To: Drs. Youngblood, Whittemore, Welhausen
From: Mst Nur E Taj Tamanna
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Re: Reflection on the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) Usability Testing Project

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Introduction

As part of the ENGL 7010 TPC: Issues and Approaches course with Dr. Stewart Whittemore, I collaborated with a classmate on a user research project evaluating the usability of the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) website. This project aimed to assess the website's accessibility and functionality, focusing on its effectiveness for diverse audiences. By advocating for user-centered design principles, we addressed real-world issues and demonstrated the critical role of technical communicators in improving digital platform accessibility and effectiveness.

Project Overview

This project focused on evaluating and improving the usability of the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) website to identify and address key accessibility and functionality. We designed scenarios for five participants representing diverse personas, including low-income families, parents, and health professionals. Participants completed tasks such as finding prenatal healthcare resources and locating Emergency Medical Services (EMS) licensing information. We gathered feedback through pre-test and post-test questionnaires, think-aloud sessions, and task performance metrics. In designing this testing process, we intentionally "mixed a number of characteristics within a subgroup while still maintaining the consistency," ensuring that our participants reflected diverse traits regarding "motivation, skill level, and experience" (Barnum, 2011, p. 119). These principles ensured a holistic evaluation of the website's usability for its varied audience.

The deliverables for this project included a comprehensive User Research Report, an accompanying Presentation, and a Project Proposal Memo. The findings revealed significant usability challenges, such as information overload, ineffective search functionality, and ambiguous navigation labels. Based on these insights, we provided actionable recommendations, including redesigning the navigation structure, improving search engine, and clarifying program names.

Usability Testing

In this project, we collaboratively developed objectives and usability testing scenarios addressed to realistic user personas, ensuring the testing process reflected the needs of diverse audiences. We screened participants to include a mix of first-time users unfamiliar with the ADPH website, which provided valuable insights into the platform's usability challenges.

During the user testing, we conducted think-aloud sessions, capturing participants' reactions as they navigated the website. Additionally, I administered pre-test and post-test questionnaires to assess users' comfort levels and gather actionable feedback. My role extended to analyzing the collected data, where I evaluated quantitative metrics such as task completion times and ease-of-use ratings. These metrics were then triangulated with qualitative feedback, including participants' difficulties with unclear terminology and confusing navigation. In the reporting phase, we drafted a comprehensive report that summarized findings and proposed detailed recommendations. These recommendations emphasized revising the website's information architecture, clarifying program terminology, and improving search engine functionality.

Findings and Audience-Specific Challenges

We identified key challenges faced by the ADPH website's diverse audience. The homepage overwhelmed users by combining professional compliance resources with public health services, so we recommended restructuring the navigation system to categorize services distinctly for citizens and professionals. Terminology barriers also emerged as a significant challenge. Users struggled with program names like "ALL Babies," which lacked clarity about their purpose. We suggested renaming such programs to align better with their intended services. Finally, the website's search engine often prioritizes irrelevant FAQ results over essential content. To improve user experience, we proposed refining search term matching and reordering results to ensure critical information was easily accessible.

Learning Outcomes

This project greatly enhanced my technical communication expertise, emphasizing the importance of addressing the ethical dimension of evaluation and content analysis. As Scott (2010) highlights, ethical deliberation involves "considering divergent norms, principles, and conventions in light of particular circumstances" (p. 303). This perspective guided my approach to understanding diverse audiences and critically assessing digital content to meet their specific needs.

Work Cited

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