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# Current Issues in Assessing and Improving Information Usability

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**Abstract**

The usability of information is vital to successful websites, products, and services. Managers and developers often recognize the role of information or content in overall product usability, but miss opportunities to improve information usability as part of the product-development effort. This meeting is an annual forum on human factors of information design, in which we discuss issues selected by the group from the facilitators' list of topics, augmented by attendees' suggestions.

**Keywords**

Information design, user assistance, documentation usability, information development, information usability, documentation standards, usability testing, product development

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.2 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: User Interfaces—training, help, and documentation.

**General Terms**

Design and Documentation

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### **Content and Relevance of the SIG**

As the Internet becomes increasingly the focus of business and consumer activities worldwide, the usability of information has become a central issue in achieving successful websites and Web-enabled products and services. One of the best sources for methodology in Web content usability is the huge body of research and practice in documentation usability built over the past 20 and more years. Although not all such knowledge transfers directly to the Internet, human factors of information design can be applied both to the Internet and to a wide variety of other communication activities:

- Web content design and development
- Software user assistance
- Traditional print-based documentation
- Online training, tutorials, and Webinars
- Small screen formats on mobile phones, GPS, and other devices
- Interactive performance support elements of the user interface: wizards, error messages, screen dialogue

This meeting is the 19th annual forum on human factors in information design. Its predecessor SIGs on information usability—from CHI 1990 through CHI 2008—were well-attended by enthusiastic participants; many people come to this session every year for an annual update. (The organizers took a sabbatical in 2009, during Judy Ramey’s sabbatical year from the University of Washington.)

The topics for the CHI 2010 SIG include the issues that attracted the most interest at previous CHI

conferences, plus questions people frequently ask the SIG organizers at other presentations:

- Information usability in mobile computing contexts
- Search and navigation problems within documentation and Help
- Information-design requirements for content and knowledge management systems
- Strengths and drawbacks of user-generated assistance (folksonomies, wikis, blogs, forums)
- Justifications and approaches for embedded user assistance
- Metrics to evaluate Web content and the success of online communication
- How to make information usable for users who won’t or can’t read
- For sites that have both mobile and stationary-Web versions, how to design information to scale well for both formats
- Improving the usability of interfaces designed to implement self-service transactions
- Effective short content (messages, Web links, headings)
- Crossovers among user experience design, information architecture, and UI design

### **How the discussion will be organized**

If the group is fairly small (fewer than 30 people), we begin with all the participants introducing themselves and describing what they hope to learn from the SIG. When we have a large group, we ask for a show of hands about people’s backgrounds and interests, to help us focus the discussion.

Next we offer a list of suggested topics (usually about ten) and ask for further suggestions from the group. Then group members vote for their highest priority topics, and we identify the three topics that will each receive 20 – 25 minutes of discussion during the session. This topic discussion and voting process ensures that we spend the SIG time on the issues of most concern to the participants; it has worked successfully for many years.

For each of the selected topics, we take questions from the participants, and other participants contribute their experiences to answer the questions or comment on previous answers. The organizers facilitate the discussion and contribute answers and comments as well. The organizers also serve as timekeepers to ensure that we move to the next topic on schedule.

### **Schedule for the SIG**

Here is how we will use the 90 minutes of the session:

Introductions: 7 minutes

Topic decision-making: 8 minutes

Discussion of Topic #1: 20 – 25 minutes

Discussion of Topic #2: 20 – 25 minutes

Discussion of Topic #3: 20 – 25 minutes

Because we address the topics in priority order (beginning with the topic that receives the most votes), if participants want to continue a fruitful discussion of one topic, we can shorten succeeding topic discussions. Also, the final minutes of each topic discussion will be used for wrap-up and conclusions.

### **Background of SIG Organizers**

Stephanie Rosenbaum is founder and CEO of Tec-Ed, Inc., a 15-person user experience consultancy. Headquartered in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Tec-Ed also maintains offices in California and New York. Tec-Ed clients include Cisco Systems, Nokia, Google, McGraw-Hill, VMware, the IEEE, Yahoo!, and a wide variety of smaller firms.

Stephanie has presented (panels, workshops, tutorials, and/or SIGs) at every CHI conference since 1990; for CHI 2006, she was co-chair of the Usability Community. A member of the HFES and a charter member of the Usability Professionals' Association, as well as a Fellow of the Society for Technical Communication, Stephanie is a past vice-chair of ACM SIGDOC and was awarded an IEEE Millennium Medal. She co-authored a chapter in *Cost-Justifying Usability, An Update for the Internet Age*, and contributed an invited chapter on "The Future of Usability Evaluation" to *Maturing Usability* (Springer, 2008) from the European COST294-MAUSE research community.

Judith Ramey is professor and former chair of the Department of Human Centered Design & Engineering at the University of Washington. She is director of the UWTC Laboratory for Usability Testing and Evaluation (LUTE), which received the ACM SIGDOC Diana award in 2007 for contributions to communication design. She edited the first special issue of a journal devoted to "the value and methods of usability evaluation," a 1989 issue of *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*.

Judy regularly gives courses, tutorials, and presentations on usability issues at conferences held by ACM SIGCHI, the Society for Technical Communication (of which she is a Fellow) and the Usability Professionals' Association, as well as for corporations. With Dennis Wixon, she edited *Field Methods Casebook for Software Design*, published in 1996. In cooperation with the University of Twente in the Netherlands (and sponsored by an STC research grant), she organized a workshop that resulted in five sets of heuristics for Web communication, described in the August, 2000 special issue of *Technical Communication*.

Janice (Ginny) Redish is president of Redish & Associates, Inc., a user experience consultancy in Bethesda, Maryland. For more than 30 years, Ginny has helped clients and colleagues make products meet both business goals and users' needs through her expertise in usability and clear communication. Among the many clients Ginny has helped over the years are American Airlines, AT&T, Hewlett-Packard, Nokia, Xerox, and many federal and state agencies.

Ginny is sought after as a conference speaker and workshop leader. She has keynoted conferences in the U. S., China, England, Finland, Norway, Slovenia, and Spain. In 2004, she gave the keynote for the annual conference of the Usability Professionals' Association. Ginny is a long-time CHI member, often a paper reviewer, moderator of a panel on usability. She was an invited speaker at the first meeting of the Usability Professionals' Association, and is a former member of the board of directors of both the Usability Professionals' Association and the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

Much of Ginny's professional work is leading highly interactive tutorials and training, particularly on the topic of this SIG—assessing and improving information usability. Her training always receives rave reviews. Ginny's latest book, *Letting Go of the Words—Writing Web Content that Works*, focuses on the new media for usable information; and it, too, has received rave reviews. Ginny's work has also brought her many awards, including the Rigo Award from ACM SIGDOC, the Goldsmith Award from IEEE PCS, and the Ken Rainey Award for Excellence in Research from STC.

### **Acknowledgements**

The "founding" organizers, Stephanie Rosenbaum and Judy Ramey, gratefully thank everyone who has helped make this SIG a successful event for almost 20 years, both our previous—and current—partner organizers (Ginny Redish, Dana Chisnell from UsabilityWorks, and Laurie Kantner from Tec-Ed) and all the CHI attendees who contributed their experience during our SIG sessions.