

How You Can Help the Next Generation of UX'ers

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Introduction

"The economy stinks. Regardless of where you live in the world, you've probably been impacted by the current economic downturn. Most of us know people who have lost their jobs or even their homes. This is probably the worst downturn that most of us have experienced in our lifetimes."
- Tom Tullis, February 2009

Sounds familiar to 2025, doesn't it? As we started to emerge from the 2020 pandemic, the job market for UX took off. But by 2023, the job market for UX and technology in general needed to weather once again. And so it continues today. What can you do to help? If you experienced the downturn to which Tom referenced, you may have persevered in usability, UX, or a related field and be gainfully employed today. Or you may have found yourself out of work for a first or second time.

Very sadly, Tom is no longer with us today to advise us again. However, we can reference his sage advice in "Tips for Usability Professionals in a Down Economy," published in the *Journal of User Experience (JUX)*, thanks to open source and archiving:

The usability profession is experiencing the current economic downturn just like everyone else. This article offers ten tips for usability professionals trying to weather this economic storm:

1. *Be more efficient with your usability tests*
2. *Get more data with less work*
3. *Deepen your usability skills*
4. *Broaden your other skills*
5. *Demonstrate business value*
6. *Keep up on technology*
7. *Keep tabs on competitors*
8. *Maximize your visibility*
9. *Compare design alternatives*
10. *Don't re-invent the wheel*



In our discussion about today, we would like to add some thoughts from a broader perspective and consider what seasoned UX professionals can do to help researchers and practitioners in the field survive this downturn to thrive in the future. Otherwise, they may need to decide to change course temporarily or longer.

If you are employed, or no longer want or need to be, how can you help newcomers to the field? Many of the same thoughts and ideas that are relevant to them will apply to more experienced UX professionals who are unemployed and seeking.

Before we begin, sincere thanks to those already doing all they can.

We recognize that experience and chronological age can be somewhat independent, but for the purposes of this discussion, we will assume that most highly experienced UX professionals will tend to be older. Furthermore, we will assume that the newcomers to the field will tend to be younger, though this is not always the case, of course. We make this assumption so we can discuss generational differences that may assist or hinder how you can help.

Older adults (40-plus years old) can bring a wealth of experience, wisdom, and stability that can be helpful to less experienced generations. However, generational or experiential differences can unintentionally interfere and create barriers in relationships.

What Helps?

Now is the time to double down and dive deep into your extensive networks and help others make those all-important connections. Networking and having connections inside of the industry are still the number one source for jobs, which makes even more sense in an era of abundant automation.

Your lessons learned from past career successes and failures may be of relevance to present-day job seekers. While we must remember to listen first and foremost, and prefer to respond to questions rather than offering our own experiences, stories about the path to success and recovery from failures may be of interest. To provide context, keep in mind the famous quote from the poem *If*, by Rudyard Kipling in 1910, "...If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster. And treat those two impostors just the same..."

As an example, you may have experienced pivoting when an industry or organization was winding down because it was required. Or one's personal life may have required a change in location, hours, or demands. One of the authors of this article transitioned from utilities to non-profits to technology, and the other from retail to utilities.

In addition to changing sectors of employment, each of us has needed to do more design or more research depending on the project, and we've learned that the skills and knowledge of one informs the other. You can help others when you hear of a new opportunity that a job-seeker may be able to stretch to match.

We believe that older or more experienced adults (40-plus) tend to be more emotionally regulated, offering a calming presence during stressful situations. They may have a greater capacity for patience, making them good mentors and role models. (One of the authors is a master of this, and the older one is still working on it.)

And many older or more experienced adults have accumulated financial knowledge and career experience, which can be a major benefit to younger or less experienced individuals. For example, with a recent mentee, we discussed financial considerations in preparing for a major career break to go back to school. Our younger colleague commented, "As with anything in life, the more experience you have, the better off you are going to be in most situations."

Understanding past societal changes can help younger generations appreciate where they come from and navigate future challenges. For example, after the dot-com bubble burst about 25 years ago, tracking the rise, fall, and subsequent rise again was instructive.

Finally, you have perspective to consider if this employment downturn is unique in that automation, in the form of Artificial Intelligence (AI), may alter our field more dramatically than ever before. During the careers of the authors, we have experienced the following:

- In the 1980s, automation was feared and often realized as a threat and challenge to manual jobs.
- In the 2000s, the internet made software and hardware skills a feared and often realized threat and challenge to jobs that were previously offline.
- Now in the 2020s, AI is feared and becoming realized as a threat and challenge to previously non-automated jobs. Although there is undeniably a lot (and we do mean a lot) of hype—as is often the case with any new technology—the reality will likely be similar in many ways to the previous technologies mentioned above in that there will be good, bad, and unpredictable challenges.

On a positive note, your dedication can be inspirational to those just starting or those jumping back in. Your longevity expresses an unwavering desire to support human-centered design and user research in different ways throughout one's career. Seeing this, mentees have been impressed with the continuous need for these human-centered services over decades.

What Hurts?

What can hinder you from helping newcomers to the field? Experienced professionals may not fully grasp current economic, career, or societal pressures, leading to disconnects in perspective. Keeping abreast of the changing landscape can help mentors and colleagues understand the current and near-future environment. As an important example, there is much contention about return-to-office policies for those who have been working remotely since the pandemic in 2020. It seems many older leaders would like a return to the way things were, but many younger workers appreciate the flexibility while still meeting or exceeding their performance requirements.

As another example, it is relatively well known that fewer jobs offer the long-term prospects of decades past. In the usually relatively stable sectors of academia and government, expected job security has become more difficult to obtain.

Experienced professionals may struggle with adapting to newer technologies, leading to frustration on both sides. For example, hype about AI may lead some professionals to dismiss opportunities presented with the careful application of AI.

Older and more experienced professionals may struggle with adapting to present-day social norms, creating cross-generational challenges. For example, more people live alone now, which causes career decision-making that involves only one income and job to look very different than another's decision path.

Alternately, many older and more experienced UX'ers may wince at what appears to be ageist attitudes or behaviors from younger professionals they want to help. For example, we were conducting a usability test for an automotive manufacturer with advanced technology for dashboards and center consoles. As one older participant was departing, the testing staff remarked about how effortlessly he had been using the technology given his age. After looking up his background, the team was surprised to learn he had been VP of a well-known technology company.

While this can obviously have real consequences, some patience with differences in perspective can help. We often think that, early in one's career, one does not have enough experience to apply for a job. But then, at some magical point, we begin to have too much experience. There's no happy medium!

All of these potential hindrances can be overcome by building mutual respect and open-mindedness to help bridge the gaps. Experienced and newer generations can learn from and support each other effectively.

Mentoring

In addition to helping less experienced professionals find jobs whenever possible, mentoring before, during, and after a graduation or job change can be beneficial. As many of you have experienced, the benefits go both ways between the mentor and the one being mentored.

Here are examples of the questions mentees have asked in the past couple of years about the field of UX. Some examples from one mentor's recent experiences include, but are not limited to, the following:

Q: With a background in psychology or a related field, how does one transition to working in UX or other similar design or research fields?

A (or Suggestion): Map design and research strengths to new opportunities. This is precisely the path one of the authors chose, so it is achievable! Market Research is another opportunity that can closely align with this background in psychology and research.

Q: With a background in human-computer interaction, how does one broaden the ability to work in UX or other similar fields?

A: Consider trends in business, applied design, and technology.

Q: How does one prepare to work in a regulated field such as medical devices or utilities in which risk analyses are critical?

A: Review industry-specific standards and explore risk analysis techniques.

Q: How do human factors and UX relate to one another?

A: There can be a great deal of overlap depending on the sector, project, or product, which mentees may find confusing. Take note of the terminology used in job descriptions or on organizational websites.

Q: Do I need a graduate degree? Do I need more training or certifications?

A: Explore the pros and cons and what mix might be right.

Q: Is my portfolio or set of case studies compelling?

A: Ask for an objective review(s).

Q: Should I be a generalist or a specialist? If a generalist, how do I avoid burnout if asked to wear multiple hats? If a specialist, how do I keep some other options open?

A: While there may be pros and cons of each, some may find starting as a generalist, if they can, provides a good way to decide if a more specialized role may be an even better match. Of course, oftentimes job positions dictate how general or specific we can be, with generalists typically working in smaller organizations and specialists in larger.

Q: Should I work in academia or industry?

A: Explore the pros and cons of each field and the challenges in moving between the sectors to aid in decision-making. For instance, having diverse experience outside academe can enrich one's teaching, yet academic research is often quite specialized and requires focus to achieve funding and publication. Going back and forth between academic and non-academic can be tricky for this reason.

Q: Who can I network with?

A: LinkedIn® is still the most popular networking platform, but encouraging others to reach out to specific companies and people can provide a much-needed human touch.

Q: What are the job titles being used in today's job market that may match my capabilities?

A: This is especially tricky as automation relies on keywords, and job titles and position descriptions are notoriously variable. Search for open positions and consider what the current market is asking for.

Q: Should I freelance, work for a small organization, or work for a large organization?

A: Again, a discussion of pros and cons can be helpful. If there is a choice, people may benefit from working in an organizational setting to gain experience before embarking into solo freelancing. However, market conditions may dictate otherwise. A very talented UX graphic designer, whom the authors know, broke into the field freelancing to start and now works for a larger organization.

Q: Can I take a break to travel or for family needs, and still come back?

A: It depends. (Being a sounding board for the factors under one's control can make answering this easier or harder.)

The Future

Tom Tullis told us that we were in for tough times in 2009. Were he here with us today, he may well have remarked that this one is a whopper!

The unknowable aspects of our future careers can be fascinating and unnerving:

- How will the world change over my career lifetime?
- What local, national, or international events will shape the employment opportunities?
- How will my personal life change (health and family)?
- Will UX transition to Experience Design or some other name?

Then there are the personal considerations:

- Where am I open to living? How flexible geographically am I now?
- How much am I willing to work in terms of both hours and demands?
- How much money do I really need?
- How can I prepare myself for future employment ups and downs (such as by managing debt and saving)?
- How much do I want to work to be satisfied in the moment and long-term?

There are plenty of conversation starters and questions for discussion among colleagues and mentees.

Conclusion

We want to help new generations of UX professionals by recognizing the changing environment and that it may not be like anything we have ever experienced. We can listen, network, and encourage responsibly.

Some parting ideas for you to consider are these:

1. Make connections within your network as appropriate to help others.
2. Listen well and offer your lessons learned when asked.
3. Model a calm and patient demeanor.
4. Encourage discussion of financial considerations when appropriate.
5. Describe the up and down cycles that historically occur.
6. Present your career path which shows your flexibility over time to adapt.
7. Stay up-to-date on technological developments.
8. Stay open-minded about changes in social norms.
9. Be open to learning.

We expect that the skills and knowledge required for UX research and design will be relevant for decades to come. As the job market cycles go up and down, we can help others with less experience to find their niche, or pivot as needed and use their talents in a related endeavor.

About the Authors



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As a 2005 graduate of Bently University's Masters of Science in Human Factors and Information Design program, John has extensive UX research experience. He has worked in the financial, health insurance, retail, and (currently) utility fields. He lives outside of Charlotte, NC, with his wife and daughter.



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Cathy has worked in human factors, usability, and user experience starting in 1980. Her experience included working for General Physics Corporation (now GP Strategies Corporation), Human Factors International (HFI), the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), non-profits, and smaller software consulting firms. She is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA), Division of Applied Experimental and Engineering Psychology. She is currently enjoying living on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, vacationing on Cape Cod, and visiting grandchildren in the Hudson Valley.