Fostering the Strategic Value of Usability: The European Usability Forum

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Abstract: In this paper, it is argued that there is a strong need for concerted strategic activities of European organisations engaged in user-centred design, human-computer interaction, usability and related disciplines. The Usability Forum, provides a global platform to coordinate comprehensive activities in the area of research innovation, lobbying, education, and publicity. The main benefits, organizational principles, as well as future plans are described.

Keywords: User Centered Design, Europe, Usability, HCI, professional organisations

1 Current situation and problems

In the research field comprising HCI, UCD, Usability and related areas, a lot of achievement has been made to communicate expertise and quality assurance to relevant target groups (managers, usability professionals, designers, etc.). EU-funded projects promote usability-related issues and are providing resources and reference material (see { HYPERLINK "http://www.usabilitynet.org/" } for an overview). A range of national professional organisations launches strategic initiatives and provides support for usability practitioners (e.g. the American-based UPA, or the British HCI Group). Furthermore, research conferences and organisations (CHI, HCI, Interact, etc.) are assuring high quality standards and added value for the research community. Finally, standards and accreditation associations are developing co-ordinated basic materials and guidelines to support the development of user centred design as a professional discipline.

Despite all these achievements, the fragmentation of the community into organizations, projects and professional networks has led to a situation that initiatives can only be made in a rather informal and bilateral way. Moreover, the development of a strong and consistent voice towards the public, relevant funding organizations, and industry is aggravated. This fragmentation is rather unnecessary, since all actors in the field strongly agree in the fundamental concepts and benefits of user-centered thinking. In the field of usability and related areas, there is a strong need for a strategic European platform, giving user-centered thinking the impact it deserves.

2 The concept of the Usability Forum

In order to overcome these weaknesses, the EU-funded project UsabilityNet initiated the Usability Forum. The concept of the forum builds on the following basic principles:

Open and comprehensive organizational structure: The forum is very broad with regard to the covered application domains, organization types and technical paradigms. It is open to all interested parties in the field: research organisations, professional associations and commercial companies.

High-level strategic and collaborative actions: The forum aims at combining the substantial efforts described above and to provide a powerful comprehensive means for lobbying and publicity.

Roadmapping of future research activities: Additionally to the strategic focus, the forum also aims at developing a long-term vision for future research activities in the field of usability engineering and user-centred design research. The outcome of these activities - "Book of Visions for a User Friendly Information Society" - will prepare the ground for the definition of future research directions.

European focus: Since there is a strong need to build up a common voice within the European research community, the Usability Forum is primarily focussed on Europe. However, to make overall strategic activities more efficient, it will also liase and coordinate with relevant American and other regional bodies.

Sustainability: The initial set-up and beginning activities of the forum were supported by the EU-funded project UsabilityNet. The maintenance of the forum, in contrast, is provided by a voluntary contribution of the participants. The sustainability of the forum as a whole does not mean that certain sub-parts will not strive for additional national or EU-funding (e.g., an innovative research initiative of a domain-specific working group).

Complementarity to other research and networking activities: A major goal of the Usability Forum is to avoid doubling the work of other bodies. Since representatives of these organizations are also participating in the forum, significant content and initiatives can be reused. This especially applies for the adoption of the UsabilityNet web site as a leading information resource, the take-up of available accreditation initiatives, the reuse of existing educational curricula and strategic activities of professional organizations.

3 The organisational structure and procedures

The official starting point was the Usability Forum kick-off meeting on 9 January 2003 in Vienna, Austria. The participants were the Usability Forum core-members - representatives of 19 organizations from 11 European countries, covering industry, research and professional networking organizations. The meeting had the objective to refine the detailed goals of the forum and to establish an organizational structure.

In order to streamline the work and to adapt the organizational structure to the main strategic issues, working groups (WGs) were formed. The initial set of working groups are:

WG1: Communication and Public Awareness: This working group is mainly concerned with communication to interested parties (other professional bodies, public institutions, etc.). Additionally, internal communication is provided by the implementation of a working space and mailing lists.

WG2: Innovation: The definition of long-term visions for innovative user interfaces and roadmaps for research priorities is the goal of this working group. The results of this work are intended to have an impact on research priorities within relevant research bodies (e.g. the IST-programme of the European Commission). Furthermore, concrete projects can arise from the work being done in the innovation working group.

WG3: Policy: The goal of the policy working group is to set-up efficient lobbying mechanisms directed to European and national governmental institutions. These activities have a high priority, since the lack of awareness and political representation is one of the most often complained weaknesses within the research community.

WG4: Business Cases: Relevant cost-benefit examples (i.e. recent and valid for a European context) and the demonstration of potentials arising from usability are the main focus of this group.

WG5: Domains: Specific application and sector-specific areas like eGovernment, High Integrity or aviation are addressed in this working group.

WG6: Knowledge and Education: The already existing course material and instructional know-how is taken into account to shape a European curriculum. Furthermore, a consistent concept for the different approaches for an accreditation scheme is formed.

4 Outlook

The activities done so far are promising and there has been a high interest in participation. The future challenges for the Usability Forum are to maintain sustainability and to amplify its impact. Further meetings are planned in the next 6 months. The results will be published in a "Book of Visions for a User Friendly Information Society" to visualize the strategic effects to the outside world.