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Heuristic Evaluation Method

A usability evaluation method in which one or more reviewers, preferably experts, compare a software, documentation, or hardware product to a list of design principles (commonly referred to as heuristics) and identify where the product follows and does not follow those principles.

**Recommended Uses:**

- To identify issues within the operational environment of the system when pre-existing design solutions and/or those of the competitors are available. When: during the Understanding Phase.
- To evaluate versions of the user interface at one or more timepoints during the iterative design cycle. When: during the Evaluation Phase.

**Limitations:**

- Does not include interaction with intended users of the product or application. As a result, it may identify issues that are not pertinent to the intended user and may miss issues that impact end user performance.
- Not a substitute for a usability test, as the two methods often uncover different types of usability issues.


**Outcomes:**

A list of potential usability problems along with their associated design violations, typically categorized by severity and illustrated with screenshots.

**Skills Required:**

- Usability experts identify more issues than non-experts, but with training, non-experts are able to identify usability problems.
- A domain expert is needed to assess technical applications or products.

**Expertise Required:**



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To conduct a heuristic evaluation, evaluators walk through a set of tasks or scenarios with the user interface to identify violations of usability principles, or “heuristics.” Researchers and usability practitioners have developed sets of heuristics that focus on different user interaction goals. These principles should be considered guidelines or “rules of thumb” for designing the user interface, not standards or requirements.

A heuristic evaluation is generally conducted with at least two evaluators. Each evaluator completes their review independently. One evaluator might see problems that the other misses, or they each may have different thresholds for what constitutes an issue in their mind.

The reviews will be merged into one final document. The merging process should be done in a meeting with all evaluators present. All evaluators should have the opportunity to weigh in on what does and does not get included in the final draft. Although the lead may have final say on disputed issues, the group should strive to arrive at consensus.

As a preliminary step, it is highly recommended that evaluators acquaint themselves with the heuristics that will be used in the evaluation. The set of heuristics employed is the research team’s choice — there are options. However, we strongly recommend using the General Design Principles for EHRs because it was specifically designed with health IT applications in mind.

When studying the heuristics, it helps to consider how they will be put into use. For each step in a given task, the evaluator should consider whether the design violates any of the 14 heuristics. In other words, for every step the user is expected to take with the interface, the evaluator must ask themselves 14 questions. Does this step honor or violate principle No. 1? Does this step honor or violate principle No. 2? The process will quicken and become more automatic with practice.

**Foundational Steps** (typically the responsibility of the lead evaluator)

**1) Identify the intended user and the scenario of use.**

Who will use the product and in what context?

**2) Identify a set of fundamental tasks**

that the users must be able to accomplish to make the product successful.

**3) Ideally, break down the task into the required steps in advance of the review (e.g., in a task analysis).**

If this step is not completed, the evaluators will be required to do this less formally while completing the evaluation.

**4) Select an instrument**

Typically a Microsoft Word or PowerPoint template — including the set of heuristics that will be employed and the criteria for severity ratings. (Samples are provided below.)

**5) Distribute materials to the evaluators.**

**Evaluation Steps**

**1) Walk through the task steps**

For each step make a judgment as to whether a heuristic has been violated.

**2) When a heuristic is violated, describe the issue**

on a Findings Page in the chosen instrument. The description should be accompanied by a:

Screen shot of the issue

Severity ranking that indicates the severity of the issue in terms of its expected impact on successful use of the product. The template should provide criteria to calibrate these judgments

Recommendation for how to resolve the issue

**Compile the Findings**

**1) Meet to walk through each evaluator’s findings.**

Each evaluator should describe the issues he or she found.

**2) Come to consensus in the meeting**

on the quantity and severity of issues, the heuristics violated, and design recommendations.

**3) Compile a final document**

that represents the group’s review.

**4) Deliver to customer and/or to the design team.**

Author

Sources

References

Glossary Terms

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