

The 8 competencies of user experience: a tool for assessing and developing UX Practitioners

These are notes taken from David Travis' article on Medium, accessed 06.01.2017

<https://medium.com/@userfocus/the-8-competencies-of-user-experience-a-tool-for-assessing-and-developing-ux-practitioners-631770c6d2da>

Key UX competencies

1. User needs research
2. Usability evaluation
3. Information architecture
4. Interaction design
5. Visual design
6. Technical writing
7. User interface prototyping
8. User experience leadership

User needs research

This competence is defined by the following behaviours:

- Articulate the importance of user research, not just before the system is designed but also during design and after deployment.
- Identify the potential users of the system.
- Plan site visits to end users, including deciding who to sample.
- Structure an effective interview that gets beyond the surface opinions (what users say) to reveal user goals (what users want).
- Keep appropriate records of each observation.
- Analyze qualitative data from a site visit.
- Present the data from a site visit in ways that can be used to drive design: for example, personas, user stories, user journey maps.
- Analyze and interpret existing data (for example web analytics, user surveys, customer support calls).
- Critically evaluate previous user research.

Usability evaluation

This competence is defined by the following behaviours:

- Choose the most appropriate evaluation method (e.g. formative v summative test, moderated v unmoderated test, lab v remote test, usability testing v expert review, usability testing v A/B test, usability testing v survey).
- Interpret usability principles and guidelines and use them to identify likely problems in user interfaces.
- Understand how to design an experiment, and how to control and measure variables.
- Plan and administer different types of usability evaluation.
- Log the data from usability evaluations.
- Analyze the data from usability evaluations.
- Measure usability.
- Prioritize usability problems.
- Choose the most appropriate format for sharing findings and recommendations: for example, a report, a presentation, a daily stand-up or a highlights video.
- Persuade the design team to take action on the results.

User interface prototyping

This competence is defined by the following behaviours:

- Translate ideas into interactions by developing prototypes and simulations.
- Choose the appropriate fidelity of prototype for the phase of design.
- Articulate the benefits of fast iteration.
- Create paper prototypes.
- Properly explore the design space before deciding on a solution.
- Create interactive electronic prototypes.

Interaction design

This competence is defined by the following behaviours:

- Choose between different user interface patterns (for example, Wizards, Organizer Workspaces and Coach Marks).
- Use the correct user interface 'grammar': e.g., choosing the correct control in an interface, such as check-box v radio button.
- Describe how a specific user interface interaction will behave (for example, pinch to zoom).
- Create user interface animations.
- Create affordances within a user interface.
- Create design ideas toward a solution.
- Sketch and tell user-centered stories about the way an interaction should work.

Visual design

This competence is defined by the following behaviours:

- Use fundamental principles of visual design (like contrast, alignment, repetition and proximity) to de-clutter user interfaces.
- Choose appropriate typography.
- Devise grids.
- Lay out pages.
- Choose color palettes.
- Develop icons.
- Articulate the importance of following a common brand style.

Information architecture

This competence is defined by the following behaviours:

- Establish the flow between a person and a product, service, or environment ('service design').
- Uncover and describe users' models of the work domain.
- Organize, structure and label content, functions and features.
- Choose between different design patterns for organizing content (such as faceted navigation, tagging, hub and spoke etc).
- Develop a controlled vocabulary.
- Articulate the importance and use of metadata.
- Analyze search logs.
- Run online and offline card sorting sessions.

Technical writing

This competence is defined by the following behaviours:

- Write content in plain English.
- Phrase content from the user's perspective (rather than the system's perspective).
- Create content that helps users complete tasks and transactions.
- Express complex ideas concisely.
- Create and edit macro- and micro-copy.
- Write content in the tone of voice that matches the organization's identity or brand.
- Choose the right kind of help for the situation: tutorials v manuals v contextual help v micro-copy.

User experience leadership

This competence is defined by the following behaviours:

- Plan and schedule user experience work.
- Constructively critique the work of team members.
- Argue the cost-benefit of user experience activities.
- Lead a multidisciplinary team.
- Assemble team members for a project.
- Promote ongoing professional development of the team.
- Liaise with stakeholders.
- Manage client expectations.
- Measure and monitor the effect of UX on the company's success.
- Evangelize UX throughout the company.

How to assess the competence of your team

How to use the Star Chart

Unless you have worked with each of your team members for several years, I recommend that you ask team members to assess their own competency. I usually give people the following instructions:

Pick one of the competency areas on this star chart that you are most familiar with. Read over the behavioural descriptions for this competency area and then rate your own competency between 0 and 5, using the following scale:

- 0 I don't understand this competence or it is non-existent
- 1 Novice: I have a basic understanding of this competence
- 2 Advanced beginner: I can demonstrate this competence under supervision
- 3 Competent: I can demonstrate this competence independently
- 4 Proficient: I can supervise other people in this competence
- 5 Expert: I develop new ways of applying this competence

Then move onto the other competency areas and complete the diagram.

There are problems when you ask people to rate their own competence. The Dunning-Kruger effect tells us that novices tend to overestimate their competency and experts tend to underestimate their competency. For example, a novice who should rate themselves a '1' may over-rate themselves as a 2 or 3 whereas an expert that should rate themselves a '5' may under-rate themselves as a 3 or 4. To counteract this bias, I recommend that you either (a) ignore the absolute ratings and instead look at a team member's general pattern across the 8 competencies; or (b) you follow up each chart with an interview where you ask team members to provide specific examples of behaviours to justify their rating.

Mapping the competences to UX design roles

The field of user experience has a bewildering array of job titles (I wrote about this in the past in The UX Job Title Generator). So to map these competencies onto different user experience roles, I've taken some of the practitioner roles from Merholz and Skinner's (2016) recent book, 'Org Design for Design Orgs'. I've chosen this book because it's both up-to-date and written by acknowledged experts in the field.

If you click to the article online, you will see detailed explanations of how to use the charts.

Next steps

If you manage a user experience team:

- Download the PDF template and ask each member of your team complete the star chart as a self-reflection exercise. Discuss the results as a group and use the discussion to identify the competency areas where your team thinks it needs support.
- Given the environment where your team works, what would an 'ideal' team composition look like?
- Discuss the results individually with each team member in a 1-1 to objectively identify areas where your rating of their competence differs from their rating. What behaviours do you expect them to demonstrate to prove they actually are a 3, 4 or 5?
- The diagram could also serve as a way to set performance goals for evaluation and professional development purposes.

If you do not work in the field but are responsible for recruiting people to user experience teams:

- Use the competency descriptions in this article to set behavioural-based criteria for hiring and writing job postings.

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