

Welcome, New Usability Graduates

By Andrew Swartz, (first published 14 June 2004, UsabilityNews.com)

It is June. Here in Yorkshire we've had two weeks of sunshine, and we're holding our breath hoping that we might have another glorious summer. In any event, it's a nice break from the drizzle, and the flowers are magnificent.

In the usability world, we are having a flowering of a different kind. The university-based ergonomics, human factors, usability, and psychology programmes are finishing up for the year, and a new generation of well-trained professionals is looking for their first jobs.

It is an exciting time of year for those of us who are more established in the field. The quality of candidates is inspiring. In my organisation we are reinvigorated year after year with the new ideas and new approaches that these bright newcomers bring.

I send our congratulations to this year's graduates, and as a small gift, I offer the following advice to all of you who are beginning your job search. These are titbits based on what we have noticed from the best usability practitioners over many years – not only those who excel in the field, but those who are happiest in it.

Curiosity and delight

I know of no one who lasts in this field without a genuine sense of curiosity about people, and delight in seeing how the everyday world really works. You probably already have a strong sense of curiosity or you wouldn't have survived your degree programme. But if you don't, it's never too late to start. Start watching people on the bus and tube. How do they use their gadgets when they're bored? Watch your roommates and family. What websites do they visit every day? What phone features do they use a lot, and which ones do they never use? Notice your own reactions – if you have a choice between using a self-service kiosk or a person at a desk, which do you use and why? Do you use your TV, mobile, or MP3 player in some way that would surprise the creators of those devices?

Stories

While you are noticing all these phenomena, start collecting stories. Stories are the strongest and most versatile tools in our professional kitbag. You can talk about your 'levels of affordance', your 'heuristics', your 'two-tailed t-tests', and your other bits of jargon, but what will win over a potential employer, future colleague, and friends at the pub are stories of the people who accidentally press the button that opens the restroom door instead of flushing the toilet.

Expertise

As you start your career, you can't be an expert in everything, and no one expects you to be. But you should have at least one area where you shine. It could be a technique that you excel at, a platform you love and understand like few others, a software or hardware tool that you know better than anyone else, or a market segment you have insights about that no one else can touch.

Communication

If you are in this field for the long haul, you have to be a great communicator. Nobody ever asks programmers or accountants to justify their very existence, but usability people do it every day. The great sin of usability professionals is that too often they write reports that do no more than gather dust. Learn to speak and write in ways that will change hearts and minds. Start small by making sure your reports are well-edited and that your presentations are clear and have a dramatic arc. Over time, learn how to construct large arguments and convince people that quality is worth fighting for.

Stand up for yourself

Looking for work is just about the hardest work that there is. And the pay is lousy. It often takes longer than you think it will to find a job. If you find the dachshund of despair nipping at your heels, you may be tempted into jobs you know are bad deals. We have heard of some organisations who unscrupulously make pay contingent upon bringing in new business. No one fresh out of a university programme should have to find new clients just to earn their salary. Look for an employer who is willing to show you the ropes. They should offer you a mentor, a guaranteed salary, and the chance to do substantive work. While they should engage you in a rigorous interview, it should always show an underlying respect for what you have already accomplished.

Hard work

Be prepared to work hard when you start in a new organisation. You will not only have to contribute to the group's bottom line, but you will need to learn new skills particular to that organisation.

Passion and joy

Most importantly, find something in your career to be passionate about. Some love particular technologies – games, gadgets, or navigation tools. Some love certain kinds of research – ethnographic projects or large-scale statistical studies. Others have certain social ideals – perhaps using technology to improve the lives of the poor or disabled. The important thing is that you find something about your career that you love. Like all long-term relationships, a usability career can have rough patches: office politics, downturns in the economy, moments of ennui. If you have an underlying passion, it helps put the difficult moments in perspective. And for those of you just starting, a bit of sincere passion will make you stand out to potential employers like true gold amidst an ocean of costume jewellery.

Usability is a great career. It is one of a few careers where you can make good money, earn respect, and tangibly make the world a better place. Good luck to all of you just entering the field. May you find good jobs, and soon.

About ExperienceLab

ExperienceLab (formerly Serco Usability Services), are a global experience design research agency. They help organisations optimise their customer experiences, from web to TV and mobile, from advertising to physical environments. They've been doing this for a while, pretty much since the first computers and networks were created, so they know a thing or two about how to make people, processes and technologies work in harmony.

ExperienceLab use a wide range of techniques to tailor a research solution that fits your business objective, including ideation sessions, proposition analysis, customer needs mapping, usability

testing, benchmarking and touch point integration studies. As a co-founder of the UXalliance we also provide research on a global scale.

Why not visit the ExperienceLab blog (www.experiencelab.info), which features the latest thinking on experience design issues.

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