

Summary of Usability Certification Meeting

Salt Lake City, 15-17 November 2001

Nigel Bevan, Serco Usability Services
extracted from the minutes by Donald Day, Intuit

The objectives of the meeting were to decide whether usability certification is viable, and if so to discuss potential criteria for certification, the certification process, and the scope and mission of a certification consortium.

Participants were invited representing international organisations and companies that might join a consortium. Over 30 industry leaders, managers, and usability practitioners were invited. The participants were:

Nigel Bevan	Serco Usability Services (UK UPA and UsabilityNet)
Alan Colton	SurgeWorks (convenor)
Donald Day	Intuit
Jonathan Earthy	Lloyds Register (British HCI Group)
Dane Falkner	SurgeWorks
Masaaki Kurosu	NIME (SIG Usability, Japan)
Julie Nowicki	Optavia
Stephanie Rosenbaum	Tec-Ed, Inc.
Charlotte Schwendeman	Vertecon
Bill Saiff	FannieMae
Eric K. Strandt	Northwestern Mutual
Don Williams	Microsoft Corporation
Larry Wood	Brigham Young University (UPA)

The submitted positions from the participants and other invitees who were unable to attend, showed overall support for usability certification, but a diverse range of opinions on the scope and purpose of certification. A number of key issues and potential problems were also raised in these position papers and in the subsequent meeting discussions. Decisions were by consensus (except where otherwise indicated).

1 Benefits to stakeholders

The group identified the following stakeholders, in order of priority.

Stakeholder	Impact	Explanation
Purchasers Of Usability services		Must hire a usability professional knowing that they are hiring a qualified individual with the proper credentials.
	+	Provides criteria to choose a service provider, requires less expertise on part of purchaser to make decision, helps justify decisions to management, likelier to get better services resulting in a higher quality product.
	-	Needs to be properly advertised and managed, a certified person will cost more, could stifle innovation, guarantees mediocrity.
Usability Professionals		An experienced usability practitioner.
	+	Provides status and a level of authority, promotes accepted values within the profession, makes moving job easier, will command a higher salary, helps define a career path
	-	Does not distinguish between the newly qualified and the very experienced, will need time, effort and money, will not cater for the specialist, could homogenize the profession.
Usability Aware Employer		Managers who are aware of the positive impact usability professional have on the product's design but want assurance that they are hiring qualified individuals.
	+	Encourages development of less experienced employees, provides criteria to select a new employee, helps justify decisions about hires, lowers the risk of selecting an inappropriate employee, a certified employee will need less local training, easier to identify training requirements, can be part of a reward/compensation package, provides a basis for differentiating employee expertise, provides guidance for professional development.
	-	Certified employees will expect a higher salary, the employer may be expected to pay for certification and training, leaves less latitude for personal judgment, may focus only on certification and not on other relevant skills.
Entry Level Practitioner		New to the usability arena and want to know the type of knowledge and experience they need to be a qualified usability practitioner.
	+	Provides something to aspire to and guidance on skills required, provides self-evaluation standard, gives status, makes the subject more meaningful, helps decide "should I go into this field?"
	-	Costly in money and time, the employer not as likely to pay, provides a barrier to entry to field
Usability Consultancies		A consultant firm who represents themselves as having expertise in the usability practitioner space.
	+	Easier to gain credibility, provides differentiation to competitors
	-	Cost to get employees certified, may result in higher staff turnover, more difficult to retain staff, consultancy fees will need to go up.
Training Organizations		A training firm who trains usability practitioners on various usability methodologies.
	+	Easier to get students (marketing), may increase business of certified courses, defines a program for training
	-	Must meet standards (could be costly), cost of certification, defines a program for training

Stakeholder	Impact	Explanation
Users		People who buy and/or use products designed based upon user centered design principles.
Project managers		The project lead that must hire a competent usability practitioner.
Executives sponsors of usability professionals		Uneducated in the usability but sponsor usability professionals in their organization.
Academic teachers		Educators who teach usability at their colleges or universities.
Non-profit professional organizations (i.e., CHI, UPA, SIG)		Professional organizations that promote user centered design.
Industry usability trainers		Individuals who train usability practitioners on various usability methodologies.
Students in academic programs		Students who want a degree in user centered design or usability professionals who want to go back to school for an advanced degree.
Project team		A project team that want assurance that they a hiring a competent usability practitioner.
Legal professionals		When hiring a competent usability practitioner will lesson possible liability.

2 Principles

Agreed [with one dissenting vote] that the desired certification scheme should include, as much as practically reasonable:

- Aptitude—capable of the trade
- Mindset—user orientation
- Code of practice—business ethics
- Skill-set
- Principles
- Knowledge

The goal for certification should be inclusive, but may be exclusive by definition of certification. We want to support the individual’s success, but not give the certification away—success should be achievable by large numbers of people, not an exclusive few. However, the certification cannot be a “rubber stamp.”

A minimum standard must be established with the goal to drive excellence. Note. To help in bringing people up to the standard mentoring will eventually be incorporated.

If needed, certification could include a complaint system, which would re-examine elements in doubt (and an appeals procedure). The reliability of the findings, including the veracity of candidates are a concern.

3 Criteria for certification

The scheme should relate to the entire user-centered design (UCD) field, broadly defined, not merely usability testing and evaluation. The group decided to base its consideration of competencies on work already completed for the European proposal, including its “Technical Competencies for User Centered Design Professionals” technical report. The preferred approach decided by the group was to define core competency complemented by elective specialties. This list corresponds to the key elements of ISO 13407, which was voted unanimously by the group to form the foundation of certification competencies.

Core Competencies

- Plan and manage the HCD process
- Understand and specify user and organizational requirements and context of use
- Produce interaction design solutions (but items 7 and 8 from where? may be elective)
- Evaluate designs against requirements

Elective Competencies

- Usability consultancy
- Ensure HCD content in system strategy
- Introduce and operate a system
- Training courses
- Technology transfer

Nigel Bevan and Jonathan Earchy were asked to establish a work group that will put together the initial core competency “strawman” based on core and electives defined by ISO standard core, 13407 as outlined below by the core group. This first step was to develop personas of types of usability professionals who might seek accreditation, as a way of anticipating their needs in terms of certification core competencies and electives.

The core group will use the “strawman” to further refine the core competencies.

4 Certification process

The suggested elements (each agreed by at least 9 of 12 present) were:

- a points system to assess eligibility based on education, training and experience (all agreed that a minimum of practical experience was necessary). It was also agreed that academic degrees in the field would not be required (the certification should be practitioner-based).
- submission of material describing use of UCD on a project. The DSDM model of a 2000 word explanation of how and why UCD principles has (or has not) been applied was favoured.
- submission of structured peer references
- a written exam composed of problem-solving questions
- a structured interview
- an agreement to abide by a code of conduct

This is based on the procedure used by DSDM and the British Computer Society. It will be further elaborated by Alan Colton and Nigel Bevan. The final certification process might be based on all or some of these processes.

5 Certification body

Assessment should be operated by a not-for-profit consortium including representatives of professional bodies and major companies.

The scheme should be operated internationally (the international strategy has not yet been defined).

6 Developing the scheme

A business case will be prepared outlining all the steps needed to put a scheme in place. A draft scheme will be produced prior to the CHI conference in April, where a public announcement will be made in conjunction with an article in Interactions. Further consultation activities are planned for the UPA, STC, IFIP and EUPA conferences.