Please, No More *User-Centered* Design

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As I carved out a design career in the technology industry, the humanity of my design training was slowly but surely subverted by a term with which I have grown increasingly uncomfortable. Like floppy disks, CDs, mouse cords and forty-five-pound monitors, the word *user* should be left behind with so many other cast-offs of computing technology's early days.

Before there were *Users*, there were *People*

People are the ultimate, universal concern of a designer. They are omni-present: from problem definition through solution refinement and beyond. In the industrial and graphic design studios of my college years, I was taught to move through a design process that focused my decisions on *people*—populations of individuals with physical, emotional, and cognitive characteristics, abilities, and tendencies. As design students, a studio project requiring us to design a set of knives focused our attention on *butchers, amateur cooks* and professional *chefs*. When designing the typographic composition of a book, we spoke of the *author* and the *reader* to remind us of the person for whom we were creating this object and the experience it would afford that individual. The more we understood people, the more accurately we could define a problem and the more likely we were to deliver a solution that was useful, innovative, even delightful.

During the second half of the last century, computing steadily advanced from the remote and mysterious mainframes of industry to the palms and pockets of nearly every man woman and child today. Designers eventually, and necessarily, merged their skills into this migratory event. And as the designer's importance to this event increased, the *person* upon whom their work had always focused was supplanted by another—*a user*. This would be the one-degree shift in design's trajectory that decades later, has designers in a place far away from their human-centered origins and having less impact than they may appreciate. To understand the significance of this small shift we must look back decades ago when design's course was changed by one degree—that one word, *user*.

The right word at the right time

I pushed my way into software development as the technology industry rushed to bring personal computers to the mass market in the 1980s. As a designer at that time, most technology-led project teams thought I was making their creations *pretty*, tending to the "look and feel" of their new graphical user interfaces.

Not wanting to be just the *creative* guy that designed the icons for the system, I needed to maneuver so that I could more deeply affect these new kinds of products that were a mix of graphic design, industrial design, and something altogether new—screen-based interaction. Invoking the word ***user*** did it.

I discovered that just the mention of the individual who would ultimately engage with the software products could give programmers pause, if just momentarily. And in that moment, this designer could attempt to influence the technologist's decisions—get them to go the extra mile in the name of delivering a product that would be just that much more understandable for the *user*.

These were early days. The Internet hadn't taken off yet, most client-server software development projects were failing, and an industry was very much figuring things out. Getting working software out the door was our biggest challenge. My focus was the user, their moment of interaction with a computer screen, and the designer's value would be measured in how *usable* the software was.

That was then. A lot has changed, but the use of the term *user* has not.

What's the problem with *user*?

Long ago, Madison Avenue taught us that consumers represent a far more complex challenge, and opportunity, than we are afforded if we consider them only within the seconds it takes to remove the bag of frozen peas from the supermarket freezer, or the minutes it takes to drive a Ford Mustang off the lot. Thinking about people only within the confines of the seconds, minutes, or hours that they are engaged with a product ignores the greater part of their humanity, transforms *people* to *users*, and sets designers on a narrow, dull, and insignificant path. Discovery, opportunity, and invention lie far beyond the moment that a product is touched.

It's inaccurate and presumptuous. The individuals who interact with software are not users; they are people who will use the software. To call the individual who is the object of our design efforts a user is to engage them with our solutions before we have accurately understood a problem or opportunity, let alone created anything. The term expresses us to the moment when a person engages with a designed object. Before they are users, they are people, in some human context, with a history, culture, tendencies and all the things that make them human.

Change the term *user* to the *role* that a person assumes within the workplace: *accountant, analyst, manager, executive, call center operator*, and technology takes a step back while the *human* comes into focus. Does the call center application supporting a customer service representative make them feel helpful, empowered, and confident? Or does it represent a cold, exhaustive inventory of features and functions defined by business stakeholders and assembled into logically organized and accessible screens? Unless those well-ordered screens and sweeping inventories of features are enabling confident and empowered people who are delighting needy or frustrated customers, *user* and *usability* are guiding us away from human-centered design, blinding us to innovation opportunities, and limiting return on our operating investments.

Usable outcomes, but are they useful…even inspired? In *user-centered* design we are usually driving toward the *usable* and not necessarily the useful, let alone the indispensable. In the 1980s and 90s, when we were pushing personal computers toward consumers whose previous computing experience was the use of a Texas Instruments calculator, usability was paramount—even if sometimes elusive. *User* and *usability* were interchangeable and together they became design's North Star within the world of technology.

With decades of design maturity behind us, the rules and patterns of a 'usable' software application are well known and easily applied. Achieving usability is hardly a proud moment for the designer. To celebrate a highly usable software tool is akin to celebrating a modern skyscraper that conforms to the building code's ADA requirements. Digging into the human context of a problem invariably creates new understanding that delivers opportunity, innovation, and invention to the design process. In technology projects, beginning with the *user* means we are beginning and ending with a computer screen.

In a recent master data management project, a *user-centered* project aimed to increase the efficiency and accuracy of a relatively small team of professionals charged with fulfilling master data update requests inside a large global company. When designers took a *human-centered* approach the focus of this project shifted from the team making updates, to the entire population of employees likely to make a master data change request. The people making updates were highly skilled and incredibly nimble—because for years, 50-70% or requests were flawed—driving a lot of follow-ups by these professionals. By making requests and requestors more accurate, request arrived without errors and updates were made without delay. The impact transcended what could have been achieved with a focus on the usability of master data updating software.

The problem is particularly acute in the workplace

Technology has become ubiquitous because of how well the creators of the most innovative, widely adopted solutions have incorporated a deep understanding of people into their creations. Ride sharing apps are more than usable. What we are interacting with is rooted in human insights extending well beyond the design of computer screens. It is a system that understands our context and our needs and expectations in the transportation event beyond the screen. Enterprise technology teams have been happy to employ user-centered design professionals and methods in the name of delivering *usable* systems. And business operators have been satisfied with this approach, even as accompanying training and change management budgets have grown. Leveraging design beyond system usability goals has been slow in the workplace.

Sure, computing became ubiquitous in part because devices and applications are so easy to use. However, sustaining a person's connection requires more than consistent placement of buttons and careful word choices. Successful digital tools have two things going for them: the cost of entry is low—*I can figure this thing out*, and the value of engagement is clear and considerable—*this thing **gets** me!* These connecting values are rooted in a deep understanding of the person for whom this digital object is intended. For the tool's creator, this human insight is the center of opportunity for transformation, innovation, and invention. This is not well considered when business tools and methods are being defined. When a medical record system employs *user-centered* design to ensure usability, its creators may be doing little to benefit two people in a cold examination room conversing, collaborating, and seeking mutual understanding. A user-centered design answers the question, how do I make it easy for a caregiver to retrieve and enter data (while assuming that if it's usable, caregiving is enhanced). A human-centered approach may focus on

the question, what do these people need, and what can technology do in this situation to address these needs?

Course correction for greater impact

The term *user* places a *person* in front of a computer screen. *User* is not *who a person is*. It is a role that a *person* assumes when they engage with an object. Who someone is—their contexts, needs, relationships, beliefs, expectations, and limitations—exists prior to interacting with the object, extends after engagement has ended, and reveals to an object's creator what form an object should take to best serve that person, when they choose to become a *user*. The user of a ride sharing application is a commuter, a shopper, a senior citizen, a student—a *person*. The *user* of a tool that supports financial accounting may be a tenured employee, a CPA, a newly hired professional or a go-getter analyst climbing the corporate ladder. Beyond the rules of accounting, human insights reveal system requirements and opportunities that can surprise, inspire, and mitigate risk.

A return to *human-centered* design and a decreased emphasis on the *user* offers an opportunity to depart from the user-centered world that satisfied a need for usable systems during the rapid expansion of technology to every aspect of our lives. Human-centered design is a tradition that delivers insights to guide technology investment toward transformation and invention—not just usable digital tools. From artificial intelligence and machine learning, to updated work methods and new workplace tools, technology's ability to deliver on promised returns hinges in large part on deeply understanding the humanity of the target contexts of these investments.

Designers delivering transformative human insights to industry

ZENDA designers come from a wide breadth of backgrounds: behavioral sciences, industrial design, architecture, graphic design, engineering, fashion design, and the humanities. ZENDA's clients are corporate enterprise business and technology leaders who are looking past the user-centered to invent ways of working that are informed and inspired by their people. Complementing operational goals and technological advances with human context insights leads our clients to truly unexpected and innovative ways of working.

About the Author

Harold Hambrose is ZENDA's Chief Design Officer. In the 1980s and 90s Harold had the opportunity to lead design efforts for many personal computing firsts while establishing and growing *Electronic Ink*—the earliest and eventually largest design firm focused exclusively on the design of human experiences with enterprise systems.

Harold speaks at enterprise systems and operations conferences, has served as an expert design witness in $1B enterprise system product litigation, and is the author of *Wrench in the System* published by John Wiley & Sons.