

A Day in the Life of...

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Title: Speech and User Experience Designer

Company: IBM Research

How I arrived at my present job (academic and other influences):

While working as an International Business Development specialist at a large bank I discovered that I loved computers and my favorite part of the day was while I was logged on, sending and reviewing email. That was back in 1983, so computers were not as commonplace as they are today. Our secretaries used typewriters with magnetic cards instead of word processors!

So I promptly quit my job and enrolled in school again - this time at NYU, and studied computer architecture, software design, programming and all those good things. IBM hired me straight out of NYU.



How I organize my day: I leave the house around 8:15 for the short drive to my kids' school, where they need to be by 8:30. I get to the office by 9:00 and usually spend the first hour going through my email, reading and responding to messages (hey, just like back at the bank). I usually have several meetings I have to go to during the day, so I check my online calendar to figure out where I have to be when. Most of time I work through lunch - I get my lunch on a take-out tray and eat it back in my office; you guessed it, doing email again. By now you might be wondering when I actually get any work done, and sometimes I find it struggle myself to find enough hours in the day to get my technical design work done. A good trick is to block off time on my calendar so no one can schedule a meeting, close the door to my office, turn off the audio alarm for when I get new mail, and then go to work!! These are my favorite times of the day. Another trick is to escape to the library (we have a wonderful library here) and get some of my research done. I have to leave by 6:00 so that I can be home in time to let the babysitter go. Then I start my second job, working with my kids on their homework and getting dinner fixed!

Amount of time spent working daily (at home and office): I can usually get around 9 hours a day in for my job. It is not always spent at the office. Sometimes I will take that first hour of email work and do it from home, or take a document that I am writing and write it from my office at my house.

What I do to get myself thinking creatively: To be creative, I have to clear my mind of other distractions. A closed office door is usually enough to do that. If I'm working on screen designs I use the whiteboard in my office. If I'm doing dialogue design, I like to type out a typical interaction on my laptop. I've tried working outside on a beautiful day with my laptop, but sound of the breeze in the trees and the song from the birds is enough to distract me, and when I find myself looking at cloud formations I know it's time to go back inside (anyway, on sunny days it's hard to read the screen of my laptop!)

My problem-solving strategy: Part of every designer's job is solving problems. With software we

create a solution that supports a user in their task, or overcomes a problem they are having with their current system. So I spend a lot of time problem solving. What I like to do is first lay out all the options and often I will write them out on a white board or paper. Then I list the pros and cons of each option. If the pros and cons are sort of equal across a couple of solutions, I go with my gut feeling, because it usually does not lead me astray.

What I do to relieve stress: I've found a couple of stress-busters that work well for me. My favorite is gardening. After a hard day at work, I love to go home and putter around in my garden. It does not take much weeding or transplanting to find myself balanced and strong again. Something about the smell of the earth, the sounds outdoors, and the beauty of the plants put things back in perspective. Another good relief for stress is aerobic exercise. Now this one takes a little more discipline to undertake (cause let's face it, running on a treadmill, or climbing endless stairs is pretty boring) but I always feel great when I'm done!

My hero, mentor, or person I most admire and why: This is a hard question to answer because there are a lot of people that I admire for different reasons. My husband is a hero to me. He is such a hard-working partner in this balancing act that we play with our dual-career household and our two elementary school aged children. Author Anna Quindlen is a hero to me because I love the way she writes and the things she writes about speak directly to my heart. Anita Borg is another one of my heroes because she thinks outside the box, she sees things before other people do, she is a great motivational speaker and she is changing the way people look at technical women in the workplace.

What I do to mentor those who work for me: I make sure that I communicate openly with them. I try to understand where they are coming from and where they want to go. I try to make sure they know I am always available to them even if my calendar says I'm very busy. I give positive feedback as often as possible, but occasionally need to let them know if they are on the wrong track. If it is a young woman, I try to let her know that we are alike in many ways, that I have been where she is now, and it's been an OK place to be.

How a negative event changed my life in a positive way: My sister's husband died suddenly when he was 31. I was only a year younger than him and it was the first close encounter I had had with death. I have not seen life the same way since. When I say goodbye to someone I know that it may be the last time I ever see that person. It makes my time with them more precious and I think about how important they are to me. I decided that I did not want to do things that were not fun and interesting and the onus was on me to make sure that the things I did were both. I am very conscious of the beauty of life and when I get caught up in small problems that are not life and death issues, I get perspective back more easily.

One event or decision in my life I wish I could go back and change: That's a real hard question to answer. Even when I look back at what I would consider the "mistakes" in my life, I realize I would not change them because I learned from them, because my life took a different path because they happened.

What values are the most important to me and what I value in others: I value honesty. Sometimes people are offended if someone is very frank, but I value that openness and direct talk. The up side is that you always know where you stand with that person. The down side is you may not always like what you hear! If I am always honest with the people around me and honest with myself, then I can hope to maintain another important value to me which is self-respect. When the day is over and all is said and done, we wake up with ourselves every morning and I try to be someone that I can live with.

What inspires, motivates, or gets me excited about my job on a daily basis: I'm always motivated to come to work in the morning because I love what I do. I could not think of someplace I would rather

work, or other research that I would rather do. Ever since I saw the Star Trek movie (I believe it was called the Journey Home) where they go back in time and try to pick up the mouse to use as a microphone, I knew I wanted to work in Speech Recognition. We are working towards that Star Trek interface. We have a long way to go, but I hope to be one of the people that gets us there. I also believe that many (most?) computers programs are not designed with a focus on a simple and easy interaction for the user. Most interfaces are too complicated these days and it is a life's work for me to make sure the designs that I am responsible put the user first. I design interfaces so people like my mother (who is over 70 and recently bought her first computer) can use them - and people like you and me can use them too!

Biography: Jennifer Lai is a Speech Interface Designer and has been working in field of Speech Recognition at the IBM T.J. Watson Research Center for 10 years. During her first 6 years she worked on the IBM Speech Recognition engine, creating language models and programming tools to facilitate model creation, while for the last 4 years she has directed her attention to developing speech applications. Jennifer's responsibilities include requirements gathering, interaction design, UI development and usability testing for speech systems including the IBM product MedSpeak/Radiology. As the lead for User Centered Design, Jennifer has focused more closely the past few years on workflow analysis and managing relationships with the user/client development partners. She has published papers on the use of speech in multimodal systems, the development of statistical language models and has three patents in Natural Language Translation. She joined IBM in 1985 as a Data Consultant working at divisional headquarters, and the Research Division in 1987. In her most recent publication she co-authored a chapter on Speech Interfaces in a book titled Human Factors and Voice Interactive Systems available through Kluwer Academic Publishers. Jennifer teaches a full-day tutorial on Effective Speech UI Design which has been given at the SIGCHI CHI '98 conference, and will be given at CHI '99 and the IEEE MM conference ICMCS '99.

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