

Usability Testing: Best Practices

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[Meaghan Hudak](#) | Reading time: about 3 mins

Earlier this year, I participated in my first usability test. From the experience, I've gained some helpful insights and learnings. You may be wondering where I went for a usability test.

Let's start with, what is Usability Testing?

[Usability testing](#) is a testing method for measuring how well and user-friendly an application or product is.

A small, targeted set of end-users will test the application or product to discover any usability errors. Usability testing focuses on how easily users can accomplish tasks within a system.

This level of testing is often performed on the current version of the product, or at the beginning of the software development life-cycle.

A group of users will review the application to be developed in accordance with what the users want from it.

From there, suggestions and improvements can be considered. To kick things off, I've included five points to consider during the usability testing process:

What is your goal?

What is the question you're trying to answer with your test? Is there a design issue on a website that is hindering users? Is there a new product you want to test? Based on your goal, pick specific tasks to give the test participant. We'll learn much more if we watch them try to accomplish something.

Participant Recruitment

Recruiting test participants may seem daunting, but it doesn't need to be. For starters, we only need 5 people. Jakob Nielsen explains [The Magical Number](#)

Getting more participants isn't worth it because there are diminishing returns on the data. Focus on finding representative people. This means people who have a reason to do the tasks we're testing. How do you find the right people?

The first place to look is your user base. It's an instant pool of potential participants who care about your product. Once you've found participants, explain what the test will take.

Prep for the Usability Study

Detail what steps you want the user to take to uncover accessibility issues or challenges. You're going to want to write a script. This ensures we're giving them the chances of inconsistencies between tests.

You'll want to record the test so you can focus on what's happening and avoid having to take notes under pressure.

Perform the Usability Study

Welcome the participant and explain to them how the test will work. You want to take some of the pressure off. Explain you are not testing them... you're testing the application, mobile app, etc).

If they make mistakes, it's not their fault and the test is not punitive; we're here to learn from their experience. Ask them to try to think out loud as they perform.

Explain that to ensure conditions are as real as possible, you won't be able to offer them any advice or guidance. Explain the real-life scenario that would lead them to use the interface. Let them read the task out loud and begin. It's important to remain neutral and silent as the participant takes the test. This is how you use the interface. You're there to listen and watch.

Users may be critical or run into problems but resist the urge to explain things or prompt them. If they ask you how to do something, reply with "What do you think you would do?"

After each test, take a step back with the participant and ask, "How'd that go?" If you have specific questions, you can retrace their steps and ask them open-ended questions like "What do you decide to do that there?" or "What was going through your mind at this point?"

Data Analysis

Review the recording. Did the participant complete the task successfully and efficiently? If not, what stopped them? What were their key behaviors and comments for patterns between the different participants.

Rank the issues, identify solutions, and determine the best course of action moving forward.

The Human-Centered Design data synthesis methodology explained:

Synthesis Process

- Externalize the data and organize it by creating an Affinity Diagram.
- Draw connections between the groupings to develop deeper insights and identify common themes.
- Distill the themes, generating insight statements to summarize key learnings or findings.

Quantitative vs. Qualitative

- Quantitative data reflect whether the tasks were easy to perform
- Qualitative data consist of observational findings that identify design features that were easy or hard to use

Task Efficiency

Measure the average (mean) time taken to complete each task. Some users may simply take longer to carry out tasks, possibly skewing the results by making the average time to complete tasks higher. To account for this, mean totals should also be calculated.

By following these best practices, you will be able to implement the changes to better serve your customer and users.



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