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The new reality: Technology must be self-evident

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I recently challenged a product person at Google, asking if a certain option — toggling on or off Gmail's threaded conversation view — would be possible on a thread by thread basis. The Googler responded that it was certainly possible but that they wouldn't do it. Why? Because it would introduce complexity and confusion for users.

I smiled and said, "I'm really glad you guys think that way, even if the product doesn't let me do exactly what I want."

Why would I say that, and why is this significant?

Because, it's the exact opposite approach of the old way of building products in the technology industry, and it's a symbol of the new formula of discipline that is powering today's best tech products. Over the next decade this principle is going to change the balance of power in the tech industry and have a major impact on the job roles in the tech workforce.



The old model

Let's pick on Microsoft Word as an example of the old way. Although it is far from alone in this phenomenon, it is one of the most popular software applications of all time. The product started out great. It was one of the first word processors to offer WYSIWYG and introduce a toolbar. It quickly

conquered text-based Word Perfect by the mid-1990s.

But, then lots of different Windows and Mac users told Microsoft all of the things they wished the product could do or ways that they wished it would work and Microsoft took the best suggestions and kept adding on more and more features and options to the point that today's Word is so bloated, over-complicated, and bogged down with options that it's often difficult to figure out how to do basic tasks. In fact, it often requires a bunch of documentation and training to figure out how to use it.

This pattern has played itself out thousands of times with products as large as ERP suites and Microsoft Office and as small as the line-of-business apps that power niche industries within government and health care, for example. It even plays itself out in hardware (although software continues to become increasingly more important than hardware). Think of the laptops and desktops with lots of redundant ports and tons of confusing buttons and unused function keys.

All of these traditional tech products were the result of an industry racing to catch up with the relentless demand for computer technology. We had a phrase for this when we first started TechRepublic. We used to say, "We're building the plane while we were flying it."

The problem with that approach is that it typically allows inefficiencies to creep into the process and less thought is dedicated up front to the overall design and architecture of the product. In other words, it fosters a lack of discipline.

A self-evident user experience

The new way of building tech products is about less rather than more. It's about removing (or never implementing) rarely-used features rather than piling on as many as you can cram into a product. It's about not being hyper-reactive to a handful of user requests that may not reflect the larger user base. Most of all, it's about discipline — the discipline to stick to a product's core functionality and avoid the temptation of product creep.

The end game of this disciplined approach is building products that have a user experience (UX) that is almost completely self-evident. That's why products with stripped-down GUIs and feature sets like the iPad, Android, Gmail, and Salesforce.com have become meteoric success stories.

A user doesn't need to approach any of those products with a user manual in hand or a half-day training course under his belt. The user experience is self-evident.

And, once people start experiencing these types of self-evident user experiences, it changes their expectations for the other systems they work with. They start wanting and expecting tech products that just work and that don't require a manual or help from an IT expert to set up and use.

For product builders, the tough part of instituting this kind of discipline is that you have to get comfortable saying "No" a lot. There are tons of ideas, features, and options that sound good when you're building a product but you have to create a process that weeds out the unnecessary and is continually in a state of brutally paring down to only the absolute core functionality.

Many of the incumbent tech companies do not have the culture, talent, or processes in place to do that. Plus, many are saddled with backward compatibility issues that keep them from making bold moves into the future. Nokia and BlackBerry are excellent examples. Both are under attack from newer systems that are far more self-evident (iPhone and Android) but have a large installed base

that they don't want to alienate by iterating too quickly. In both cases, they've ended with over-complicated products that suffer from many of the same maladies as Microsoft Word.

It's tempting to think that only startups or new products from big companies can achieve this kind of discipline to produce self-evident products. However, even Microsoft is showing signs that its "gets it" on this topic. Look at the Bing search engine and the Windows Phone 7 platform and you can see that the company had the guts to blow up the previous products and start over from scratch with a far simpler and more self-evident product. Of course, what they do with their two core products, Windows and Office, will likely be a different story but at least a couple of their product groups are making the right moves.

Some of you will take this idea of self-evident UX to mean that the tech products are going to be dumbed down and become less sophisticated. That will be an easy criticism to make since many successful products won't pile on as many features and will be more discriminating about the ones they do include. But, as Leonardo da Vinci said, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

What it means for tech workers

The move toward a self-evident user experience is going to have several natural consequences for the technology professionals who work with these products on a daily basis. In many ways, these IT pros have benefited from the overly complex and sometimes convoluted technology products because they were the ones who helped sort everything out for the users. That won't be the case for much longer.

There will be fewer jobs for IT pros who focus primarily on assisting users to learn and troubleshoot new and existing technologies. A lot of the IT jobs will shift toward project management (selecting the right products), programming (building next generation software), and the data center (working in the NOCs of large service providers).

This change isn't going to happen all at once next week or next month, or even next year. It's a process. It's already happening in many places, but it's something that is going to gradually unfold over a decade. Some places will hit a tipping point before others, but if you're a traditional IT professional you need to be aware of this changing dynamic and changing set of user expectations, because these are the factors that will fuel many of the changes in the tech industry in the years ahead.

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