A Practitioner's Approach to Collaborative Usability Testing

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The integration of usability testing into mainstream web development cycles is still in its infancy in many areas of the public sector. Websites are a key means of delivering information and services to residents. However, these websites are often developed and launched within tight timelines without consultation with the public.

To solve the problem, this chapter presents a collaborative approach for success-fully launching websites where content experts, design experts, and the public work together for the common purpose of creating a usable website.

The purpose of this case study is to outline a methodology for collaborative usability testing developed in a local government setting where subject matter experts (SMEs), content owners, stakeholders, IT professionals and the public are engaged in the design and development of public sector websites.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

In the province of Ontario, Canada, local governments are called municipalities. Municipalities are incorporated areas created by the provincial government of Ontario. Ontario has 444 municipalities. Municipalities are assigned certain powers and responsibilities as set out in The Municipal Act, 2001. The Act denotes which services are mandatory to deliver to citizens and which are not. Non-mandatory services are provided at the discretion of council which is comprised of elected members (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2011).

Most municipalities comprise several departments that deliver government programs and services ranging from community health and social development to environment and infrastructure projects as guided by council.

SETTING THE STAGE

A typical web project at a municipality is usually part of a campaign to deliver programs and services to the public. A campaign usually originates from a service-facing area such as the Public Health department. Typically a staff member from a program area (Content SME) is tasked with managing the development of a website. The Content SME often works with a project manager from the Communications or IT departments to outline the business requirements and project deliverables to be produced by the web team. Often a communication (marketing) plan is created to announce the initiative and provide a consistent and clear message to the public about the new service. A challenge can arise when members of the public are resistant to the message because they are seeking different information from that which the Content SME and project manager assume they want (Magill, 1998).

Usability testing is one of several activities supporting user-centred design (UCD), a philosophy or approach whereby a product is produced based on the needs and interests of the user. (Norman, 2002, p. 188). The need for usability testing may be identified by the web master through project strategy meetings or by Communication Services professionals assisting SMEs wishing to have a user-centred approach. Usability testing helps to align the user's desire to find information with the program area's need to impart information and deliver services efficiently. Very often the program area's needs and vocabulary differ from the IT department's technical language and security concerns (Zhao J. & Zhao S., 2010) surrounding websites. Usability testing brings together diverse professionals for the common purpose of observing and recording the reactions and feedback of sample users to the websites.

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