



A Heuristic Evaluation by Adam Mentzer

Introduction

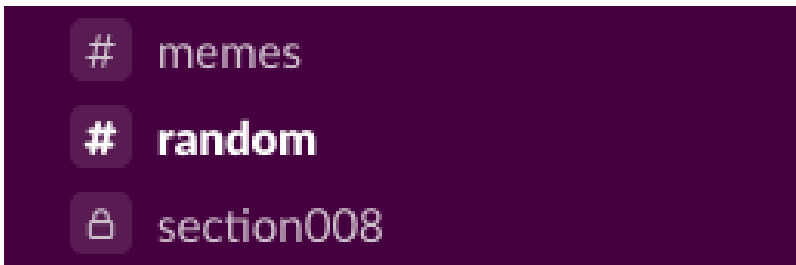
Slack was born out of necessity. Originally, it was created as a way for a game development studio to communicate about their latest project⁴. While the game fell flat, the team realized the value of the tool they'd made and was able to grow it into a standalone \$4.7 billion⁶ product. Unlike the gaming project that it was intended to aid in the creation of, Slack is a communication platform used for sharing information, planning events, and organizing ideas with the intention of replacing email in your workplace. Practical and modern, it appeals to many for its ability to not only let its users share troves of content, but also to provide avenues through which this content can be organized. On Slack, one can have all of their different groups (teams, projects, clubs, etc.) together in one place. Within these, there are separate "channels" for separating subgroups of people. Beyond this, Slack allows one to narrow conversations down to individual conversations via direct messaging⁵. **Slack will increase productivity for anyone using it, but this heuristic evaluation reveals that it suffers from issues related to content and navigation. Users might not only feel overwhelmed by the amount of information presented, but confused about how to explore it safely and efficiently as well.**

Purpose

The heuristic evaluation is a way to get a sense of how a system's design influences its usability. While heuristic evaluations are typically done by multiple people, even a single person evaluating a system heuristic-by-heuristic is usually effective enough to expose a significant portion of a system's usability problems (at least 30 percent, according to Nielsen)². In the following heuristic evaluation, Slack's performance for each heuristic will be ranked on a scale of Poor, Average, Good, and Excellent.

1) Visibility of system status:

The system should always keep users informed about what is going on, through appropriate feedback within reasonable time¹.



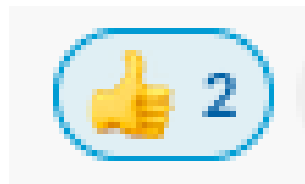
Slack does a good job of giving the user meaningful feedback. Unread messages cause the name of the channel in Slack to become bold, reverting to normal text once viewed.



The appearance of different buttons are altered once the cursor hovers over or selects them. The way in which the appearance changes depends on the type of button, but each of them are either darkened, highlighted, or underlined.

There are other status indicators in the system, such as a progress bar for downloads, highlighting the user's reactions to messages, and highlighting the name of the channel the user is currently viewing.

Recommendation: Nothing compels the user to action. To remedy this, send a notification to a user regarding the activity of others. For example, it might say "Twenty people replied to Austin's post. Go see what's happening!"



EXCELLENT

2) Match between the system and the real world:

The system should speak the users' language, with words, phrases and concepts familiar to the user, rather than system-oriented terms. Follow real-world conventions, making information appear in a natural and logical order¹.

Slack's *concept* is simple, so there isn't much that's missed between real-life conventions and how Slack operates. Everything is stated in plain terms and tries to relate to the user with colloquial language.

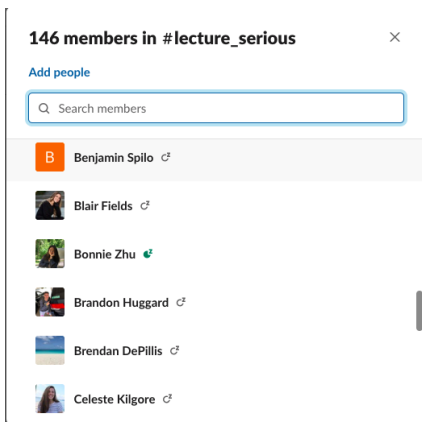
Q Type what you want to search for. Slack will do the rest.



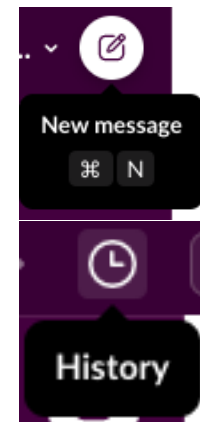
Adam Mentzer

This is your space. Draft messages, list your to-dos, or keep links and files handy. You can also talk to yourself here, but please bear in mind you'll have to supply both sides of the conversation.

Jot something down



Information is shown logically and is understandable to the average person. For example, members are listed alphabetically by default and symbols are identifiable (plus sign = add something, etc.).

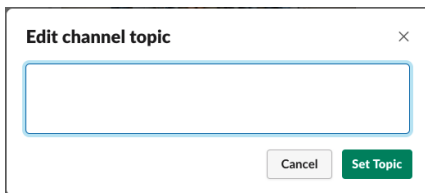
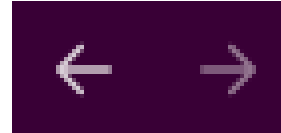


Recommendation: In real life, things that you use often are placed in a position of priority. Slack could align with this by placing your most frequently used workplace at the top of the sidebar.

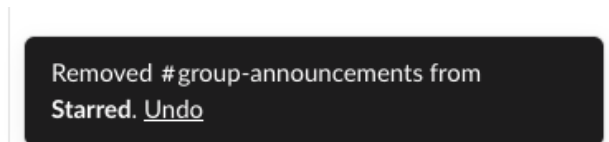
EXCELLENT

3) User control and freedom: Users often choose system functions by mistake and will need a clearly marked "emergency exit" to leave the unwanted state without having to go through an extended dialogue. Support undo and redo.¹

Luckily for users, Slack makes it fairly easy to recover from mistakes. Usually, the back arrow located at the top of the screen will do the trick.



Other times, Slack provides some opportunity to cancel/undo the action so that the user isn't in the wrong place.



Recommendation: There's no "home page" in Slack. The user is always caught in a channel from one of their workplaces. Not only does this sometimes make the user feel like they are caught in a maze of channels, it can make them feel like they're never truly removed from a mistake. The addition of an easily-accessed home page containing the user's different Slack workspaces would give them a place to "crash land" if they wind up committing a mistake or if they get lost within the app. Also, there should be more of an explicit, all-encompassing undo/redo option, as the existing undo/redo options are present on a situational basis.

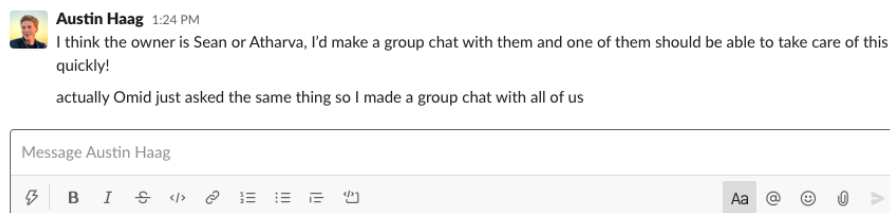
AVERAGE

4) Consistency and standards:

Users should not have to wonder whether different words, situations, or actions mean the same thing. Follow platform conventions.¹



For the most part, the layout of Slack sticks to the same standards you might expect to find in other applications. For instance, the box for creating a new message is located at the bottom of the screen like with Instagram or Discord. Additionally, the profile options are found in the top-right corner of the screen, similar to YouTube and Steam.



Recommendation: In a lot of applications (and this is especially the case with email), an arrow means “reply.” In this case, it is actually for sharing messages. As this has the potential to be misleading, the “Share Message” function should instead be placed under the “...” icon to mitigate confusion.



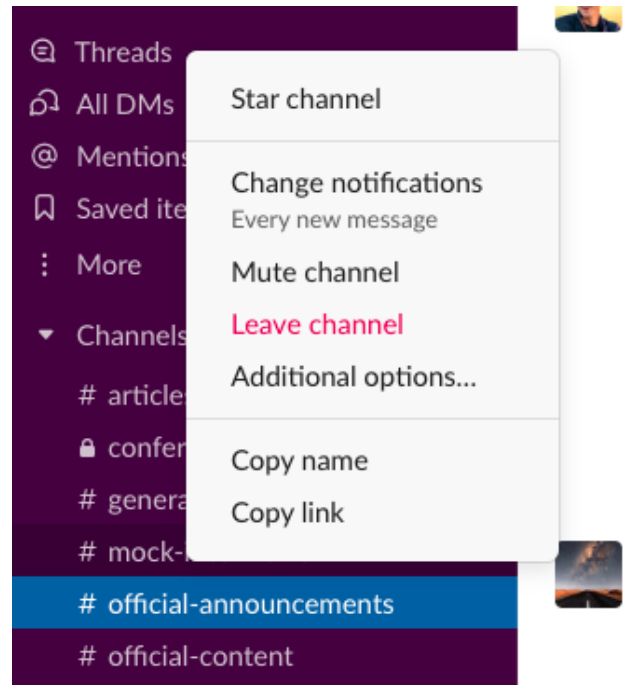
GOOD

5) Error prevention: Even better than good error messages is a careful design which prevents a problem from occurring in the first place. Either eliminate error-prone conditions or check for them and present users with a confirmation option before they commit to the action.¹

Slack prevents against some errors by making some functions only available after “declaring intent” by right-clicking, making the misclicking of buttons more difficult. However, mistakes are still possible and some of the more serious options (like leaving a channel) don't have the warnings that they should.



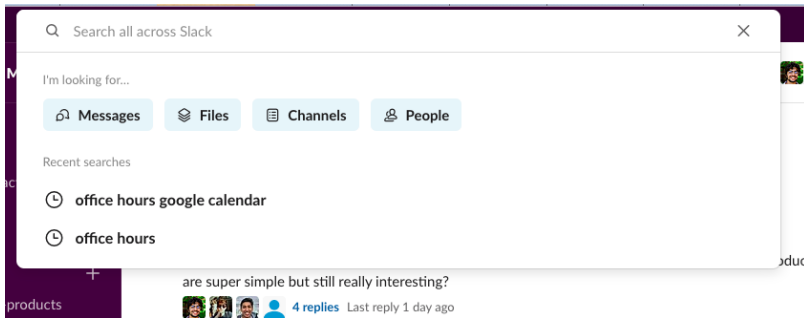
If I clicked the X, all of my conversations with Omid would be wiped without even asking for confirmation.



Recommendation: Implement more pop-up text boxes that ask if the user wants to proceed with their action, especially with regard to calling someone and for choosing to leave a DM thread.

POOR

6) Recognition and recall: Minimize the user's memory load by making objects, actions, and options visible. The user should not have to remember information from one part of the dialogue to another. Instructions for use of the system should be visible or easily retrievable whenever appropriate.¹



Most of the information needed for operation is right on the screen. While it is also a form of feedback, a black label appears over most buttons when they are hovered over, giving the user an indication of the button's function. Recognition is also encouraged with the presence of the "History" button that lets users see where they have visited most recently while using Slack.

In the same vein, recent searches appear when the search bar is activated and recently messaged colleagues/channels appear when composing a new message. The user needs to remember little, as most of the needed information is available and understandable.

Recommendation: Because they are created by users, channel names occasionally don't do an effective job of communicating the channel's purpose. To prevent this, black labels containing the channel description should appear when the user mouses over a channel.

GOOD

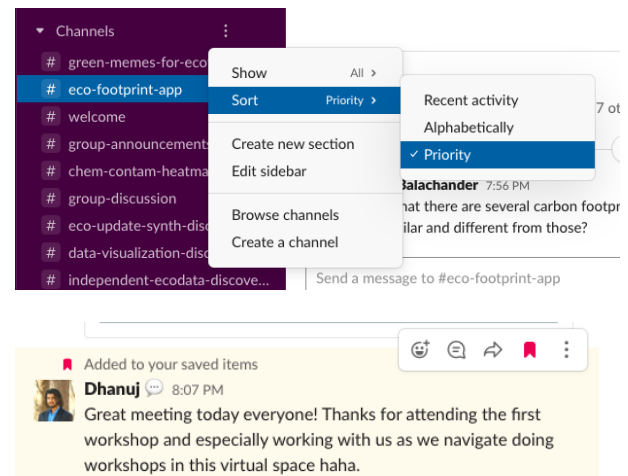
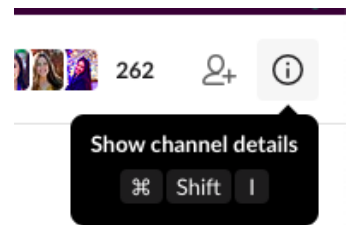
7) Flexibility and efficiency of

use: Accelerators — unseen by the novice user — may often speed up the interaction for the expert user such that the system can cater to both inexperienced and experienced users. Allow users to tailor frequent actions.¹

Basics	
New message	⌘ N
Jump to a conversation ?	⌘ K or T
Search	⌘ G
Search current conversation	⌘ F
All DMs	⌘ Shift K
Browse channels	⌘ Shift L
Edit last message (in empty text input)	⌘ ↩
Back in history	⌘ [
Forward in history	⌘]
Threads	⌘ Shift T
Dismiss dialogs	Esc

As you go along using Slack, you become acquainted with the plethora of keyboard shortcuts that are available to the user. Numbering eighty, these shortcuts make navigating even the most extensive Slack landscape quick work. On top of this, Slack allows for advanced users to create their own shortcuts.

Outside of shortcuts, Slack gives users the option of sorting things by priority (an algorithm tracks which channels you frequent and who you message the most) and lets them bookmark things for quick access.



Recommendation: Slack should allow certain *people* to be bookmarked to allow for easy, accessible communication. This is somewhat addressed by sorting by priority, but the priorities algorithm changes while your closest colleagues might not.

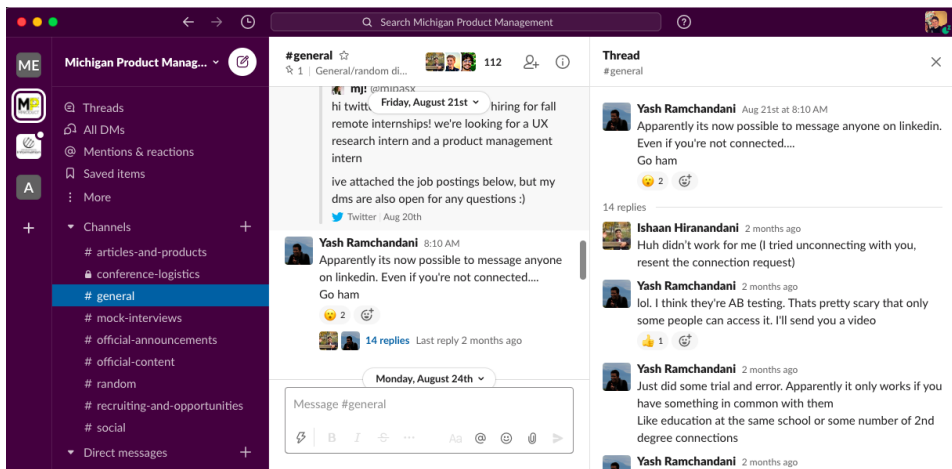
EXCELLENT

8) Aesthetic and minimalist design:

Dialogues should not contain information which is irrelevant or rarely needed. Every extra unit of information in a dialogue competes with the relevant units of information and diminishes their relative visibility.¹

The signal-to-noise ratio in Slack can sometimes be a bit too low, meaning that irrelevant information is present too often. This mainly occurs when one views a thread of messages and the screen splits into three panels: one for the thread, one for the channel in which it resides, and the list of channels off to the left.

While the list of channels can be collapsed via a keyboard shortcut, even with just two panels the screen still seems overloaded. A person can only read one thing at a time, so reading one panel makes the other two irrelevant.



Recommendation: Increase the space between messages, as they often feel untidy. Another thing that might achieve the same effect would be to have a button that makes the left-hand control panel collapsible. While it can already be done with a keyboard shortcut, this feature should be more accessible for less advanced users.

AVERAGE

9) Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors:

Error messages should be expressed in plain language (no codes), precisely indicate the problem, and constructively suggest a solution.¹

The primary errors that can be made are with typed input (usually searches) and with uploading files. When the user attempts to upload a file that Slack can't accept, it immediately displays a message that says that the file cannot be uploaded and recommends uploading a .zip file instead. Slack also provides error messages when trying to invite someone to a channel has failed.

File unsupported

Sorry, BitdefenderVirusScanner.app is a type of file not supported by Slack

Try uploading a .zip version of this file instead.

OK

Your invitation to john@john.com has bounced. If you'd like to try again (or try a different address), head to your [Invitations](#) page.

Mute Notification

Recommendation: Add constructive feedback to errors that occur when trying to add someone to a channel. As it stands, it essentially just tells you to try again.

GOOD

10) Help and documentation:

Even though it is better if the system can be used without documentation, it may be necessary to provide help and documentation. Any such information should be easy to search, focused on the user's task, list concrete steps to be carried out, and not be too large.¹

Delete a file you've added

Any member or guest can delete a file they've uploaded to Slack.

Desktop
iOS
Android

- Click **File browser** at the top of your left sidebar. If you don't see this option, click **More** to find it.
- On the right side of the screen, click **Filter**.
- Below **Shared by**, check the box next to your name.
- Find the file you'd like to delete, then click on the file name.
- Click the **...** **three dots icon** in the top right.
- Select **Delete file**, then click **Yes, delete this file** to confirm.

Slack really wants to make sure that you know how to use it to the fullest extent, which is evident in how robust its help guide is. Clearly denoted with a question mark surrounded by a circle, help is accessible, searchable, and easy to understand. Even more, the help pages have examples with simple, actionable steps.

The help guides are also easily searched and categorized into sections that are relevant and recognizable to the user.

Help
Help requests
×

Q Search the Help Center

Getting started
Everything you need to know to get started and get to work in Slack.

Using Slack
From channels to search, learn how Slack works from top to bottom.

Your profile & preferences
Adjust your profile and preferences to make Slack work just for you.

Add tools to your workspace
Connect, simplify, and automate. Discover the power of apps and tools.

Workspace administration

Visit Help Center
Contact Us

Recommendation: Some help pages are a bit too crowded. Some things could be subcategorized, merged, or cut completely. As it stands, the help pages could be described as intimidating, monolithic walls of content.

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Conclusion

All in all, Slack does a great job of providing everything that it can for its users. It follows conventions established by other platforms, gives the user constant and relevant feedback, and has useful help guides in the case of confusion. The problem is that this confusion might happen a little too often, as the cornucopia of information presented to the user can lead to disorientation. By implementing a true home page, letting the user space out some of the information, including more constructive errors messages, and refining the help guide, Slack can flatten its learning curve. This helps its users to become gradually more confident in their Slack literacy and better connect the connect the cognitive principles of perception, memory, and learning to Slack's UX design³.



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