# World Usability Day: A Challenge for Everyone

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Every citizen on our planet deserves the right to usable products and services. It is time we reframe our work and look at a bigger global picture.

The time is right, the interest is here. 'User friendly' is a common and understandable term; people understand that the world should work well. Now, we have to encourage them to take the message to the streets and say, "We will not stand for it anymore, we want our world to be usable."

No more excuses, no more managers complaining about budgets and schedules. No more marketing people selling functionality and power that is more than we need. No more consumers buying things we cannot or do not need to use.

### What can we really do in one day?

World Usability Day was established to focus people on the problems and subsequent solutions related to usability. We want to raise people's awareness of how much these problems impact all of us.

If we can get thousands of people on the planet to focus on one thing for one day, we can accomplish something big. It only takes one day to change someone's point of view, or to light a fire that can burn for years.

A good example of one day that changed the world was Earth Day 1970. For the first time, a group of people focused on the environmental issues plaguing the planet. Disparate groups, such as environmentalists fighting against polluting companies, toxic dumps and extinction of wildlife saw they had something in common. The groups even crossed political barriers, and on April 22, 1970, twenty million Americans demonstrated for a healthy, sustainable, environment. By 1990, Earth Day was a global event with 200 million people in 141 countries participating. Today, you can see recycling bins in cities all around the world. Earth Day is still making a difference.

The field of user-centered design is concerned with making technology, products, and services for everyone. Usability is for everyone. It is a common goal of many groups, including inventors, technology developers, information architects, designers, teachers, communicators, medical professionals, government systems and services, among many others. World Usability Day should bring together all these people together with a common goal—make products and services useful for all of us.

## Think globally, act locally.

Although the planet contains billions of people with thousands of cultures, we have many similar values. Most cultures want people to live in peace and prosperity. Most countries want their people to be safe and productive. Most businesses want to make a profit.

The problems are big, and are similar all over the world. Common global issues such as healthcare problems, ecommerce compatibility and security, government, and education suffer from similar usability problems—technology products and services often do not work the way they should. Many government agencies and schools simply accept that their systems and processes are not efficient. Everyday, people feel it a the local level when they use ATM machines, read street signs, use their cell phone, or try to open a package.

Change comes slowly and it has to come from the ground up. People need to create the activity at the grassroots (local) level. This kind of local activity can connect with other local activity to create larger work that operates on the global level. In this case, the whole is much greater then the sum of the parts.

The success of the first year of World Usability Day was beyond our wildest imaginations. Our goal was to have eight events on two continents, and to get a modest amount of media coverage. However, UPA worked with other organizations to run events and to get media coverage on five continents at 115 local events in 35 countries. Our next step is to expand on that initial success and to get people demonstrating to demand their rights for usable products and services.

## Why Should You Care?

Everyone should care and take action to create change.

The first level of change occurs with the public, who start to expect more from the world around them. They should be marching in the streets to demonstrate against wasteful and harmful development that puts machines and technology before people, that makes people change to match the machine. People should organize rallies to hear speeches about the harmful

effects of healthcare systems that do not work, about transportation systems that cause accidents and injury because of bad design, or about voting systems that do not work and lead to unfair elections.

The second level of change should happen on the professional level, for teams and developers of technology and products. These people should insist that user-centered design (UCD) and development is a standard process for any work, and should not stand for any process that does not include UCD.

Product managers up through CEOs will stop thinking twice about whether they have the time or budget to include UCD in their workflow. UCD will be an integral, ubiquitous part of the development process.

### What should really be happening?

Events should be planned to get people involved at the grassroots level. The message about usability needs to be brought to everyone on the planet. People not only need to be educated, but also need to know they can take action.

Rallies and demonstrations would be great, but we also need local events for people educate themselves. Events should be planned that provide people key takeaways, such as grassroots efforts to correct usability problems in their neighborhoods. They could put up signs to help people navigate confusing traffic patterns, fix a walkway, or help a supermarket organize the checkout stands more effectively.

The Boston Museum of Science, in the United States provides a good example of educating people about

usability. The Boston UPA organizers worked with local groups of other organizations and the museum to create a set of events that were based on product usability. Exhibits, such as Alarm Clock Alley, demonstrated these issues in a straightforward fashion. Visitors to the Museum raced with each other to set the time on two difference alarm clocks. Even the people watching the race immediately understood the UCD issues. Some commented that they finally understood that it was the alarm clock design and not their lack of technical skills that caused the problem. People came away saying that they would not buy another alarm clock that was hard to use.

### Challenge to Change the World

The challenge of World Usability Day is not small; it is to change the way the world is developing and using technology. It is not just for the developers, designers, product managers and the like, but for the everyday person, who has to use technology or who is not able to use technology because it is too hard to use, too expensive, or because the technology is not accessible. Communication systems that fail, educational systems that are not accessible, and healthcare technology that has ample room for human error create unacceptable hazards for users.

If the real driver of development was the user's need, then the small, inexpensive computer and network would be developed already, for those who cannot afford or who do not need something bigger. We would have voting machines that produce fewer errors, and that would be user friendly and enjoyable enough so that more voters would turn out for the elections. In education, we would have third-world countries with simple computers and communication systems, which

would enable them to provide better training for their people and give them the tools they need to change their economic future.

If technology becomes the driver in areas, such as healthcare, then we end up with systems that are able to do a lot of things, but do not really improve the general care. The real end user of healthcare technology is the patient, but most equipment today is geared only for the single doctor who is looking at one issue. Why do not healthcare record systems, doctors' offices and hospitals all talk to each other? If they did, a patient who comes in an emergency room in a city that is far from home, would receive the correct treatment because their medical history would be easily accessible.

The long-term success of World Usability Day depends on how well we can change the way people think about and use their tools, products, and services around the world. The first step is to get the message out that we should not be tolerating this level of design and engineering. People need to stop accepting and buying products and services that do not really meet their needs. The second step is to get professionals working with the general population to change the direction of our technological development. Finally, we need to get everyone involved in product development to integrate UCD in every process, everywhere.

**Where is this going?**
We want to create a world where technology serves people and not the other way around. A world where people are served by their tools, by the physical, built environment that is made to accommodate everyone.

No one is left out because they do not have enough money or the right language, or are not big or small enough to fit into the control seat of anything.

Usability is not just a problem of software or gadgets being too complicated. Usability is a basic right to everyone living on the planet. Usability about whether the door I am entering opens in a way so I do not get smacked while going through. Usability is about my late grandmother being able to talk to me from her bed in New York City, while I am at home in Boston. Usability is about children in third world countries having the same access to technology, communication, and basic devices to operate equally in the world today. Moreover, usability is about my doctor being able to look at my medical data, all together, so she can better diagnose my health as I reach middle age.

World Usability Day is about changing the way usability is thought about, taking that new thinking, and creating action. World Usability Day is about changing the way our products and services are developed and marketed so they really do serve everyone.

**Link**
www.worldusabilityday.org

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**Elizabeth Rosenzweig** is currently the Director of World Usability Day and Principal at Bubble Mountain Consulting, where she works with companies and organizations on user-centered design solutions to research and develop technology projects, including the Voting Technology Project at MIT. From 1991 through May 2005, Elizabeth was a Principal Research Scientist at Eastman Kodak Company, where she built the Boston Usability Lab—a usability-engineering center of expertise—at the Kodak Boston Software Development Center in Lowell, Massachusetts. In addition to creating and running the Lab, she was instrumental in defining, and putting online, standards for graphical user interface design that are in use throughout Kodak. Elizabeth has been involved with the Usability Professionals' Association, serving on the Board of directors since 1999, most recently as Past President of UPA and current Co-Director of Outreach on the Board of Directors. With 20 years of industry experience, Elizabeth frequently presents at national conferences and has been a contributor to professional journals among them *interactions*.
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