

Position Paper for:

Toward usable usability research: Building bridges between research and practice

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My current work or interest in the field

I am a Web Experience Analyst at IEEE. My role encompasses user research (usability testing, heuristic and expert reviews) and Web analytics to provide data driven solutions for enhancing IEEE Web presence sites. Previous to IEEE, I worked at SAP as a user researcher and worked at improving sales sites for account managers. I am more of a practitioner now than a researcher, but from time to time I do get to dabble in some usability testing first hand.

My background in the research-practice gap

In my current role at IEEE, I am usually at the receiving end of a lot of user research findings and reports from vendors. I translate these findings at times for site owners and am the middle person who can help prioritize the findings for the people who will use them.

Off late, I have also been reviewing a lot of sites for usability, and though it is not primary research, some of the recommendations I make for enhancements are heavily based on research done by experts and best practices in the UX space. That said, I am not sure if I am fully aware or able to easily absorb someone else's research into my recommendations unless I know the scope and context of the expert's research. I sometimes feel that I may be using the research out of context.

Critical issues that I would like to see addressed in the workshop

For the past 3 years, I have been working with UX researchers and practitioners who research our sites and make recommendations to improve IEEE sites. A few things I think we can try to address in the workshop:

- a) At times recommendations from researchers conflict with existing best practices across the organization. Should this gap be filled by a practitioner or someone else?
- b) Using a different researcher for different projects leads to mixed responses on some common things that are researched each time. How do we solve for this?
- c) Can/should practitioners be able to question the research findings of the researcher?
- d) Can UX teams survive without one or the other i.e. either the researcher or the practitioner.
- e) Can we create processes for the researcher and practitioner to use such that they help each other deliver good findings?

At the workshop, I am hoping we can discuss a way to find a happy medium to bridge the researcher's view and the practitioner's view on these items, as well as hear what experts in the UX field may have to share about this.

Issues to avoid

Not sure I know yet.

My view of the issue

My view of the issue is based on the work area I am in vs. what maybe happening in the field.

The challenge with the two types of UX people i.e. researchers and practitioners, to me seems to be the ease of translation/delivery of findings.

In the event that the researcher is just doing his/her role of research, and sharing the raw data/findings, the user of those findings may not find value to it. I am guessing this is what happens most of the times, which is why there is this gap in putting research to practice.

As long as the researcher also does a good job of putting the findings in layman's language, the end user of the research will be happy. This means the researcher may have to don a practitioner's hat.

There could be two scenarios when this happens:

- a) In teams that are short handed or have bandwidth issues, the researcher may end up also being the practitioner and thus the user of his/her own research. In this case, all plays out well as long as the larger team gets what they need from this person.
- b) Teams that have the bandwidth to have both a researcher and practitioner can have the flexibility around their processes. I am guessing that such teams can rely on the practitioner and researcher to work hand in hand with each other to create findings/reports and translations as required.

It is when these ideal teams don't exist and it becomes a researcher-practitioner relation that is shared outside a team (as opposed to within it) that the translation/delivery of findings maybe a challenge.

Some preliminary solutions

I am not an expert so I don't think I can provide a solution to this. That said my thoughts on bridging the gap are below:

- a) Create a process that researchers can use to become less rigid in their methods.
- b) Create a process that practitioners can use or adapt into their work to easily relate to the researcher's findings.
- c) Create a clear understanding about why we need both a researcher and practitioner or atleast these roles, and
- d) How can teams find a workable solution in the event they don't have both of these folks within the team?

Looking forward to an exciting workshop!