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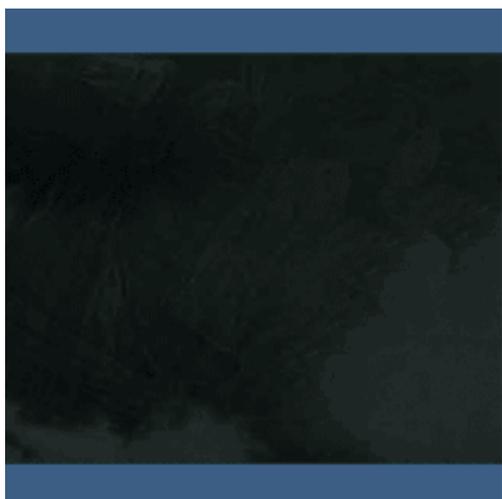
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Usability over complexity

Usability Engineering is not just a trend, but a hark back to all things simple

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Sashwat Chaturvedi

MUMBAI: Complexity is a subjective term. During the World War II, a large number of fighter jets flown by the Allies crashed, often without any apparent reason. Experts at the time attributed it to the inexperience of the pilots flying those jets, or what we better know now as 'human error'.

In subsequent studies, psychologists identified that lack of knowledge about 'human capabilities' and 'human limitations' as the real reasons for a majority of these crashes.

In short, the jet manufacturers were scarcely paying any attention to capabilities or limitations of the pilots leading to systems that were complex and hard to manage. This led to the genesis of 'Human Factors Engineering'. The mission of

this field is to make products and technology brought to the hands of end users, easy and transparent to use.

Yet almost everyone would agree that the world is becoming a lot more complex than it was say a few years ago. The best example of this adage can be found in the computing systems that we use. Increasingly, programmers and designers are taking user's basic knowledge of IT systems for granted leading.

Most of the users suffer from anxiety in their everyday work due to such encumbrances. Usability engineering (UE) is a science that attempts to bring back usability (rather simplicity) in things we do.

"UE is a discipline that uses a structured methodology to design the interface of products with a goal of making the product fit to the needs of the users (humans). The end result of usability engineering is an easy to use product. It can also be applied to physical products and systems and is referred to Physical Ergonomics, Human Factors Engineering or Human Computer Interaction," says Jhumkee Iyengar, head, Usability Engineering, Persistent Systems.

For the past few years, many companies are increasingly banking on UE to help them design software and applications best suited to the needs of the target user. UE is best suited at the onset of the design process, re-engineering at a later stage can be quite an expensive affair.

Do not confuse usability with accessibility (related to users with special needs). "The area of usability that addresses issues of disabled users is called accessibility. Accessibility means that people with disabilities can use the web. Accessibility also addresses the issues of user groups such as older people who experience changes in physical abilities (changes in vision, memory, dexterity, etc). Countries like U.S. have made a law that all their governmental websites will be accessible. For instance, the primary standards used by websites world over are the Section 508 standards," clarifies Iyengar.

As India is becoming a place where much of the software, applications are designed it becomes incumbent

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upon the solution provider to also be aware of UE. Persistent Systems is one such company, it has a team of experts that are working in this space. The company has also set up a UE lab at its Pune premises.

"UE is in its infancy in India. Awareness about UE as a discipline itself is very low. Because of recent publicity, UE has become a catchy term and Indian software industry is responding to the emerging market, paying lip service to it for the most part. It has the potential to evolve the Indian community into a serious partner for global UE work. This is because we Indians have a unique advantage of being analytical, creative and effective communicators; the capabilities that are needed for UE," says Iyengar.

"However, this will only be realized if industry and academia together pay attention to building a discipline and expertise as none exists today. Otherwise UE will get relegated to adding incremental value by performing incremental and low level usability," she adds with a note of caution.

A manpower projection in 2002 by Jakob Nielsen says that India will need to train 400,000 usability professionals in the next six years to meet its own projections'.

Meanwhile, November 14 is being celebrated as World Usability Day, to promote the value of usability engineering, user-centered design and every user's right to ask for things that work better. The Usability Professionals' Association, a worldwide organization, is encouraging, organizing and sponsoring 36 hours of activities at the local level around the globe, on the same day.

There will be around seven such events in India, two each in Bangalore and Hyderabad, one in Chennai, Delhi and Pune.

Persistent is organizing the Pune event.

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