Turning the Usability Fraternity into a Thriving Industry

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INTRODUCTION

Many business and IT executives today think that usability is an important aspect of software applications that are used in enterprises (Orenstein, 1999). However, the term usability represents different things to different people. And, to most people, usability does not sound like an aspect that could really impact enterprise performance and bottom-line.

Literature suggests that the usability fraternity has failed to make an impact so far. For example, Bias and Mayhew (1994) ask “… given that the Human Factors Society (now the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society) is a quarter of a century old, why is it taking so long for usability engineering to achieve its place alongside the other accepted disciplines?”

Later, this article looks at some reasons why, and what to do about it.

BACKGROUND

There are thousands of advertising agencies in the world and many of them have a large staff and huge revenues. Advertising is a recognized industry. Is usability a recognized industry? How many usability firms are there? How many usability firms have over 100 people or 10 million dollar revenues? How many are listed in the stock market?

One U.S.-based organization says that though their usability engineering group strength of 18 specialists is small, this number is still larger than what many independent usability groups have. That gives us an idea of the average size of usability firms.

What are some of the problems that are stopping this field from growing big? Here are some: Practitioners are not picking up the right skills. Practitioners are not doing the right “usability” things. Practitioners are not impacting the business world. And practitioners are not promoting the right things. Of course, there are exceptions, but they are few. The following sections look at each problem in detail.

DEVELOP GOOD CREDENTIALS

Many usability practitioners are believed to not have the right kind of training. Shneiderman, Tremaine, Card, Norman, and Waldrop (2002) say that CHI (computer-human interaction) fails because its practitioners are badly trained. And Mauro (n.d.) says: “This important new science (usability engineering) has in many instances been dramatically misrepresented by pseudo-practitioners, who claim to have such expertise but often do not. As a result, many corporations and government agencies that retained such experts often found the experience unsatisfying and the promises of creating significantly more usable products and services illusive.”

What is the education or skill-set that usability practitioners bring to their profession? Well, some bring expertise limited to the human side of users. Some others bring visual design or graphic tools expertise. Sure, those skills are required, but they are not enough. Practitioners need to be well-trained in technology and business. These are often the missing skills.

Being technology-literate is important for practitioners. Technology-literate would mean having a degree in computer science or software engineering. Technology-literate practitioners will know if their design can be implemented using the chosen application development software. They will know the technical impact of the design solutions they come up with (say, on system performance). When they speak the language of developers, they will also be trusted by those professionals, who will implement the design solutions.

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