

What can we learn from the user experience (UX) world?

The day-long design session of this year's Ergonomics & Human Factors conference closed with a very insightful 30 minute discussion called 'What can we learn from the UX world, which is arguably much more successful in practice?' The topic was drawn from an earlier post on LinkedIn which asked the ergonomics and human factors community for questions relating to design that they would like to debate at the conference.

Eddy Elton opened the session with some slides exploring the differences between human factors and UX drawn out in facts and figures covering the availability of courses at different levels and job opportunities. Perhaps the most powerful was the slide comparing the number of jobs currently posted on LinkedIn. A search of the term 'User Experience' revealed 16,694 current vacancies, whereas 'Human Factors' revealed only 126 current vacancies.

The introduction was concluded with a quote from an article published that morning by Bram Bos, a UX creative director, stating "I don't care what background you have. Just show me you have the UX-factor." This quote was selected as it highlights the view that UX is a much broader church than human factors. Unlike ergonomics and human factors, which has well established societies such as the CIEHF, there is no dominant UX society within the UX community and no real collective sense of what education, skills and experience a UX practitioner should have. Arguably as a result, UX tends to draw in a more eclectic group of individuals. The deliberately provocative question was then put to the group: "Are we, as a community, too exclusive – should we be inviting more people in?"

The discussion covered a fair few topics in the short time available. The level of difference between UX and human factors was discussed and the fact that we share many of the same tools and techniques. This view was also subsequently raised by Don Norman in his latest essay pointing out that these newer job roles 'interaction design', 'experience design', or 'human-computer interaction', came primarily through the efforts of the disciplines of psychology, human factors, ergonomics and computer science.

A reasonable focus was also placed on the way that ergonomics and human factors specialists present themselves – right down to the way that we dress. The concern was raised that human factors is just not as 'sexy' as UX. Some of the success of the UX community was attributed to the youthful, can-do attitude that can sometimes be missing from human factors. A follow-on comment was made that UX deals almost exclusively with design – it's about creating things and coming up with new ideas - whereas there is a commonly held perception that human factors is too often about finding problems in current

systems and less about finding solutions. Another interesting thread focused on the importance of our ability to adjust our approach and level of rigour to fit the task and budget at hand. Another negative perception of human factors is that it is overly analytical and, thus, expensive and time consuming to apply.

It wasn't all a tale of doom and gloom for human factors though. The great strengths of our community were also discussed. CIEHF's selective membership criteria means that a minimum professional standard can be assumed from Chartered members. Human factors and ergonomics practitioners are unique in their ability to really handle and understand the complexity of the systems that we are best known in, such as healthcare, aviation and defence.

The discussion was closed with two opposing views from those gathered. The first highlighted that the UX world was predominantly interested in websites and the sale of consumer goods. The view posed was that a fairly clear line exists between UX and human factors, as human factors is uniquely equipped to support the safety-critical world of fighter jet interface, control room consoles, and air traffic control systems. The view was that we should leave the world of website to UX and keep safety-critical systems for human factors practitioners.

This opinion was robustly contested by the view that we cannot afford to sit back and settle for the much smaller prize in terms of jobs (more than 100 UX jobs for every human factors role) and influence. It was posed that human factors practitioners need to take a much stronger role in the domain currently dominated by UX. It is easy to see the logic in both of the closing arguments, and clearly room for both views within the human factors community. Two clear questions appear to emerge from this:

How do we better communicate to stakeholders which projects should be designed with the involvement of someone who has the recognised breadth and depth of skills in human factors (as required of a Chartered member)?

How do we better communicate how our skills and techniques can add something new to the less regulated world currently dominated by UX?

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Documents about IEA history available

Two documents about the history of the International Ergonomics Association are now available for download from iea.cc: the "50th Anniversary Booklet, The International Ergonomics Association" and "History of the International Ergonomics Association: The First Quarter of a Century".