

Why Hire a Usability Consultant?

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Usable systems such as software and web applications should seem intuitive to the end-user, but getting there is not always as intuitive for programmers and developers.

What Do Usability Consultants Do?

Usability consultants work with designers and developers to analyze how an application meets end-user needs so that they can improve upon its concept to enhance productivity, increase overall end-user satisfaction, and minimize end-user errors.

If a usability consultant is brought in *before* a website or software application is created, they can help developers achieve consistent, usable results. This is the preferred model for development, as usability is built *into* the application rather than as an afterthought. Usability is not about making a user interface attractive. It encompasses issues such as information architecture, design, writing, and quality assurance. Usability goes way beyond the surface elements.

If usability is brought in after production, it can evaluate the usefulness of a website or software application by using one or more usability evaluation methods such as focus groups, job / task analysis and end-user testing.

Usability consultants usually offer such services as needs analysis, heuristic evaluation (often conducted through expert critique or usability testing), user interface design, and usability training.

What Are The Benefits Of Hiring A Usability Consultant?

- Increasing the usability of a website or software application results in increased productivity for the end-user.
- Bringing a usability consultant into the design and production process will reduce overall costs as it is more cost effective to build a usable application than it is to repair an unusable one.
- Doing a less than thorough job can cost more than money. It can cost time and customers.
- Usability consultants can evaluate systems more efficiently because they know what to look out for based on their experience with a wide range of systems.
- They can bring perspectives that those close to a project may not have considered. It is often difficult to be objective about your own work when you are closely tied to it.
- Consultants are trained in a range of usability evaluation methods. The advantage comes with knowing which method is best for each individual project.
- Having a usable application will result in satisfied, productive users with lowered support costs.

What Makes A Good Usability Consultant?

Usability is a multidisciplinary field. As such, a good usability consultant or consulting firm must be able to approach the subject from multiple perspectives. Usability engineering is derived

from many disciplines, including computer science, ergonomics, psychology, human performance technology, graphic design, and information science.

An understanding of the end-user also comes from a multidisciplinary approach, with team members representing different perspectives and levels of experience with many web/software projects.

Extensive experience with various usability evaluation methods will enable a usability consultant to apply the appropriate method to a particular project, as not all methods are optimized for all projects.

How to Work With a Usability Consultant

Here are some tips for fostering a working relationship with a usability consultant:

- Work together to define the scope of the project in order to establish goals and expectations
- Know what you want to accomplish with the product.
- Determine in advance how the changes will be implemented and plan a timeframe and process for the implementation.
- Keep the end-user as the focus of usability-related changes, not management's expectations.
- Understand that usability is a process where changes occur over the course of the design and evaluation process.