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OPENING UP TO UX

GOVERNMENT DEVELOPMENT TEAMS ARE REALISING THE VALUE OF USER EXPERIENCE AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE TO ENSURE THAT THEIR APPS AND SERVICES DELIVER RESULTS AND SATISFY USERS.

BY MARK SUTTON

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Al Azzawi: Project managers need to know understand UX practices and include them from the beginning stages of projects.

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There is a myth that UX is complex and expensive, but this is mainly based on lack of awareness, says Kadam

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Government has lagged behind the private sector in ensuring a good user experience for digital services, says Howard.

In the drive for smart government, a lot of time and resources have been invested in creating online services. As more services are rolled out however, government organisations are realising that simply creating an app or a portal does not mean that it will attract users. The ‘user experience’ of a service has an enormous impact on uptake — whether it is easy to use, whether you can get the information you want, how long it takes to complete a process. It is not enough just to build an app, or to deploy novel features and flashy design — good user experience makes a smart service successful.

User Experience (UX) as a discipline has emerged mainly from interface design. In relation to digital services, be it a web portal, a mobile app or a desktop application, UX aims to ensure that the user is satisfied with the service. UX studies many different aspects of an application, such as the look and feel of the design, ease of navigation, the number of clicks required to complete a task, or the rate of users failing to complete a task or abandoning the interaction. A service with good UX will be simpler and quicker to use than one that has not factored in the user experience.

In order to measure UX, practitioners use different techniques, ranging from observing users interacting with the service, and conducting verbal interviews about the experience, to measurement of time taken for interaction, or use of eye-tracker cameras or glasses that follow a user’s gaze as they use a service, to understand what parts of the screen are getting their attention, and whether the navigation is adding to the experience or if they are struggling with certain icons or menus. Other testing solutions focus on comparisons of different designs, to find out which version of a site or app works best or is preferred.

Customer Experience (CX) is often included in discussions of UX. CX includes all of the interactions with a ‘brand’ or an entity, so that it includes UX and the experience of an app, but also goes beyond into factors like brand and marketing.

With the increasing penetration of digital, it is not surprising that government is adopting UX to ensure results. Rick Howard, research vice president for Gartner noted that the public sector has tended to lag in quality of online experiences — the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) found that US government websites ranked second lowest in overall user satisfaction.

“In general, the public sector lags behind the private sector in UX/CX maturity. While government interest in, and demand for, improving their UX/CX practices is high, the rigid business architecture of government and constraints of legacy technologies and software applications perpetuates organisational silos that inhibit

the transformational, cross-cutting service models necessary for delivering high quality citizen experiences,” Howard said.

There is a definite increase in government focus on UX/CX in the GCC. Amol Kadam is co-founder of Red Blue Blur Ideas DMCC (RBBi), a Dubai-based UX and Usability Consultancy agency, the only agency in the region to be part of the User Experience Professionals Association (UXPA). He said that while interest is growing, a lot of government entities have sourced expertise in UX from consulting companies from outside the region.

“Being in the UAE personally, for the last 11 years I have seen that Government is really getting keen on this front, however, I must admit that it saddens me to see that most of these efforts are either half-hearted or outsourced outside the country and end up losing on the critical, local dynamic and insights,” he commented.

Samer El Chayati, territory manager of Exceed IT Services, a provider of services including UX to government clients in the region, sees government investment in UX.

“In terms of UX/accessibility testing, private sector customers have an edge in that they already have UX personnel on their teams so they have greater knowledge of the importance of usability. Public sector customers, however, are catching up in terms of realizing the importance of UX testing, and they also have bigger budgets for more extensive testing and quality measures,” he said.

The Information Technology Authority of Oman, which is driving the country’s eTransformation plan, is supporting government entities to ensure that their websites and services follow best practices and international standards of UX. The ITA is delivering awareness and training sessions around UX standards and practices. It also offers UX testing for government entities to assess their services.

In addition, the annual HM Sultan Qaboos Awards for Excellence in eGovernment now include usability in the judging criteria for many of the awards, with the aims of ensuring that all services focus on providing a good experience to the user.

In the UAE, Dubai Smart Government was an early adopter of UX, setting up the first government UX lab in the region. Dr Ali Al Azzawi was a consultant with DSG and is now customer experience and design consultant for SDO, heading up Smart Dubai’s UX and CX activities.

“Smart Dubai is aiming for UX and CX to be part of the fabric of government, not an afterthought,” he said.

Government organisations are seeking to expand their UX/CX capabilities, both by developing inhouse talent and sourcing external resources, however there is skills gap, Al Azzawi added.



“In this region the biggest challenge is talent — there are just not enough people. There is a huge demand for [UX], but in order to be good at UX, you need some experience.”

As part of efforts to tackle the skills gap, Smart Dubai Government recently ran a CX Project Manager course for project managers and middle managers, to provide a good grounding in CX. The training is important not just for building skills, Al Azzawi said, but also in building awareness of the importance of UX to any project, helping project managers to understand what they should be considering for good UX/CX, and incorporating UX and CX thinking into the design of new projects from the start.

“As a project manager, you need to know that these things are important, so when you have that next project, you know what you need to do, how the process goes. You should at least know what [expertise] you need to get, whether it is in terms of training for your own staff or consultancy,” he said.

In adopting UX, there are a number of codes and best practices that cover various aspects of the discipline, including industry association guides such as those issued by the UXPA, vendor- and device-specific guidelines from manufacturers and vendors, and methodologies developed by consulting companies.

To be better equipped for UX, organisations are also deploying their own UX labs, which typically include hardware and software to run the app or service being tested, and to accommodate observation and recording of the test user interactions.

More important than the guidelines or equipment however is the awareness, and the need to consider UX and CX from the start of the program. Kadam said that there is a well-established myth that UX is complex, mainly based on lack of awareness, but early introduction of UX into a project can minimise the complexity.

“In general, things do get time consuming and end up impacting the project budget if these practices are introduced late in the overall lifecycle of the project,” Kadam said. “If we learn to adapt and include both these concepts in the early stages of the

project, or better, in the planning phase, then these do not come as a burden. The complexity comes when these are introduced as an afterthought.

“It is a well-established fact that every minute of time and every dirham/dollar spent on usability returns itself fivefold,” he added. “One needs to identify right methods at the right time of the project life-cycle to address the objectives and to ensure the impact of the outcome is maximised.”

Trying to fix a poorly designed app may run into business constraints, Dr Al Azzawi noted, as personnel, budgets and priorities may have moved on to a new project. However, failing to fix a poorly designed service or app will create ongoing costs.

“Typically people spend a lot of time and money creating a thing, and then they get to the point where customers are complaining about it, they are getting support calls, people are confused by the UI, and it costs money to answer the support calls, or fix the errors, or fix misentry of data into a badly designed form — it has consequences for the customer and for the organisation,” he said.

UX is increasingly becoming built-in to development processes by software vendors, and leading organisations that are following Agile development principles are also putting the focus on the user from the start of the process. For Smart Dubai, the aim is to reach a point where the customer is automatically included in the design process for any service, Al Azzawi explained. For increasingly complex apps such as Dubai Now, which combines over 2,000 services into a single app, creating a usable app without UX would be impossible. Perceptions of UX are shifting accordingly.

“There is a business case for UX — it is not a ‘nice to have’.” When you can see that you can reduce support costs, that is a positive thing from a budget point of view and an experience point of view,” he said. “It is easy to see why UX is a good expenditure, and more and more people are seeing that it is a good thing to do — they get it.” ■