usability of a conference was new and interesting to them. Unfortunately, conference organizers have shown little interest in these informal studies of user needs and usability issues.

Here are some of the things I learned:

• Names on badges must appear in large print so they can be read from a distance. Also, badges must either be printed on both sides or designed so they can't turn their blank side towards other participants.

• The mini program that easily fits into people's pockets or purses is useful.

• Slides from presentations are sometimes hard to find on the conference's website, and they are not available from all speakers.

• Most usability conferences hand out session evaluation forms. However, it was not clear to participants what practical impact the forms had. Also, the forms were not always available on the conference's app.

• Networking and exchange of knowledge is an important part of conferences. Not all conferences support these user-centered activities, for example by providing free buffet lunches.

• As to the presentations, speakers often forgot to repeat the questions from the audience, so the discussions were mainly for the people in the first 2-3 rows – and the session chairs did not intervene.

• Spontaneously scheduled sessions were highly valued. Lightning sessions were also highly valued because they were compact, and "you know that in the worst case you will only suffer for 5 minutes".

• At a recent usability conference, a keynote speaker who was supposed to speak for 60 minutes talked for more than 90 minutes without being stopped by the conference chairperson.

• Some presentations were poor, boring or hard to understand.

As Moshe Y. Vardi puts it "Why is it then that we are putting so much attention on ensuring the quality of the papers and so little attention on ensuring the quality of the talks?" [1] He further suggests that the quality of presentations should be considered in making program decisions. In my opinion this should apply in particular for keynote speakers.

Presentations

Many presentations by usability professionals at conferences and for stakeholders have interesting and valuable content, but they are often overloaded with breathtaking graphics. Slides with little text can be hard to understand a month later. At a recent conference, the slides had pictures of birds – when I pulled down the slides later, I couldn't recall key points because of the lack of text. Text and breathtaking graphics should be mixed appropriately to make the points understandable after the talk.

Some presenters exceed the agreed time limit for their presentation – and still expect to have time for "just one question."

Almost all presentations end with a "thank you" slide with the name of the presenter displayed prominently with a beautiful picture, for example a sunset, in the background instead of a more usable (and graphically dull) "Takeaways" summary.

Usability Test Reports

Qualitative usability testing is the most widely used usability method. Results from a usability test are often communicated through a usability test report.

Unfortunately, some of these reports suffer from usability problems. Since 1998 I have collected usability test reports from more than 120 professional colleagues who independently tested the same websites; afterwards they discussed their results and the reasons for any differences in a subsequent workshop.

Some of these usability test reports are published – anonymously, of course [2]. From these reports we learned the following:

A usable usability test report should start with a succinct executive summary of at most one page. It should be short - no more than 30 pages regardless of how much the client paid for the usability study (of course there is no page limit to appendices). Usable reports should clearly distinguish between disasters and minor problems. In addition to usability problems, they should include the most important things that users liked about the product so the development team won't accidentally remove or change these positive features.

I recently reviewed a usability test report for a client, who had commissioned a professional usability evaluation company to do a large scale usability test involving about 100 users. The usability test report had 600 pages but no summary and no table of contents. The report mainly consisted of endless lists of usability problems. Some of the reported serious problems could not be traced back to the video recordings of test participants' interactions with

the system. Several of the videos were unusable due to bad sound quality. Even after the company was informed that the sound quality was bad, they continued producing videos with incomprehensible sound.

Conveying usability test results convincingly to clients is key to a successful usability test. Nevertheless some usability professionals use one-way presentations to communicate usability findings. A more user-centered way is to communicate findings in workshops, which encourage two-way discussions and a deep understanding of issues.

Usability Test Labs
In a usability test, users are observed while they interact with a product. Usability tests often take place in a usability lab. Behind a one-way mirror, observers watch the interaction, discuss observed problems, make notes and get a first-hand impression of users' joy and pain when they use the product.

I've seen usability labs that are glaring examples of unusable design.

In one lab the one-way mirror was less than optimal. Observers were asked to avoid glowing objects in the observation room, because the objects could be seen on the other side of the mirror. For example, observers who were using Apple laptops to take notes were asked to cover the glowing apple on the lid with a Post-it note. Similarly, observers were asked not to wear white clothing and also not to move around during test sessions.

During a usability test, users often say or do apt or funny things. In response, observers at times spontaneously laugh or cry out loud. In some labs, however, the sound insulation between the observation room and the test room is so bad that the user can hear loud sounds from the observation room. Some usability professionals request observers to suppress their conversation and laughter – that is, keep quiet. Such requests reflect unusable usability labs. Observers, who are often stakeholders, are the primary users of a usability lab. Their satisfaction and buy-in is decisive for a successful usability test.

Usability Textbooks
Many introductory usability textbooks are available today. I have taught introductory HCI-courses at Danish universities for many years. I have yet to find a textbook that meets the needs of my students and myself.

Most introductory textbooks suffer from usability problems.

Some textbooks discuss advanced interaction methods extensively and devote little space to the basics of contextual inquiry, user requirements and usability evaluation. Examples are often trivial, superficial, exotic or completely missing. I recently came across a new introductory HCI-textbook that devoted only one page out of more than 200 to usability testing, which is often considered the single most important usability method.

Some textbooks are hard to navigate because the index does not list many of the terms that students look for, and because they are too long. The most popular textbooks that I am aware of have 940, 590 and 600 pages. My experience is that a one-semester course covers 100-200 of these pages. Students complain that the excessive pages obscure the really important points.

Usability Standards
Over the years I have had the pleasure of working on a number of usability standards for public or internal company use. Most standards related to usabilty, for example those produced by Microsoft and Apple, are highly usable.

Over the past few years, I have participated in some ISO Committees (ISO: International Organization for Standardization). In my opinion, the usability standards produced by ISO have serious usability problems even though the editors and authors are respected usability professionals. For example, I have attended committee meetings that spent considerable time discussing whether new chapters should start on top of a new page, and whether concepts that are notoriously difficult to understand should be illustrated by 1 or 2 examples. Both suggestions were rejected in the end.

A frequent excuse is that these are ISO policies, which are unbeatable. Isn't it reasonable to expect usability professionals to speak up loudly and fight for standards that produce usable standards?

HiPPOs
A HiPPO is an unsubstantiated statement like "I want a carousel on the home page" brought forward by a high-ranking manager. HiPPO means "Highest Paid Person's Opinion". HiPPOs are particularly damaging if they are put forward by a usability manager.

Free-roaming HiPPOs can cause havoc because they signal that the organization accepts opinions instead of usability research. They violate the foundations of modern, research based usability work.

HiPPOs brought forward by rationally thinking persons can be tamed by gently insisting that they are hypotheses that should be confirmed or disproved through usability tests using realistic data sets.

A Simple Solution: Speak up!
Having presented examples of poor usability in the usability profession, I suggest that usability professionals need to do better – and *you* can help, regardless of whether you are a software professional or a usability professional.

Usability is essential and has come to stay. The days of "If it was hard to code, it must be hard to use" and "Users should do what they are told to do without whining" are gone – but sometimes you may need to remind your usability professionals of this.

Whenever you encounter deliverables from usability professionals that are hard to use, tell them openly, provide clear examples of poor usability, and remind them that they are ethically obliged to pay attention to their users.

Other solutions are:
- A usable checklist for creating usable conferences
- Teaching usability professionals communication skills, rhetoric skills and how to sell their results in a political environment
- Rigorous guidelines and standards for usability activites, such as usability testing; such standards can improve usability
- Set up quality assurance programs to enforce the standards and

thus ensure that stakeholders get usable deliverables.

My message to usability professionals is: Do as you preach and listen humbly to your users.

My message to project managers and their teams is: Speak up and demand that your usability professionals deliver usable products that meet *your* needs.

References

[1] Vardi, M.V.: Are You Talking to Me? *Communications of the ACM 54*, 9 (2011), 5.
[2] http://www.dialogdesign.dk/CUE.html.