

te testing experience

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He has written numerous papers and a number of books, including "The Testing Practitioner", "ISTQB Foundations of Software Testing" and "Testing according to TMap". Erik is also a former part-time senior lecturer at the Eindhoven University of Technology, the vice-president of the International Software Testing Qualifications Board and the vice chair of the TMMi Foundation.

Finally Usability Testing?

State-of-the-practice

I recently came upon some case study papers regarding usability testing of web site. I assume that this means (some) attention is provided to one of the most critical success factors for websites: usability and thus usability testing. In fact usability has been identified in various surveys as one of the main reasons for project success in any IT project! For a number of years I've been lecturing on this topic at test conferences. At EuroSTAR, I have received the best tutorial award for "Discount Usability Testing" and our company Improve Quality Services regularly runs courses on "Usability Testing". Yet, I don't have the impression that all this pioneering work has had much impact on the testing community. During the latest EuroSTAR conference an usability expert from South Africa stated that "usability (testing) will only start to be performed and receive the right level of attention, when testing for functionality is under control". An interesting thought that, as far as I'm concerned, is very much true. Perhaps we were just not ready for it, are we now.....?

Best practices

It remains strange that when no less than 40% of the software code that is being developed world-wide is directly or indirectly related to the user-interface, we still only dedicate a minimum percentage of our test effort to usability testing. Yet, there are many so-called best practices available. Only last week I was involved in a usability test that very clearly showed that thorough attention for usability throughout the development process (requirements, standards, expert reviews, usability testing) can deliver great results. The users were enthusiastic regarding the new system that supported their tasks in an efficient, effective and user-friendly manner. This is also possible in real-life IT-projects!

Practical recommendations

As far as I'm concerned every (senior) tester that operates at system level should, in addition to the conventional functional test design techniques (boundary value analysis, equivalence partitioning, decision tables etc.), also have the level of knowledge and skills that allows them to apply a number of relatively easy to use usability test techniques. The first things that come to my mind in this context are the Heuristic Evaluation technique developed by Jacob Nielsen (www.useit.com) and the SUMI questionnaire method (www.improveqs.nl). Both techniques are relatively easy to learn, do not require more than one or two days of testing effort and therefore have a great cost/benefit ratio. Recently the British Computer Society (BCS) Special Interest Group in Software Testing developed a testing standard in the area of usability testing that is certainly worthwhile to get acquainted with (www.testingstandards.co.uk). Sufficient possibilities therefore to make a good, low-costs but thorough start with usability testing; preferably in co-operation with developers, prevention is always better than cure.

During a recent conference a number of enthusiastic former participants to my usability courses told me they were now using the techniques mentioned above in their test projects with good results. Usability testing, will it finally happen?

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