

User-Centred Redesign of the Home Office Public Web Site

Dr. Jason Ryan,
Rachael Rainbow
Cognitive Applications

Dr. Sarah Burton-Taylor
Web Usability Partnership

Mark Boardman, Emma Charles,
Gemma Richardson
Home Office Digital Communications Team

This case study describes how the Home Office working with consultants, the Web Usability Partnership and Cognitive Applications, has applied a user-centred methodology to deliver a greatly improved web site design which has senior management buy-in, meets Home Office strategic objectives, and most importantly, can be shown to accurately meet the needs of its intended users.

BACKGROUND

As part of a major web site redevelopment project, the Home Office wanted to develop a user-driven information architecture that met user goals and satisfied the business needs of the department.

The existing site was attempting to reach all of its audiences, including stakeholders, practitioners and the general public. Whilst there was a great deal of useful and relevant content, the site was failing to reach any of its audiences in a satisfactory manner. A lack of consistency in the site organisation and implementation was compounding the problem with users finding it difficult to find information needed to meet their goals, either through browsing or searching.

In order to develop strategic recommendations for the site scope and architecture, site stakeholders and users were interviewed, and usability testing was conducted along with a content analysis of the current site. A programme board was also set up with representatives from the major units within the Home Office to oversee the project and sign off key milestones. This collaborative approach ensured that the Home Office had ownership of and was committed to the outcomes whilst utilizing the skill set of the combined team.

Although the new web site has not yet been launched (content is currently being rewritten and a new content management system (CMS) is being commissioned) the project to date has been very successful. It is a unique example of the complete application of user-centred design techniques to the redevelopment of a large Government web site and serves as a useful model for other organisations looking to tackle the same issues.

METHOD

The project involved six main phases of work:

- contextual research
- usability testing and analyses of the existing site
- user research
- determining scope and goals
- developing the information architecture
- developing and iterating prototypes

A wide range of stakeholders within the Home Office were involved throughout the process, from contextual research, where they were interviewed to establish their goals for the website, through the usability testing, user research and prototype testing, where they were engaged as observers and active participants in recording outcomes. Facilitated discussions following research and testing sessions enabled Home Office staff to share their interpretations and gain greater understanding and insight than they would have achieved through written reports; this was the start of developing a user-centred culture within the wider department as these observers were then able to go back to their respective business areas and 'spread the word'. The process also greatly helped achieve organisational buy-in to the site development ideas.

OUTCOMES

The key outcome of the process was an architecture for the web site that addressed issues relevant to and of interest to users, was intuitive for target users, and which met the strategic needs of the Home Office.

In order to develop an effective IA strategy, a consensual web communications strategy was developed that supported both organizational goals and user goals as identified in the research phase.

The resulting information architecture was documented in the following ways:

- an IA strategy report which described not only the information architecture, but also a strategy for development and maintenance;
- a web site blueprint showing the relationship between the content, search and navigation systems;
- a series of annotated page templates for designers;
- a technical specification – including task analysis and Content Management System recommendations;
- research and usability testing reports;
- a functioning prototype

The information architecture strategy contained a number of recommendations:

- To implement a solid user-focussed architecture that addresses common user goals as identified in the user research.
- To produce content that is relevant to users in their day-to-lives, and which is written in a style that users understand.
- To offer users consistent and meaningful related and contextual information.
- To improve the 'find-ability' of content on the web site by supporting two methods of searching including: (1) a standard site search facility that will initially only search web pages from within the main Home Office web site; and (2) a 'Document Finder' facility for users who wish to search for specific documents (press releases, speeches, consultations, circulars etc.) on specific subjects.
- To develop systems for capturing and recording metadata that can keep pace with content development.
- To develop an ongoing or regular programme of analysis and development in order to optimise the current areas of the site and develop new areas.

In total, over 200 users have so far contributed to the development of the web site. Wider Home Office employees have contributed to the development of the project at each stage and the Digital Communications Team are now taking the project forward into the graphic design and content creation stages.

CONCLUSION

The site redevelopment project has so far involved a number of research and usability processes. It has been a highly collaborative project between client and consultants, and at all stages the user has been the pivotal benchmark for decision-making. Whenever decisions about the site redevelopment have been made, these have been referenced to user requirements and evidence from the research, rather than subjective internal views.

The approach has also started to develop a broader user-focused culture throughout the organisation. By working so closely with internal stakeholders, the process of getting buy-in and sign-off to the various project stages has been enhanced and accelerated. However, this process has required significant commitment from Home Office Digital Communications staff and isn't without its problems; inevitably, other work pressures get in the way, which means that it is not always possible to involve all relevant internal stakeholders at all stages, but fortunately key individuals were available for key decisions.

By following a user-centred methodology which has involved substantial user research and staff involvement, a greatly improved web site information architecture has been developed which testing shows will be relevant to and can be used by a wide range of users, whilst meeting Home Office strategic requirements. From this solid foundation, the Digital Communications Team can take the project forward to the design and implementation stages.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION: contact Jason Ryan (jasonr@cogapp.com) or Rachael Rainbow (rachaelr@cogapp.com); Cognitive Applications; +44 (0)1273 821600; www.cogapp.com