

Emerging Technology

ERP MADE EASY?

Software developers are rediscovering the virtues of user-friendliness.

IN THE EARLY 1980S, THE DESIGNERS of Kwik-Chek, Intuit's first personal-finance package, set a bold goal: a novice PC user should be able to install the software and print a check within 15 minutes. Developers whisked people off the streets of Palo Alto, California, and timed them with a stopwatch, tweaking the program after each test. Thus began a whole new facet of software design, focused on making sure high-tech products were user-friendly.

A quarter-century later, entire companies are built around the need for software usability, and research centers and academic journals are devoted to it. Microsoft alone has 43 usability labs. Nevertheless, a funny thing happened on the way to software-usability nirvana: while many consumer apps became easy enough for a five-year-old to use, much business software continued to baffle grown-ups.

"Ten to 15 years ago you had better software at work than at home," says Dan Matthews, the Sweden-based chief technology officer of IFS, an enterprise resource planning (ERP) vendor. Then the Web took off. "The Internet produced an instant mass market. Developers building a service [for consumers] on the Internet couldn't call

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DAN MATTHEWS,
CTO AT IFS

the user to come in for a training session, so their tools had to be designed to be picked up intuitively."

Meanwhile, business apps like enterprise software became more and more complex. In a survey conducted last year by IFS, 20 percent of enterprise-software users said their top causes of wasted time were learning different modules and applications and just trying to find task-related information.

Data like that should rattle managers. For one thing, says Matthews, productivity is not just about doing things faster, but also about not wasting time. Also, the success of ERP rollouts hinges on end-users actually adopting the applications in their daily work. "If you ask CFOs, they don't really care about how delighted employees are about using the new software," Matthews says. "But they do care about how many months there are between when the software goes live and when employees are regularly updating time and expense reports in the system, or project managers are using it for planning."

MASS APPEAL

In what looks like the beginning of a welcome trend, some enterprise-software vendors are putting renewed emphasis on usability. IFS is currently testing an Enterprise Explorer interface that emulates the look and feel of consumer applications, predominantly a Web browser. "No one knows all the information there is on the Internet; enterprise software is the same way," Matthews says. "We have 7,000 different forms in the IFS applications." With the new interface, IFS users can navigate via hyperlinks and search windows instead of modules and folders.

Agresso Software is currently working on a new version of its ERP system with help from a user-interaction and -design company. The challenge is to come up with a design that has broad appeal. "In the past when you developed finance systems you were cover-

ing the core of a company, maybe 100 users," says Ton Dobbe, vice president of marketing. "Now the number of users is six or seven times that."

Microsoft is taking a tailored approach to usability with its Dynamics NAV software. The system features the company's "role tailored" user interface, which is designed around the individual user and his or her job function. The goal of role-tailored design is to "take out the 90 percent of the app that is not needed in that job," says Jakob Nielsen, a principal user-experience manager at Microsoft. To develop the interface, Microsoft built a customer model that describes 61 corporate "personas," or user profiles, and the core activities, interactions, pain points, and psychographics of each. One persona, for example, is Phyllis the Accounting Manager, for whom an acute pain point is the tedium of correcting posted transactions.

DESIGN OF THE TIMES

With this refreshed perspective on usability, ERP developers are vying to make their software attractive to young workers, who have grown up with a new generation of technology. This may require looking beyond the browser model. A piece of business software doesn't have to look and feel exactly like, say, Apple's iPhone, but it needs to be "a designed product," says Matthews. When a company rolls out a new ERP system, employees should be excited about taking that first test drive, he says.

Well, maybe. Given how uninspiring most ERP software is right now, that may be setting the bar too high. Most users (and executives) would be satisfied with software that makes tasks simple to execute—as simple as, say, printing a check. **cfo**

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