

Gaining staff commitment to user-centred design by performing usability assessment – key lessons learned

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1. INTRODUCTION

Uptaking usability engineering activities in software development organization may be hampered or even terminated by the lack of appreciation of their value (Hakiel 1997). Building organizational (management and staff) commitment to usability development is an issue that many authors in usability field have stressed as being one of the greatest challenges. We set out to perform two usability assessments in two different organizations (for details of the project see www.kessu.oulu.fi). One of the goals for the assessment, besides understanding the current status of usability processes, was to gain staff commitment to usability development. This short paper describes the key lessons learned on how the assessment procedure worked as a vehicle to build up staff commitment to usability development. As a basis of our analysis we use Conner and Patterson's (Conner and Patterson 1982) model of commitment development to change despite of its shortcomings (for critical review see (Abrahamsson and Jokela 2000)) because it possesses high value of truthlikeness and it is widely accepted in process improvement field.

2. BUILDING COMMITMENT

Conner and Patterson's model (Figure 1) of the development of commitment to change is presented as a grid with the vertical axis demonstrating the degrees of support for a change and the horizontal axis indicating the passage of time. The model is suggested to provide "a cognitive map of how commitment can be generated". The model is divided in three phases: preparation, acceptance and commitment. Conner and Patterson included total of eight stages (which are omitted from the figure for the sake of simplification) that one goes through when becoming committed to a change goal. If stage is completed successfully, advancement to the next stage is possible. The purpose of the preparation phase is to produce an awareness that a change may occur in the future. In the acceptance phase a person produces a tendency to act in certain

ways toward the project. If a person develops a positive perception of the upcoming or ongoing change (i.e. usability development), a decision to support the change is made and one is able to advance to next phase – the commitment phase.

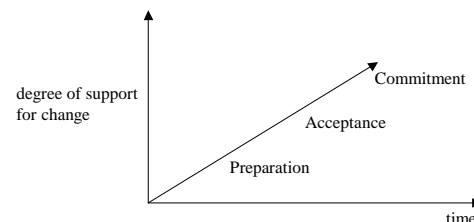


Figure 1: Building commitment to change

3. ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

The assessment was based on *UMM (Usability Maturity Model) Process* (Earthy 1999) which is pre-version of the recently released process assessment model TR ISO 18529.

The first company assessed was an SME and the user-centred design project concerned most of the organization. The project was initially initiated as a bottom-up approach – a strategy that recent organizational change literature has favored over the traditional top-down approach. Pre-assessment procedures included several meetings with several stakeholders of the company. As a sign of interest to usability issues the company organized a project group with a management sponsor to coordinate the user-centred design improvement projects. Our assessment group (six persons) was made very visible in company for the whole period of assessments (two weeks). Consciously, the inexperience of most of the members in the assessment team was not kept secret to the company. We felt that this set-up made the atmosphere easier for common learning and united effort. However, due to the brief history of user-centered design (UCD) in the company the first assessment was designed to

assess the existence of the process (=level one). Change readiness assessment (included in the assessment procedure) revealed that the organization was very sensitive to any negative feedback. The contact person of the company made the selection of the interviewees. The selection was based on organizational map, not on the processes as the reference model assumes. In reporting the results the greatest challenge was to introduce the findings in positive way. The way of presenting results in feedback session was a modified SWOT in the form *SIBC* table: strengths, targets for improvement, benefits of improvement, and costs (Iivari and Jokela 2000). The whole organization participated in the results reporting session. Feedback about the assessments and the results were gathered from the participants

The second company differs noticeably from the first one; it is larger, has offices in several countries and has a considerable amount of experience in UCD. They had their previous assessment performed three years ago. According to that assessment some of their processes were as high as level three in the respective capability scale. The current state analysis was carried out very thoroughly, but was not being excessively used for the preparation of the assessment. Therefore some interviewees were interviewed accidentally on wrong issues. The lead assessor and the current state analyzer was not the same person and the cooperation was not in place. The opening briefing was carried out two times but only with the interviewees. Company made the selection of the interviewees also in this case. Processes and people were matched. That caused some problems later; the basis for the selection was not made clear to the assessors leading to confusion in some cases. The assessment week started by the opening briefing and ended to the feedback session. The timetable was too tight; in the feedback session the assessment group seemed to have no clear ideas of the findings and even reporting of them was not considered to be a success.

4. KEY LESSONS LEARNED FROM COMMITMENT POINT OF VIEW

Our results suggest that it is possible to increase understanding and interest in UCD by assessing organizations usability processes. In the first case, when the staff was asked to assess the significance of the UCD-principles in their own work, the people who were interviewed scored 5.2 (1-7 scale, 14 answers) while others scored 3.7 (22). Therefore, assessment had increased awareness and understanding. All respondents were interested in getting more information (1.4 in scale 0-2) and ready to test UCD-principles (1.5) in practice.

There was no difference between the groups. The assessment procedure as a whole may increase the acceptability of the UCD issues. Having an interviewee profile that is not based on only processes but involve personnel from all organizational levels enhance possibilities in gaining staff commitment to UCD. This is achieved by the use of informal communication channels (i.e. if communicated properly).

From commitment point of view it was noted that the preliminary results should be introduced within the tight schedule and the presentation should follow some expected forms. This would help staff to focus on the presentation contents without getting impatient. Weaknesses are better addressed in a positive sense as the possibilities for improvement. Introducing some focused and understandable improvement ideas in the feedback session increases the credibility of the assessment and acceptability of the upcoming process improvement.

However, commitment to UCD development does not follow directly from the assessment even if the results are highly interesting and exciting. The development of commitment takes time and based on our experience we suggest that by well planned, highly visible and an open-atmosphere assessment process can make very good kick-off for the improvement process; increase understanding and interest, even get an acceptance to try new things out (level two in Figure 1).

It should be acknowledged that user centeredness does not necessarily concern everybody – UCD is still only one tool in company's toolbox, as the CEO of the company said. The company members emphasized also that it is important to increase the awareness, but to use UCD only to certain extent; the products have also other quality characteristics affecting their competitiveness.

5. REFERENCES

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