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## Usability: Counting the Cost

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*May, 2007*

**When potential clients ask me**, “How much will it cost to build a usability study into my project?”, my answer invariably is, “How much will it cost you *not* to do it?”. Below I outline the reasons for this.

- **Giving users what they want**

My answer might sound like a rather pedantic reply to what is, after all, a very legitimate question for someone who has a budget to manage and who wants the best return on their investment. It does, however, take us to the heart of what makes a website or web application successful; giving the **users want *they* want**. If your users' expectations are fulfilled, and they can achieve their goals quickly and easily, then your web-based project has succeeded and you will reap the benefits.

- **Beware of stakeholder opinions**

Project stakeholders are often forced to base their initial requirements on what **they** think their users want and need. This is a common challenge because in doing so, they can make many assumptions about their users which remain unchallenged. I would urge all project stakeholders to put **user awareness** at the top of their agenda from the outset.

- **The cost of getting it wrong**

Discovering after launch that your system frustrates and prevents its users from achieving their aims can be extremely costly. Training costs go up and productivity goes down. In the case of Websites, **visitors leave** in frustration, customer confidence is eroded and your reputation can be damaged. Obviously these 'costs' scale with the size of the project and the size of the user-base. Undoubtedly, all projects, both large and small, benefit from the early identification of the primary users of the system and a clear description of their specific needs.

- **User profiling – finding out what your users want**

So how do we *really* know what the user wants? This is a question that needs to be asked, and

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answered, as early as possible in the life cycle of a project. A variety of methods may be employed to gain information about users, such as user-profiling, structured interviews with end users, surveys, and user observation. These activities are best conducted at the beginning of a project with the involvement of the stakeholders. The information gathered from this user analysis then informs many aspects of the project, from design and development through to quality assurance.

- **Keeping on track during development**

Having well-defined and documented user requirements allows the design and development team to validate their system at every stage of the project life cycle. Predefined user-tasks can be used to formally test paper prototypes, functional prototypes, alpha and beta releases and at final acceptance testing.

- **The cost of getting it right**

Finally, I'd like to return to the question "How much will it cost?". Current best practices advise spending about 10% of a project's budget on usability will on average double a website's desired quality metrics. (Source: Jakob Nielsen, useit.com, Usability 101). But if you compare this to the cost of fixing the usability problems that you never anticipated, or redesigning the system from scratch further down the line, it will be money wisely invested.

**Sigmer Technologies** are experts in the design and development of websites, applications and databases, and specialise in usability and user interface design relating to Human Computer Interaction. To learn more about how we can help you with your usability project, please call **Nigel Gill** or **John Archibald** now on **01273 234 663**, or e-mail [enquiries@sigmer.com](mailto:enquiries@sigmer.com).



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