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Usability: 'Lovely software. But I can't work it'

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Ask anyone who uses a work computer as part of their day-to-day job and most will admit to ongoing struggles.

Many gripes will focus on the usability of the software: how difficult it is to navigate and how their passage involves numerous detours and frustrating dead-ends, necessitating anguished calls to help desks. In short, the software tends not to behave as they expected.

The impact on productivity of such confusion can be huge. In a recent survey by Global Graphics, an electronic document software company, 77 per cent of office workers estimate they lose up to one hour a week because business software is difficult to use.

Software vendors, on the other hand, prefer to focus on the time and money they dedicate to making their software as "intuitive" as possible, on their rigorous processes for pre-release usability testing and their dedication to gathering user feedback.

Frank Spillers, co-founder of Experience Dynamics, a usability consultancy based in Portland, Oregon, is on the side of the users. His company specialises in helping businesses – including big names in the technology sector – to understand better the problems that end users might encounter with their products.

"It's as if designers and developers of software have become better at making software look simple on the surface, but as the user actually starts using it, they soon get helplessly lost. Navigation is often multi-layered and vital buttons are hidden away," he says.

"My feeling is that software developers tend to build applications according to their own perceptions of users' needs, not users' actual needs. They find it hard to stop themselves from adding new features and functions, because they believe these make the product more applicable to a wider audience, when all they do is make it unnecessarily complex for the majority of users."

Despite the lip-service paid by software vendors to usability, problems persist with even the most recent of products, says Chris Rourke, director of User Vision, an Edinburgh-based usability consultancy. His company offers an "eye tracking" service, based on technology that measures and records the path that users' eyes take when scanning a user interface. "This allows customers to see which areas of the interface grab users' attention and which areas they tend to overlook. If you've got a vital button or menu located in one of these neglected areas, your application or website isn't likely to hit usability targets."

Mr Rourke plans to use this technology in a study of the problems users of **Microsoft's** Windows XP operating system encounter when their organisation migrates to the newer Vista platform. "I've had problems with that migration myself and have heard plenty of customers say they're struggling with usability issues post-migration. It will be interesting to see where the most common obstacles lie, but I expect to see plenty of them," he says.

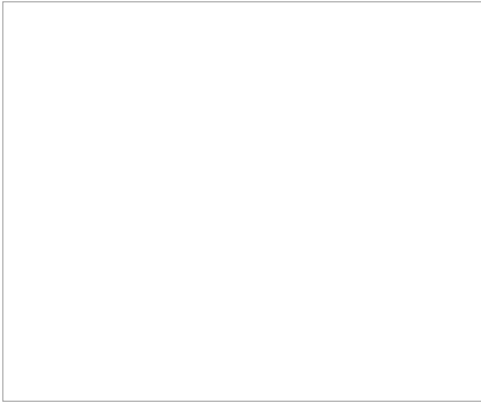
So what do users really want from enterprise applications? At Global Graphics, chief executive Gary Fry believes the consumer applications that employees use outside the workspace provide the answer.

"Organisations invest millions on training their employees how to use business software. Yet those same employees are using Facebook, Myspace, iPhones and digitising their music without any training at all. By making business software as easy to use as consumer technology, employees are more efficient and less frustrated, while their employers benefit from lower training costs and better productivity."

It is an idea that has yet to become mainstream for business software, says Rob Mettler, a user experience expert at PA Consulting, a management consultancy.

"Companies developing consumer products have to make them intuitive and simple to use, or they risk the wrath of consumers who are unable to use the latest must-have product, resulting in poor customer satisfaction, low advocacy and no follow-on sales," he says.

"However, business software has often failed to adopt user-centred design techniques. When software is developed for employees, they aren't treated as customers. They have to use the software, because they're a captive audience, despite the fact that getting it right leads to benefits in productivity, turnover, efficiency, support costs, adoption, errors, and so on." But following the lead of consumer applications will become even more important as a new



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generation that has grown up with them enters the workforce, according to Vikas Dohle, vice president of product management at AspenTech, a software company that targets heavy industry.

Take, for example, the emerging recruitment crisis faced by the engineering sector; the average age of engineers in the oil industry lies somewhere between 40 and 50, he says. "This means that, over the next 10 to 15 years, many of our customers will lose the employees most adept at using complex software applications as that generation retires. In its place will come the 'video game generation' – younger engineers who are accustomed to interacting with computers in more intuitive, visually led ways and who are perhaps less tolerant of complexity."

With that in mind, says Mr Dohle, AspenTech is focusing heavily on re-engineering its products to meet these expectations, making them more role-specific, for example, and exposing only the functionality that is most commonly used.

Likewise, Global Graphics has recently released gDoc, a new product that aims to address the usability problems employees experience when building electronic documents, based to some extent on Mr Fry's experiences at previous employer, Adobe.

But can a complex application for manufacturing, logistics or customer service ever be as easy to use as Facebook?

Alan Bowling, formerly information systems director of Northern Foods and current chairman of the SAP UK & Ireland User Group, thinks not. "Business processes are complicated. For me, the bigger problem lies in the training that users receive and whether they really understand the business process they're trying to perform."

The training issue is a complex one, however.

Received wisdom suggests that, when an organisation deploys a new application, it should be prepared to invest heavily in training if it is to reap the full return on investment benefits of the purchase.

But Mr Spiller of Experience Dynamics argues that enterprise software vendors and their third-party partners have an interest in perpetuating these training needs. "If you're spending huge sums on training, you're footing the bill because of vendors' failure to adhere to usability standards, and they're getting away with it," he says.

In effect, the conflict between users and software vendors is at stalemate. While that state of affairs persists, many businesses could find that their employees' productivity actually decreases with the introduction of a new product, because business processes end up taking longer. In the most extreme cases, employees may even resist using the new technology.

For corporate software buyers, the best way forward seems to lie in continually pushing for incremental improvements in business applications and making usability as important a purchasing criteria as technology, architecture and functional breadth and depth.

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