

Annex H. Interviews with four webmasters

Do you currently use any HCI guidelines or usability methods?

All of the webmasters used Accessibility guidelines when developing web pages for the sites they worked on.

One webmaster did not use any design guidelines when developing web pages, although the University was currently looking into producing guidelines. Another used Dreamweaver templates to keep the site pages consistent and the other two had developed their own sets of design guidelines or style sheets.

As there were no generally recognised design guidelines, the solution was to create their own.

Would you prefer any guidelines to be printed or online?

Two of the webmasters preferred the guidelines to be web based, which would enable benefits such as bookmarking, emailing to colleges and linking to examples.

One webmaster would like the guidelines to be available on the Internet and to print, as each would be useful in different circumstances.

Research-based web design and usability guidelines

The initial response to this document from all of the webmasters was that it was too big, and seemed daunting.

Overall three of the webmasters liked the document and would use it, the fourth thought it was too basic for him but he would find it useful as a teaching aid. Two webmasters would recommend it to team members, although one commented they were unlikely to read it.

Key guidelines for academic websites

All four of the webmasters found this document less daunting than the 'Research Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines' document, and said that they would use it, as would the rest of their team.

Overall this document got a very positive response apart from one webmaster who didn't like it to start with, but warmed to it after studying it in more detail and understanding the ratings and references for each guideline.

Illinois Online Network – Web Design for Online Courses

Two of the webmasters commented that this document would be useful for people creating learning materials using 'Blackboard'. Another thought that Blackboard made the document unnecessary.

Three of the webmasters would find the document useful when teaching web design to students.

One webmaster did not like this document and found it to be outdated.

SAP Quick guide to Creating Information-Orientated Web Sites

Three webmasters hadn't heard of or seen this kind of method before, and were interested to learn more about it. One webmaster who had said she did not need to use this document as she already knew about the webmasters of the site.

Two webmasters thought this document would be useful when designing a site from scratch.

One webmaster thought this technique would be more justified for larger sites due the time it would take to implement, but another thought that it would be easier to apply to small sites due to it being basic.

Overall there was high interest in this document by the three webmasters who were not familiar with the techniques documented in it.

“Duncan” – academic web developer with negative attitude to HCI

Develops a University website, also teaches at the university.

Strong academic background.

Negative attitude to HCI / Usability guidelines.

Duncan has written his own set of style guides for the web site that he maintains, which he and his colleague (“she is not as fussy as him” and “he has to point out problems to her”) uses when developing and maintaining the site. University staff members that add information to the site do not adhere to them.

He works with three sites, the front facing site of the University, the staff intranet and the student intranet. Duncan works alone and reports to nobody.

A few years ago a student who was interested in Usability carried out an evaluation on the site. A “thick document” was produced, Duncan “didn't think the student did a very good job and it wasn't very useful”.

Duncan's main outlook on site usability is to keep it simple. When the site was produced there were discussions about whether it should be “flashy or sober” and Duncan supported the latter, as webmasters of the site do not have access to modern technology.

When discussing whether using Usability guidelines would hinder people in Duncan's situation he responded, “Once you adopt the procedure then it is not more work any more”.

Duncan wants any guidelines that he uses to be concise (documents that are too big are “intimidating”).

Research Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines

Duncan found the size, title and contents table of this document to be “intimidating”, as well as finding the title confusing. It looked “authoritative”, but found it to be too basic to use himself. However, he said “I would recommend this to students who I was teaching web design to”, but “I would not recommend it to colleagues”.

Illinois Online Network – Web Design for Online Courses

Duncan had a particularly negative attitude to this document, although he appeared not to understand it fully stating “we have Blackboard for this”. He spotted some information that was out of date, which put him off. He wanted to know more specifically what “the lowest common browser is”. He would not recommend it to anyone. Overall his opinion on the document was “quite nice, but who is it for?”

SAP Quick guide to Creating Information-Orientated Web Sites

At first Duncan assessed the document as being relevant to “students not staff”, but as he read it he stated that he was “interested in this document and wanted to read it in more detail to learn about starting a site from scratch”. He felt he could “get something out of it”.

Draft JISC Guidelines

Duncan’s first impression of this document was negative – “not nice to read”. He did not notice the references and ratings. He stated “If you wanted to cater for 99% of webmasters what should you do”, more specific information was required about things like browsers and operating systems to support and image size / download time.

He advised us of a number of places where he didn’t understand the wording of a guideline (e.g. “what are breadcrumbs”, which he called a return path). He has “seen the same kind of guidelines everywhere”.

As he talked and the ratings and references were pointed out he seemed to warm to the document commenting “they are all sensible”, and suggested having a set of (basic) best practice guidelines such as no frames, breadcrumbs, tabs, external links in a new window, etc...

Overall Duncan said that he would like more advice on things you should do (and may be legally bound to do). He wanted a distinction between what he had to do and what he had a choice over. He also wanted more specific information on what he needed to support (Browsers, Macs, etc...). He felt strongly that his website is “alright as it is”.

“John” – academic web developer with minimal knowledge of HCI

Webmaster, works in a team of three people.

Dreamweaver templates are used to keep the site consistent.

Departmental sites must use the template for the first (home) page, are encouraged for the second level pages, and can use a different layout if they want for pages under that, “it’s a compromise”. Accessibility is also important within the institution.

He works on a portal, which is a “gateway to the student Intranet”, and is restricted by IP domain name. It is customisable by the webmaster logging in (server side).

Usability feedback is taken very seriously. A “picky” student with special needs complained about reading the site, and text only pages were created for her.

Research Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines

John's initial reaction to the document was negative, he groaned when he was told the number of guidelines it contained. He read through the foreword and then commented: "This should be an annex".

John read this document thoroughly and commented on guidelines that he didn't agree with as he went along.

Overall he found the document "interesting" and "well done". He said it was "necessary" for him to read it but the departments who work on his site wouldn't. He would recommend it to them though, and other webmasters.

Draft JISC Guidelines

John was very interested in the list we had produced, but did state, "Maybe a list of what not to do would be more useful". The list was "useful for departments who are "prepared to read the guidelines, and don't give a toss why". He also recommended that a web-based version could link to an example (good and bad) for each guideline.

Illinois Online Network – Web Design for Online Courses

This document was found to be more "superficial" and was described as being good for "a short talk for people who are interested in the web". Not for "professionals".

SAP Quick guide to Creating Information-Orientated Web Sites

John found this document a "different perspective" that he "hadn't seen before". He said it would be more relevant for larger sites where "the time spent would be more justified". "It would be good for managers, but programmers just want to get stuck into their 'extreme programming'".

"Ian" – academic Web Master with knowledge of HCI

Responsible for the main web server in the IT Department and over 60 web sites.

He has developed a web guide for editors and developers including best practice for style sheets, forms and accessibility, but "they could do with an overview".

The IT department has a portal, mainly for the intranet.

His approach to developing a new web site is to look at the structure and produce a mock up using a flow diagramming package.

Webmasters are asked what they think of the site to find if there is any room for improvement. He looks to sitepoint.com for best practice.

They are rolling out a content management system that will limit the need for guidelines.

Research Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines

"comprehensive" "The pdf has the advantage that it could also be searched"

"A printed copy would also be useful to take away and digest for personal study."

Draft JISC Guidelines

"I can get stuck into these guidelines right away. Good for full-time developers. The length is about right."

“It would be an advantage to have centralised guidelines to avoid duplication of effort.”

“Selective links to the pdf guidelines give flexibility.”

“It is good to know what it is based on – I am never sure of the validity of this type of information.”

Illinois Online Network – Web Design for Online Courses

“This is very good, it is much more approachable for the majority of staff who use Blackboard. They would welcome simple advice and need extra guidance on best practice. It includes several good recommendations that I have not seen written down before.” “It should have examples like MS guides.”

SAP Quick guide to Creating Information-Orientated Web Sites

“Academics could read and digest this. It would also be good for the dedicated web team.”

“It is good to have a proper methodology, particularly when designing from scratch.”

“It is something you need to sit down and read through, so a printed version would be most convenient.”

“Susan” – academic web developer with knowledge of HCI

Currently re-developed University website which is running behind schedule.

WC3 Accessibility guidelines were used for this site.

When the new site was being designed the team looked at what was wanted, how the content and structure would be organised (a lot of content from the old site was discarded), accessibility, technology (content management systems and XML) and other similar websites were studied to gather best practice rules.

Susan has knowledge of HCI as she studied a module during her degree.

The site uses basic personalisation for name recognition and changing details. A database is used for this.

Susan found that there was “not much in the way of HCI / Usability guidelines around, apart from Jakob Nielsen who you either ‘love or hate’”, and continued that “there is no single good source for such guidelines”. Susan uses JISC mailing lists and stated that JISC would be a good place to look for such guidelines, “everyone would look there”.

She expressed confusion between Accessibility and usability and then stated that “if you adhere to accessibility guidelines, then the site becomes usable”.

The University that Susan works for has no guidelines for developing web sites, but they are currently looking into it.

Research Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines

Susan described this document as “cradle to grave of designing websites”. She liked the screen shots and examples. She thought that it would be a useful resource for her team at work, “it should be a book, that would be on the desk”, and stated it was “good for a checklist against what has already been done”.

She felt she would prefer an online version, which she would bookmark, and she could email relevant chapters to people in the team.

Draft JISC Guidelines

Susan found this document to be “a lot more accessible” and commented that she was “less overwhelmed” and “more likely to apply it”. She felt that she could have got “too hung up on the big one”.

Susan thought that this document “could definitely be used by the University” and that “all the core areas are covered”.

Susan expressed concern that Accessibility was not properly catered for as it is a legal requirement and she felt that in the next four years it would become risky not to comply.

Illinois Online Network – Web Design for Online Courses

Susan’s first comment was on the “lack of images” to explain “what they mean”. Also the content was not grouped under titles such as ‘Homepage’. She thought that University would use this document, but that it was “a bit basic, and needs to be more specific”. She would prefer something she could “tick next to”.

They would be useful as part of the learning materials development course for people using Blackboard, as there are no guidelines at the moment.

SAP Quick guide to Creating Information-Orientated Web Sites

Susan found that this was “more for small sites”, but preferred that there were more illustrations. She found it to be “practical”, but “not very specific” and lacking “clear instructions”. She felt that her team “already knew about their webmasters and profiles”. She found the document to be “good for beginners who wanted to start a site from scratch”.

Overall Susan said that the documents relevance to a web developer depended on their “level of experience”. She restated her concern about the difference between Accessibility and HCI and stated that making a usable site was a knock on affect of making the site Accessible. However, she also thought that there was a lack of understanding of HCI and that the guidelines were a good idea, and that JISC would be the ideal place to place these guidelines, particularly on the legal side of things.