



# Help When You Need It

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On an extraordinarily early Saturday morning, I was taking my seat in a chilly arena getting ready to watch my sons' Minor Atom hockey game. The coaches were on the bench, clipboards in hand; the bleary-eyed youngsters sat on the bench, and the first lines squared up for the face-off. The refs skated out in preparation to drop the puck. Everything was proceeding as usual until I noticed that the game scoreboard operator was no where in sight.

Well, the game couldn't proceed without a scorer, I thought. And with no one rushing to the job, I took the initiative and shortly found myself in front of a Harris Time Inc Scoreboard control panel. The puck dropped, and I intuitively selected the "Stop / Go" option. The scoreboard clock started counting down. The game continued, and I relaxed into my new-found role, watching my boys skate up and down the ice. Intermittently, I took a look at the other options on the panel: home goal, away goal, home penalty, away penalty, period, time, and a number board. All very easy, I thought.

And then the refs started skating over to me on a regular basis. The requests came quickly: Home goal! Away goal! Penalty! Two minutes for Hooking! No Goal! Change the score! Change the time! All required modifications up on the arena scoreboard; all controlled by the Harris Time Inc Scoreboard control panel.

Although my initial intuitive selections correctly updated the scoreboard, the tasks coming in quickly were forcing me to figure out the more detailed operations of the panel. To my surprise and delight, the Harris Time Inc Scoreboard control panel included product documentation incorporated right on the top of the unit. Although a jumble of text on first glance, I noticed most common tasks were available for review, which I desperately needed. With the information at hand, setting up the two-minute penalty for

hooking became a breeze. All further tasks required of me were clearly marked on the top. I successfully completed the game; the refs and coaches giving me a thumbs-up on the way to the dressing room.

Afterward, I reflected how this experience directly translated into my day-to-day role of software product design and communication and reinforced, to me, the importance of providing users with direct product documentation, when they need it. In terms of software, through inline or embedded user assistance.

Although, traditionally, software user product documentation is provided within the product's "Help" option, I've long been a proponent of inline or embedded user assistance, not only as someone who works in the field, but as a software consumer: I've often found myself scanning a user-interface for text, or desperately hovering over an icon in hopes that I can glean that nugget of information I need to complete my task. The move towards the question mark icon and the online help files is the final resort, and usually a user is quite frustrated at that point. And it doesn't get any easier: the information you need must be located, often buried in reams of other detailed content. A good search feature and context sensitive help can assist in the search process, but why not provide information directly where users need it, in the context they need it?

Incorporating this type of user assistance within the product does require buy-in from the product management team, development, and communication professionals; they're added features for development teams already tight with product and client requirements. But I believe it's a great step in providing a superior user experience and greater user adoption and satisfaction.

The Harris Scoreboard control panel's "user interface" confirmed to me the effectiveness of providing important information directly to users. I had no time to read a manual or go online to find the information I required. It was provided to me right when I needed it.

Congrats to the Harris Scoreboard control panel's product designers who focused on user experience and product documentation. It was an inspired decision by a dedicated and forward-thinking team of product managers, UX designers, and technical communicators. Many thanks from this hockey Dad!