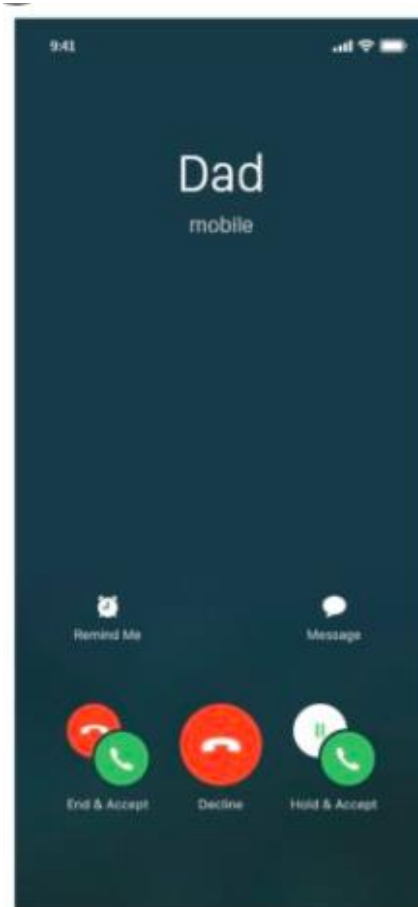


VTD Assignment 1

In order to illustrate a bad design for this assignment, I'd like to paint a story. Imagine you are on the phone with an interviewer about a potential employment opportunity. The interview is going well, when suddenly your focus is interrupted by your phone buzzing in your hand as you speak. Sparing a moment to glance at the screen, you see this image:



Your flow now interrupted, you cannot tell in the brief moment of panic what button ends or holds which call. You don't want to run the risk of hanging up on the interviewer (that would be awkward), so you instead spend the 25 seconds it takes for the other call to go to voicemail hoping you don't sound as unnerved as you feel.

Does this situation sound like an experience you've had? It's not actually your fault. You see, the controls and displays for the phone functions are somewhat ambiguous to begin with. If you sit down with the time and mind space to look at an image of this screen, chances are that you can understand what they do.

However, this is where the context in which technology is used comes into play. When you are talking on the phone with someone and another call comes in, you only have 25 seconds to understand what this means and how to respond before the decision is taken out of your hands. Also in this context the user often can't spare the mind space to sort out this puzzle, especially with a time constraint.

Perhaps the greatest source of ambiguity here is how the user cannot tell at a moment's notice what control will affect which phone call. Both the icons and text clearly display what they do, but it's not evident what they do it for. The lack of being able to *quickly* discern what does what to what leads to confusion.

There are a number of ways that this can be fixed (indeed, some phone designers have addressed this problem). The primary issue is separating or otherwise distinguishing the controls of one phone call from the other. This can be accomplished through color coding, literally moving the controls apart from each other, or through creative illustrations. The goal would be to remove the doubt from the user's mind about which call will end if you select a certain button. Here is an excellent example of how a simple change like literally separating the controls can greatly improve the design:



This relates to the principle of proximity, as you can see the controls for one phone call are grouped together away from the controls for the other call.

There can be any number of approaches to solving this issue, with varying creativity and success. I expect this issue will largely be resolved in the next few years, as corrective actions can be implemented with a software update. Changes are likely already taking place.