Chapter III

Web-STAR:
Development of Survey Tools for Use with Requirements Gathering in Web Site Development

Jonathan Lazar
Towson University, USA

Adam Jones
Towson University, USA

Kisha-Dawn Greenidge
Towson University, USA

Abstract

This chapter introduces the research and application of the Web-STAR project, which began at Towson University in 2002. The main goal and purpose of the Web-STAR (Web-Survey Tool for Analyzing Requirements) project is to provide a standardized survey tool that developers can use to determine the user requirements for existing or new Web sites. The Web-STAR will allow this most vital stage in the development process to take place within a convenient, tested, and cost-effective method. Based on existing work in user evaluation design, Web-STAR will take sound
development practices and apply them to user requirements in the design of informational websites. This chapter presents the research-in-progress development, testing and current status of Web-STAR.

Introduction

User involvement in the development stage is critical to the success of a new information system (Hoffer, George, & Valacich, 2002). Web sites are theoretically no different; however, due to tight timelines for Web development projects, users typically have been left out of the development process. Increasingly, organizations are involving users in many different stages of their Web development projects, as it has clearly been shown to improve the user experience. This can lead to more repeat visitors and, in the case of e-commerce sites, higher sales. Examples of well-known companies and organizations that include user involvement in Web development projects include Eastman Kodak, Indiana University, the National Institutes of Health, IBM, and the National Football League (Clarke, 2001; Corry, Frick & Hansen, 1997; Lazar, 2001; Tedeschi, 1999; Yu, Prabhu & Neale, 1998). User input is necessary to determine what needs users have, both relating to the user interface (usability), and the content offered by the Web site (functionality). Also, there are multiple stages of development in which users can be involved. For instance, users can take part in usability testing, to help ensure that the interface is easy to use, as well as to find any interface components that may be confusing or problematic for users (Nielsen, 1994). In certain types of Web sites, such as e-commerce, search engines, and newspapers, the tasks may be well defined (Lazar, Ratner, Jacko & Sears, 2003). However, for the majority of informational Web sites user tasks are not well defined, and data collection (requirements gathering) needs to be done to determine what tasks the users actually need to perform. It is a common misperception that you will not know who the users of the Web site are until after the Web site is built, and people have begun to visit the Web site. Most Web sites are built with a certain target user population in mind (Lazar, 2001). This target user population may relate to age, gender, geographic location, topic of interest, job activity, or other factors. People that represent the demographics of the target user population are the ones that should be involved in requirements gathering. Even if the specific users involved do not visit the Web site, they are the ones best qualified to help determine what the task needs and usability needs of the Web site are.
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