Importance of Focus Groups and Usability Testing In HCI

Ensuring devices are user-friendly is essential so that all abilities are able to use them comfortably and confidently. When creating an interface, you have to consider the demographic it is targeted towards, and tailor the design and features to what they find more effective. There are several methods in which you can obtain feedback from users on the design of the interface. However, some are seen as more efficacious than others. In this report I will be discussing a few of the methods used by web teams to achieve a successful end product.

Interface design in the Workplace

When designing an interface, Web teams often find difficulty in choosing which features are the optimal for users. The constant vacillating between usability issues and design concepts end in minimal progress and waste precious time. We, as frequent web users have our own preferences and often think that everyone else has similar views (Krugg, 2014). In addition to there being a divide due to personal preferences, there is also some disagreements depending on professional perspectives. Workers working on web pages all have their own preferences depending on their role in the workplace. For example, designers focus mainly on the aesthetics and what looks visually pleasing, whereas developers prefer a more complex design in which they have to think about the functionality. This conflict between art and commerce adds to the already existing debate between usability issues and requirements. (Krugg, 2014).

Once the debates within the workplace are settled, discussions move on to the larger demographic and what suits most users. A common misconception is that there is an “average user” – however this is not the case. “All web users are unique, and all web use is idiosyncratic” (Krug 2014). Conducting focus groups could prove beneficial however there are debates on whether the usability data obtained from the focus groups are reliable or not. Therefore, the most proficient way to design an interface is not to ask questions about personal preferences but to ask if the features implemented within the interface is delightful and effective. This can only be done by usability testing.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are seen as an effective way in determining what people look for in an interface and whether the idea behind an interface makes sense and the value proposition is attractive. (Krugg 2014). They enable users to discuss their experiences and give suggestions on what may be useful in the particular interface being created. In terms of who should be a part of the focus group, it really depends on the target demographic. For example, if the interface is an university VLE, then the target audience would be university students. Participants are selected by researched based on certain characteristics, such as age, occupation, ethnicity and education (Usability.gov, 2020). Ensuring that the focus group consists of people from different backgrounds and exposure to technology will help in creating a more accessible interface.

Participants are selected based on the interface being created. However, for interfaces made for a wide age-range such as e-commerce, focus group members must therefore consist of a range of demographics.

Including the older generation in research studies will give a more diverse range of suggestions and experience. In addition to this it provides a more realistic approach of demographic realities. (Dickinson et al, 2007). Researchers have often observed the lack of inclusion of the older demographic (over 60) when considering ‘mainstream’ human-computer interaction. Although the population of adults over 65 is around 12 million in the UK itself (ONS, 2018). The majority of HCI research is conducted with the younger population, such as university students due to convenience. HCI research is skewed towards the characteristics of the more educated young (Dickinson et al, 2007) which is an unrealistic approach as the majority of the population are not students.

However, there are some HCI professionals who frown upon the dependence on focus groups. This is due to there being an element of biasness and pressure to please the organisers. Individuals can also tend to follow what other members of the focus group are saying in order to impress them (Pernice, 2002) Therefore, the outcome from conducting a focus group may not be entirely reliable. Many HCI experts would much prefer monitoring the behaviour of users while they work and see what proves beneficial and efficient for them. This is seen as a trustier way in creating an effective interface. Which is why usability testing is integral.

Usability Testing

Usability testing involves watching a person try to use something, e.g. a webpage and see if they can conduct tasks in an enjoyable and efficient manner (Krugg, 2014). You can detect whether there are any issues or confusing aspects in the interface and then make changes accordingly.

This is carried out during the interface creation process to ensure that any requirements/features which haven’t been flagged up during prior research can still be implemented in the product before release. There are several things which researchers must take into consideration to ensure that they have made the most of the usability test and received valuable feedback.

When conducting these tests, there are often objectives which the researchers have set in order to achieve the end goal (a successful product). The main aims are the following:

* To determine whether the participant can effectively complete the task at hand by themselves
* Monitor the individual’s behaviour as they complete tasks, to see if it can be completed with minimal difficulty
* See whether the participants enjoy using the interface
* Detect any issues
* Try to mitigate the issues detected

(Interaction design foundation, 2002)

Conclusion

Understanding what makes an interface user-friendly and efficient is extremely important when creating a product. Both focus groups and usability testing can be beneficial however usability testing seems to be the method with the best and most accurate outcome. Users being assessed on their behaviour when using a system provides more reliable results than just discussing preferences. If clients are given the choice between these two methods, usability testing should definitely be the preferred option.