

Intranets

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UX for intranets

Considerations of user experience have been part of intranet design since the beginning, though naturally it has played a bigger part since we moved on from intranets-as-mere-repositories-of-shared-stable-information¹.

Although the expression seems tautological (who wouldn't design an intranet with the end-users' experience in mind?), as usual there's a lot more to it.

Firstly, doesn't user experience just boil down to usability? Secondly, can we really design something as subjective as the experiences of the users of intranets? Thirdly, there are competing philosophies, primarily task-based design.

1. User experience isn't just usability

In 2004 Peter Morville designed the User Experience Honeycomb diagram, primarily to point out that UX must include much more than usability: also fundamental are the users' perceptions of the extent to which the product or system is useful, desirable, valuable, findable, accessible and credible².



Peter Morville's User Experience Honeycomb

¹ Intranet generation one of 4 (so far). See [eLucidate Vol. 10 Issue 4, December 2013, pp 10-13](#).

² <http://semanticstudios.com/publications/semantics/000029.php>

While I can recommend Peter's Semantic Studios website and associated blog for their passion and fresh ideas on the subject, his turn of phrase can sometimes be a bit oblique: try his definition of useful: "As practitioners (of information architecture and user experience design), we can't be content to paint within the lines drawn by managers. We must have the courage and creativity to ask whether our products and systems are useful, and to apply our deep knowledge of craft and medium to define innovative solutions that are more useful." This seems to put the decision in the hands of the designer, based on their understanding of what is possible rather than the true user experience.

2. Intranet designers design *for* user experience.

UX is about how a person *feels* about using the intranet. Of course the users' feelings can't be dictated, so they must be elicited and responded to in a series of trials. They must also be recognised as dynamic, and affected as much by organisational culture and professional expectations as they are by personal experience and understanding.

As such there are many disciplines that go into designing the intranet in the light of potential and actual UX, each of which seem to address the 7 characteristics of Morville's honeycomb.

User Research - understanding the people who use the intranet, primarily by observing use.

Content Strategy - Planning for the creation, delivery and governance of *useful, valuable* content.

Information Architecture - Designing the organisation of information in a way that is both purposeful (from the providers' context) and meaningful (from the users'). This addresses the *accessibility* and *findability* issues.

Interaction Design - identifying (while trying not to prescribe) appropriate interactive channels through which the users can act as they use the intranet.

Visual Design - using the understanding of the intranet designers and in-house experts in image, identity, brand, and the power of emotional design.

Usability Evaluation - measuring the quality of each user's experience of interacting with the intranet, recognising that since quality of experience can only be measured at an individual level, there is much significant work to do to filter those through the priorities and expectations of the enterprise.

3. Task-based design - a competing philosophy

In contrast to UX design, task-based design focuses on tasks and their efficient performance as the key design object. It has a lot to recommend it: surely if the tasks required by the organisation are used as the determinant of internet interface design, the

work needed by the organisation will be carried out and, as long as they have been identified correctly, the intranet will fulfil its enterprise role.

There are two main objections to this: the observation that when it comes down to it people act from sentiment, not logic; and in most work environments, particularly knowledge based ones, it is impossible to anticipate the tasks the uses of an intranet will need to perform over any reasonable life expectancy. Hume has it that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them”³. Leaving out the “ought to be”, this is a shrewd observation and appropriate to even the most regimented work environments. Most managers do seem to realise that even where the logic of task fulfilment is recognised by staff, the performance of those tasks by human beings is only reliably ensured if it coincides with their emotions, strivings, ambitions, satisfactions. To allow an intranet design to be dominated by task fulfilment as a higher priority than user experience satisfaction is often a prime way to ensure the intranet is underused.

It is said that the realistic life span of an intranet design is three years, though many of course last a lot longer than that (the oldest *original version* intranet I have seen operating as the approved focus of work functions is 11 years). In 3 years how many times would you expect a prioritised task list for your organisation to change? And if the specific way each task was to be carried out is included, even more often!

Room for two?

A solution, where an intranet can be designed to last, and support the strategic objectives of the organisation, may lie with a joint focus on user experience on one hand and function (as a more enduring alternative to the minutiae of a task-based approach) on the other. With the speed of change and discovery in the emotional side of design it is likely that the user experience focus will continue to determine the direction if not always the content, of the design of the modern intranet.

A most worthy & exciting intranet conference!

An unusual event is in preparation for September, with the support and admiration of UKeiG. (See press release for further information.) **Intranet Now**, the brainchild principally of Wedge Black and Brian Lamb, has found a location (Radisson Blu Hotel, Portman Square London W1), a date (2nd September) and enough sponsors and media partners (including UKeiG) to announce itself as a truly independent UK intranet conference.

All the details, and online access to tickets via Eventbrite are available at <http://intranetnow.kilobox.net/>

With a remarkable gestation period of only 4 months, the conference will be full of interesting talks, with unconference group discussions in the afternoon. A snip even at the

³ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, by David Hume 1739.

full price of £120, this un/conference is a must for enterprises which are serious about keeping their intranet staff inspired and informed. See you there!