

Nita – Swedish IT User Centre

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Abstract: The Swedish IT User Centre, Nita, has been created to bridge the gap between academia, government and industry in communicating research results and elicit problem areas. During its first year Nita has proved to be an important opinion making and networking organisation. Nita has achieved to activate the discussion on the field of IT-use and IT users among a large amount of stakeholders.

Keywords: IT-use, user, research communication, usability, IT-policy

1 Background

The Swedish IT User Centre, Nita, was founded in 2001 to act as a facilitator for communication of research results and important knowledge in the field of IT Use between academia and industry. Nita does not perform any new research but acts in response to two priorities from its founders: Firstly to make industry and the public sector aware of new research to better their opportunity to develop useful and usable IT and IT-services; Secondly to establish a network of researchers from different faculties and disciplines with a common interest in use and users of IT.

Nita is located as a centre at Uppsala University and employs two people full time. It is funded by the Swedish Agency for Innovation Systems, Uppsala University, and by industry partners.

A board of directors with representation from industry and academia is responsible for the long-term planning of Nita's activities. There is also an advisory group with a wide representation from academia where the issue of "IT-use" and future Nita-activities are discussed.

2 Scope and Purpose

Nita's mission is to support a user-oriented development of information technologies and IT-based services. By bridging gaps within and between the research community, industry, and the public sector we expect to improve access to useful and usable IT and IT-based services for large groups of professional and home-based users.

The objectives are to:

- * Create access to high-quality information with strong focus to the user, to uses and the design process.
- * Disseminate research findings in a format practical to researchers and developers.
- * Further common interests, new research and the articulation of problems.
- * Stimulate dialogue and exchanges within the network.
- * Support a progressive IT-development and a more conscious demand for usefulness and usability among the users.

The objectives are achieved by, among other initiatives, interdisciplinary seminars with representatives of the research community, industry and public sector; establishing contacts, building networks, and taking initiative to set up courses and projects.

The centre also monitors international developments in this area.

3 Focus

From the point of view of society, knowledge about use of IT is of great importance in order to successfully manage issues such as "the digital divide", "e-government", "e-commerce", "universal access", "IT and learning." Nita has identified 17 such specific areas of social affairs that have "IT-use" as a common denominator.

"IT-use" for us is a generic field of research and knowledge creation that to a varying degree includes

the fields of HCI, design, engineering, information studies and many others.

For the period of 2002 and 2003, Nita has chosen to focus on the generic area of IT-use and a choice of more specific areas of social and political relevance: IT and work, mobile services, IT-statistics, and IT in School.

4 Activities

4.1 Basic tasks

Nita maintain a website and weekly newsletter for the benefit of the Swedish IT-use community. Subscribers to the newsletter and visitors to the website are about one third each from academia, business and government bodies.

The more important outcomes of Nita's work are seminars, workshops, conferences and public hearings. These activities centre on topics, public events and research findings with the ambition to communicate knowledge in functional formats.

4.2 Functional formats

It is becoming increasingly clear that industry take-up of research is fundamentally poor. In order to support this process, research need to be better communicated which sometimes means alternative presentation formats. More important, though, is to identify research that potentially have great positive effects to industry, and to refine the findings to a functional format such as check-lists, analytical instruments and process-models.

It is clear to us that practical tools that are based on good research and modelled to fit the circumstances of business are of high relevance, show great potential and is in popular demand.

5 Future possibilities

5.1 Develop methods

Nita will continue the important task to communicate research to industry and we expect to develop the means and methods to do so further. Of the highest priority is to pursue the quest for functional formats mentioned above in order to support industry with the tools needed for the realization of a user-oriented development of information technology and related services.

5.2 Services on demand

In relation to the above we have also identified a number of services on demand from academia as well as industry:

Industry shows a demand for tailored training of usability specialists. When the user-oriented perspective deepens within industry similar demands may grow for project leaders and other facilitators.

Researchers from different fields with IT-use as a common field of interest need to meet and exchange information in order for research on IT-use to be cumulative.

Exchanges between research and academia are in demand for research to get a reality-check and for industry to take up relevant findings.

In order to support the innovation process in this field Nita have an opportunity to develop scenarios based on developing state of the art technologies. Stimulating further improvements of "old" technologies such as browsers, e-mail readers and word processors is also an opportunity for Nita.

5.3 Broker of services

As a complement to the market of consultants there is a need for a broker of services. Nita will take this to heart and offer industry contact with: Specialists on methods of working user-oriented and on performing usability reviews; Interaction designers and other usability specialists; Procurement specialists; And information on relevant training and education directed to students as well as practitioners.

5.4 A user-movement

As an alternative approach to realize a user-oriented development of information technology and related services, a user-/consumer movement has good potential to show positive effects. Nita can offer a platform for this group to voice demands for useful and usable technology and services.

6 Challenges

The main challenge in Nita's relation to industry is to identify relevant research findings, to package it in a format suitable to industry take-up and to disseminate it to the appropriate parties.

The main challenge in Nita's relation to academia is to communicate across faculties and disciplines that "IT-use" is an issue that is not owned by any particular field of research; and to establish exchanges between the HCI-community, engineering, behavioral science, law, medicine and many others, in order for research on IT-use to be relevant, cumulative and creative.

References

www.nita.uu.se