Bridging the Gap Between UX and Everyone Else

Best Practices Report

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The Problem

The user experience (UX) is an inseparable part of the design and creation of products and content, both digital and physical. As a UX professional, someone will encounter anything you make and have some kind of experience with it. However, the idea of UX being worth studying is relatively new, and thus the best ways to communicate what exactly it is and how important it is are still unclear, both to laymen and people within the field of technical communication. This communication gap deserves to be studied and narrowed. The better UX professionals and others on a development team can communicate and relate to each other's needs, the better their end products will tend to be. Also, the easier it is to get people to understand what UX is, the more people will be interested in it and see why it is important.

It is important for UX professionals to learn how to effectively communicate with all the different parties involved with the development process. Uncovering the methods that will enable UX professionals to bridge this gap is this paper's goal. Most of the people UX professionals work with are not fellow UX people. Some of them are the users involved in testing the product, and some are clients and key stakeholders, who influence everything about the development from the product's overall goal down to the visual aesthetic. And, of course, some are experts in the many other fields that contribute to the success of a product. These people simply don't have the same exposure to or understanding of the UX design process. As emerging technologies designer Jonathan Follett (2009) puts it, "we often take technology for granted, accepting the massive complexity and rapid change in our field as the norm… it becomes all too easy for us to forget that ours is not the usual point of view."

How People See UX

Usually, when people hear the term "user experience," they reply with a tilt of the head, a furrow of the brow, and a short "hm." Even after an explanation of the term, it doesn't quite seem to click for many, especially those outside web development and technical communication. This is even though "user experience and its associated

fields of expertise… have expanded rapidly over the past decade to accommodate what seems like insatiable demand" (Follett, 2009).

Designing products and content to best assist their users is a concept that makes sense to people. However, their understanding generally slows down when it comes to just how important getting the details just right has on the usability and, ultimately, the success of those products. This can be especially true of people with more technical professions, such as engineers. Their mindset tends to be something along the lines of "if it gets the job done, it's fine; it doesn't have to be pretty," at least when it comes to documentation and usability. The benefits of a design that increases a user's understanding seem lost on them.

How UXers See People

UX professionals always have someone on their minds. Everything they do is for the benefit of the people who will be using whatever product they're working on. As a result, UX professionals must understand how people work. They must "get" people, to an extent. Anneke Glasius (2016), a Senior UX Designer at the London-based design firm Ostmodern, says, "we place ourselves into the mind of our user, endeavoring to create captivating, intuitive, and usable experiences." The success of a product depends on this understanding. UX practitioners must put the emphasis on their audiences by making them feel understood and resonating with them on a subconscious level (Ey, 2017).

Bridging the Gap

The first step to stopping the communication breakdowns between UX professionals and everyone else is to get people to realize exactly why UX design is so important. To those in the profession, this fact has become second-nature. But this ideology wasn't always common practice. Designers, especially those involved in the early days of the Web, used to make their decisions based on what they thought looked good and what their clients wanted (Gube, 2010). Now, however, with the vast amount of internet users and websites out there,

those sites must be able to give their users awesome experiences if they want to stand out. Additionally, accessibility has become a more and more important facet of design, and rightly so. Designing products without meeting the needs of those who interact with content in a different way cuts out an important part of the population (Hausler, 2015).
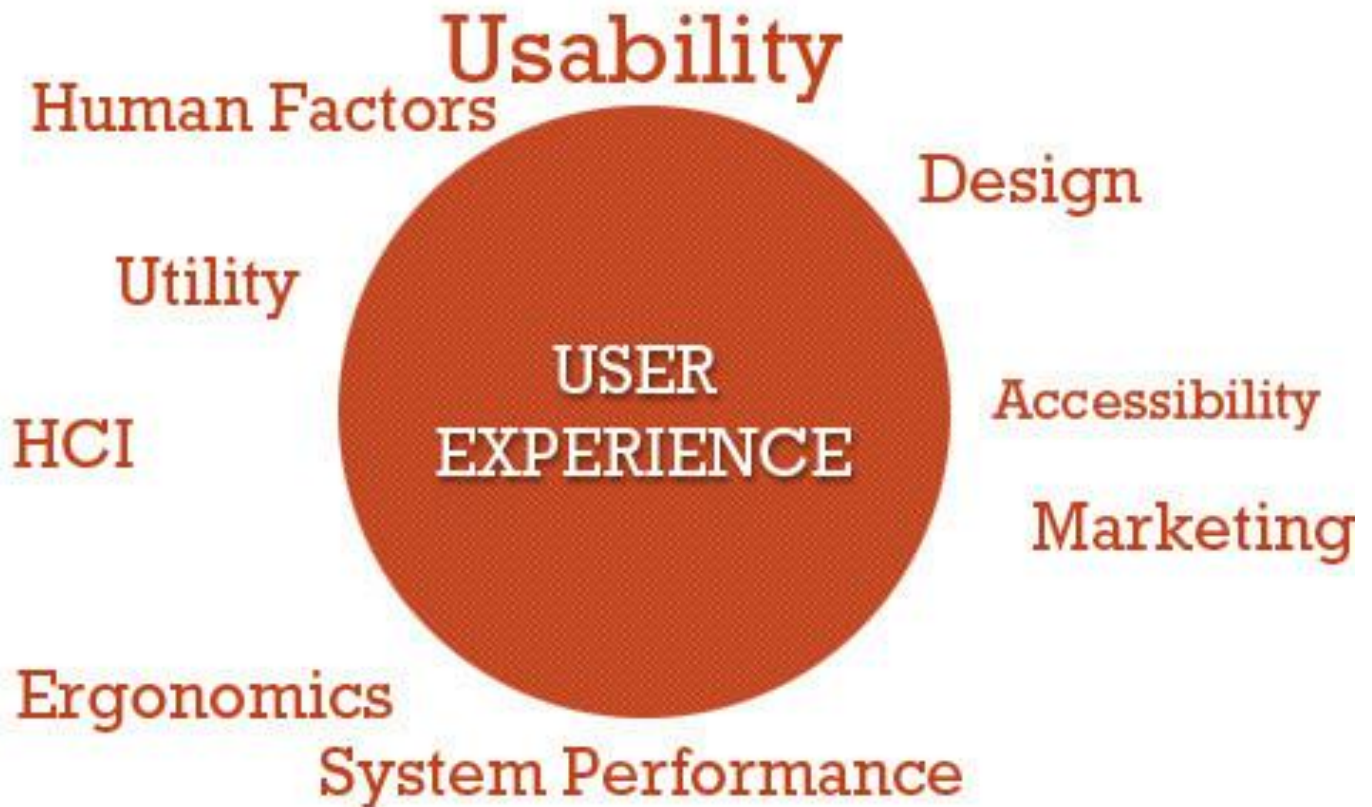

User Experience (Gube, 2010).

People also need to understand the limits of UX design and what distinguishes it from other fields. User experience design is more of an art than a science. A design that works perfectly for one user may be detrimental to another, and as a result, UX professionals can only promote or suggest the way a user might feel, but they can't force anyone to experience anything a certain way (Gube, 2010). Furthermore, user experience design is not the same as usability. Usability is how easily consumers can use a product, so it's similar, but only a part of user experience design. UX professionals also care about the way users will feel when using that product.

UX professionals are the best resource for determining how to communicate all these ideas and their importance to others. Through trial and error, many have developed their own methods for bridging the gap between themselves and their peers and clients. By closely examining these methods, the best practices for the field may be uncovered.

Glasius (2016) relays that an issue she often faces at her company is how difficult it can be to effectively communicate design ideas and possibilities to her team, so she and her colleagues worked to minimize that difficulty. Her team consists of multiple disciplines, such as project management, development, and quality assurance—none of which work directly with UX. Initially, they attempted to deal with this by creating a 250-page PDF describing their UX design process. However, after asking each part of the team what they specifically needed to know about the UX side to increase fluidity within the team, they realized that the method they had been using to communicate their process was, ironically, hard to use. Their solution was to create an interactive document using InVision that basically used wireframes for the site they were developing with pages of the details linked within each page. This interactivity was the key to their success. Their results were met with positive feedback from all the teams working on the project and resulted in an increase in scalability and transparency of communication. Glasius' team now adapts this process for each new project.
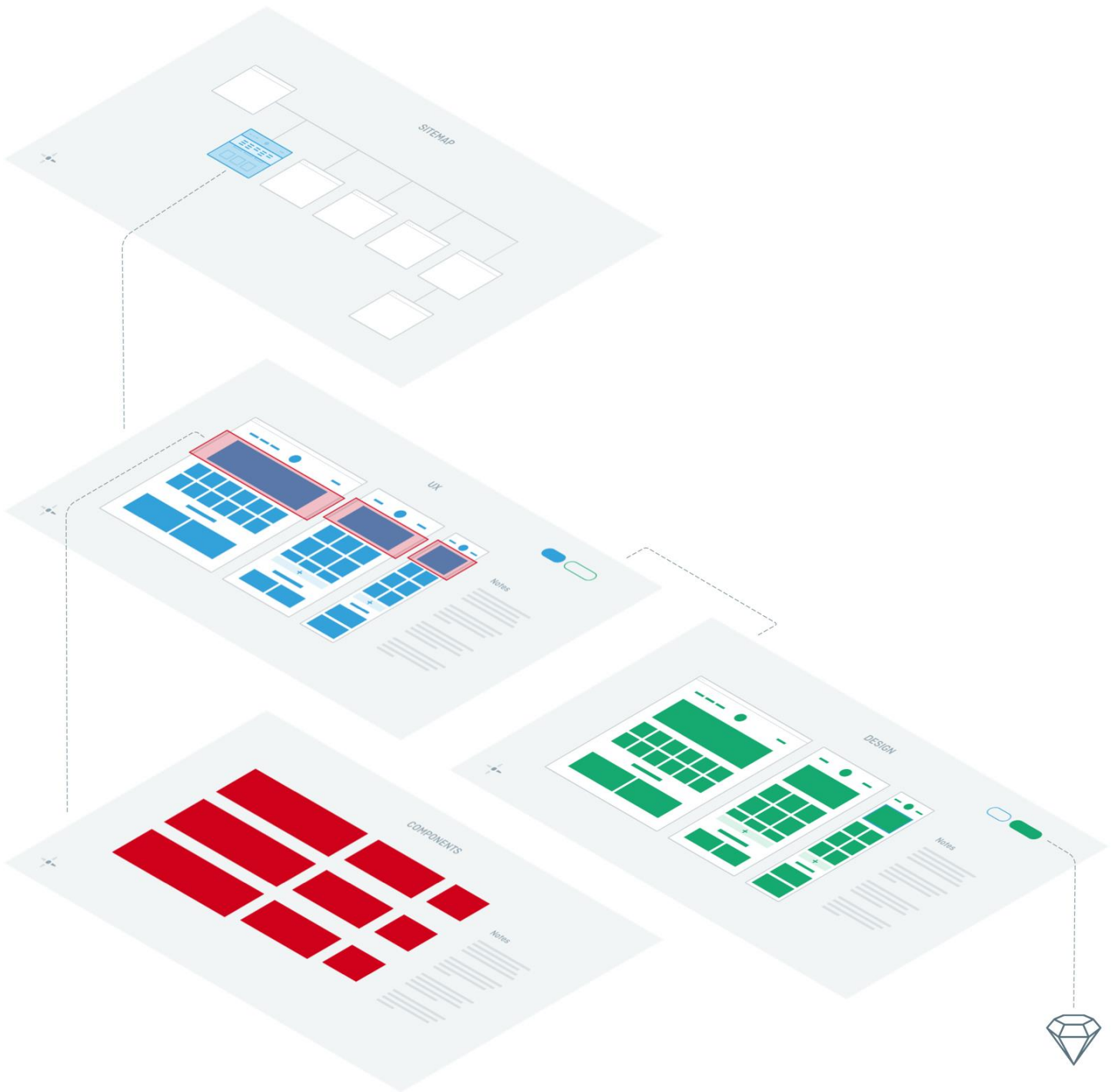
Visual representation of Glasius' process (2016).

Semick (2016) says that despite UX professionals and other team members sharing the same goal—a finished,
effective product—it's not always easy to make the two groups work closely enough together to achieve that
goal. In his case, he dealt with product managers focused on the commercial success of the products. Using his
experience with these managers, he investigated the disconnect between them and the UX side of development

to find possible solutions. He notes that when product managers and UX share responsibility for interacting with customers at the very beginning of a product cycle, customer use of the product increases. The same goes during testing of the product. If usability and design are considered at the earliest stages of user testing, the foundation is set for better UX work to be done later in the process. Essentially, he determined that the best development processes are achieved when both groups share work and decision-making responsibility as early on as possible.

In Jack Moffett's book *Bridging UX and Web Development* (2014), he attempts to give the reader the tools necessary to bridge the communication gap between UX professionals and web developers, specifically. He uses several methods to help UX designers see things from the web developer's perspective. He first recommends avoiding the desire to critique prototypes based on their lack of aesthetics and usability, as this can slow the testing and feedback process at the beginning of a product's development cycle. Then, he highlights the need for designers to understand that others on their team will often have little to no training on the methodologies of UX, and for designers to avoid pushing those methodologies upon them. He also introduces some basic principles and tools of web development such as HTML and CSS and describes them in the context of UX design. He claims that this method of teaching one individual the practices of another establishes an understanding between the two that leads to greater collaboration during development (Moffett, 2014).

Follet (2009) stresses the importance of not forgetting how to effectively communicate with not only other members of one's team, but also with the stakeholders and clients for whom the project is being undertaken. The perspectives these groups generally bring with them when dealing with UX professionals differ but there are methods to help those professionals close the communication gap between the parties. He recommends an initial interview with clients or stakeholders just to see how much they understand about UX and, if necessary, strengthen that understanding. After this, he advocates using in-progress deliverables to aid the outside entities in visualizing the UX designer's process. Doing so can reduce the likelihood that too much of a product's design will be optimized to meet the client instead of the user. This also helps ensure there are fewer changes

later in the development cycle when it comes to things that should be set early on, such as the target user demographics.

Kluttz (2016) emphasizes how important cross-collaboration between designers and engineers is. She recommends doing things like learning a programming language to help designers see things from an engineer's perspective. Naturally, this aids communication between them. Additionally, she highlights the pragmatism of being well-organized and consistent when it comes to documents and files that are meant to be shared between team members. This helps ensure that engineers understand the UX designers as clearly as possible. Finally, she advocates constant communication between the two groups, as the knowledge and expertise one group posesses will surely complement the other's.

Solutions

From these UX professionals' experiences, we can distill some useful methods for increasing communication and collaboration between practitioners of UX and others. Perhaps the most important thing UX professionals can do to facilitate understanding between themselves and everyone else is to engage in as much communication as possible. Most of the UX professionals recommended this to varying degrees. Still, this is a bit vague as far as the actual process for communicating goes. More specifically, hold initial interviews with clients and stakeholders at the beginnings of projects. Use in-progress deliverables throughout the development cycle that are specifically designed to relay UX decisions and ideas to other members of your team. Keep anything you share with your teammates organized and consistent, including said deliverables, any files, documents, or even simple emails. Avoid critiquing team members' deliverables and progress regarding their aesthetics and usability, especially early in development, when your goal should be to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible. Also, understand that these people will usually have very little knowledge on the methodologies of UX. Avoid pushing these methodologies on them just to make your job easier. Additionally, you will benefit from putting in the effort to understand the product and process from the perspectives of those

outside UX. For example, learn a programming language to help see things from the engineer's point of view. Finally, share the work and decision-making responsibility with the non-UX part of your team, beginning as early as possible in development. Follow these practices to ensure the best development processes are achieved and the gap in communication between you and everyone else is closed.

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