

# The British Human-Computer Interaction Group

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**Abstract:** The British HCI Group (BHCIG) is the UK national organisation for all those working in the field of human-computer interaction. It encourages active membership and devolved decision-making through a subgroup structure. As one of the world's oldest HCI organisations, BHCIG has been able to initiate and sustain a range of influential activities, beginning with the largest annual European HCI Conference, and soon followed by *Interacting with Computers* (top three ranked HCI journal by impact), the group web-site ([www.bcs-hci.org.uk](http://www.bcs-hci.org.uk)) and, most recently, the highly successful usabilitynews.com.

**Keywords:** UK, HCI, Specialist Group, Organisational Overview

## 1 Membership

The British HCI Group (BHCIG) was formed in 1985 and has over 500 members, both individuals and organizations working in the field of HCI. Most are resident in the UK, though there are members in most countries with an active HCI community.

The membership typically divides into one third HCI practitioners, one third educators and academic researchers and one third students, and this even spread is reflected throughout the group's activities and committee membership. Inclusiveness is one of our core values. We strongly believe that separate HCI ghettos for students, practitioners, educators and researchers are unworkable, especially as so many combine at least two such roles in our work.

BHCIG is a specialist group of the British Computer Society (BCS), whose permanent staff handle administrative functions such as distributing the quarterly magazine (*Interfaces*) to members, collecting subscriptions and handling press enquiries. About one third of the BHCIG membership are also members of the BCS, the remainder are affiliated to a variety of other national professional bodies such as the Ergonomics Society or the British Psychological Society. BHCIG recognises that, as a multi-disciplinary area, HCI must be multi-professional. We therefore work in co-operation with fellow UK chartered professional groups as and when the need arises (e.g., joint UK

work on accreditation of HCI specialists and ISO 13407 in UK government work).

## 2 Aims and Objectives

BHCIG strives to ensure that *information technology serves people*. It aims to develop the discipline and practice of HCI to help fulfill this vision. These are global aspirations and BHCIG has a deliberately international outlook and works closely with other national and international bodies (for example to achieve Interact99 and IHM-HCI2001). The group's objectives are divided into external and internal objectives.

### 2.1 External objectives

The group recognizes that the HCI discipline requires a permanent knowledge base and so facilitates the creation and documentation of HCI knowledge for the benefit of HCI researchers and those outside the field. The *People and Computers* series (now published by Springer Verlag) contains the archive of our annual HCI conference and *Interacting with Computers* (published by Elsevier) are prominent here. A number of smaller workshops and meetings are documented in print and online in *Interfaces* and *UsabilityNews.com*, and also through the BCS Electronic Workshops in Computing (eWiC) (<http://www.bcs.org/ewic/>).

These publications also help achieve the second objective of knowledge transfer between research

and practice. This allows practitioners and interaction designers to derive applicable ideas and techniques from HCI thinking and research and apply them in practice. These channels of communication also allow the fruits of practice to inform theory.

HCI, like an increasing number of disciplines, requires a culture of continuing professional development (CPD) and a further objective of the group is to define and support CPD for HCI practitioners, educators, researchers and students, so that they can develop new or refine existing skills or areas of knowledge. The group's web-site (<http://www.bcs-hci.org.uk/>) lists relevant courses and programmes, while around 100 messages each month are distributed to subscribers to BHCIG-NEWS@JISCMAIL.AC.UK

The fourth external objective is to educate and advocate for HCI. The general public, as consumers and citizens, know little of the existence of HCI, and many in the ICT industries are also unfamiliar with the discipline. We plan to do more in the future to make the public case for use-worthy systems. We also seek to influence collaborators and clients, so that they better understand the importance of HCI and can better work with HCI practitioners and deploy their skills. Through public meetings and workshops (often organized with other bodies - recent examples include an address by Jared Spool held with the UK UPA ([www.bcs-hci.org.uk/talks/Spool/](http://www.bcs-hci.org.uk/talks/Spool/)) and a UML & Usability Symposium with ScotlandIS Usability Forum ([www.dcs.napier.ac.uk/~mm/uu2002/](http://www.dcs.napier.ac.uk/~mm/uu2002/))), a media commentary service, and our online publications, we seek to empower individual citizens to be able to demand better products and services. Our practitioner representatives are key to this objective. Current activities include Industry Day at the HCI conferences, and a consultancy listing and practitioner accreditation on the web-site.

## 2.2 Internal objectives

Our main internal objective is to create, maintain and improve an organisational structure that enables rapid and informed decision making, and maximises volunteer effectiveness. We also need to maintain sound finances to underpin our activities. In 2002, we introduced a new subgroup structure to organize volunteers around existing and new activities.

The membership subgroup (Chair: Peter Wild) is responsible for member relations, service quality and member benefits. The research subgroup (Chair: Dianne Murray) is responsible for research publications and research student support. The

events subgroup (chair Chris Roast) is responsible for the annual conference and our meetings programme. The communications subgroup (chair Tom McEwan) is responsible for on-line and print information, group branding and public relations. The education and practice subgroup (chair Janet Finlay) unites educators and practitioners to develop courses and competences for accreditable HCI specialists. A Chairs and Officers Group (COG) coordinates the activities of these five subgroups.

## 3 Future Actions

The group is committed to growth over the next few years, as user-centred design becomes more of a priority in the ICT industry. A growth in membership needs to go hand-in-hand with participation, however, and current debate centers on how best to achieve this. Commitment to participate will usually come third in an individual's priorities after family life and employment.

As the subgroup structure draws in new participants, each chair seeks to find activities that require a typical commitment of around 8 hours a month. This has proven to be a manageable level for most. Beyond the subgroups, there are other opportunities to participate in the British HCI community. The annual conference involves 15-20 organizers and a similar number of student volunteers. Symposia and workshops offer smaller scale versions of the same. Both usabilitynews.com and Interfaces have a continual demand for content, e.g., book reviews, conference reports, and descriptions of student research. These offer an entry point for novices as well as an enjoyable way for more established participants to remain involved.

Enjoyment is seen as the key to ensuring continued participation and a mutually supportive mentoring culture prevails. One manifestation of this is active mentoring for new authors for *Interacting with Computers* from their first submission.

As the BCS develops its range of online services for its 37,000 members, the group is determined to play its part in bringing HCI into the mainstream of the computing profession. Recently we have been considering how to create an online discussion medium to supplement our other channels. Excellent threaded discussion groups already exist, for example William Hudson's UCD list, and we have preferred so far to lend our support to these ventures rather than compete. But there seems to be an opportunity for a next generation forum, based on the collaborative tools familiar from HCI research.

