Collaborative Design for Strategic UXD Impact and Global Product Value

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Abstract. Experts in the field of HCI have spoken at length about how to increase the strategic influence of User Experience Design (UXD) teams in industry [2] [5]. Others have talked about how to build a usability or user experience team in industry [3], and others have offered courses in managing HCI organizations [1] [7]. At the same time, other experts have spoken about the importance of making products usable and desirable for international audiences [9] and the value of “offshoring” their usability efforts [8]. Few though have discussed the value and process for an embedded UXD Group functioning as an internal consultancy to different product teams within their organizations. This paper presents both how the consultancy model can increase the strategic effectiveness of UXD inside a company, and how, by leveraging partners internationally, such groups can broaden the usefulness, usability, and desirability of their products to a more global audience.

Keywords: User Experience Design, Organizational development, User Experience Teams, Management, Internationalization.

1 Introduction

The Cisco UXD Group grew from a single person to almost 60 people. As this group increased its scope, it evolved through several traditional funding and organizational models (central funding, client-funding, distributed teams). In the more traditional organizational model, UXD resources are typically spread across multiple projects in order to support the design of all (or most) products across the company [1] [5] [7]. Most recently, this team has settled on the consultancy model. In this model, cross-functional teams of UXD experts combine to deliver an exceptional experience on just a few projects. The traditional models, their benefits, and challenges include:

- **Centralized funding model**, with a large budget from one centralized organization. In this model, one senior leader can manage the entire organization, which permits consistency of practice and process, as well as flexibility of UXD resources across the organization. The major challenge is that a central organization becomes a target for reduction or elimination, because it is such a large cost center. Also, in a highly decentralized organization (such as Cisco),
leaders in each division may request that UXD resources working on their project report directly to them.

- **Client-funded model**, where individual business units fund a central team that provides UXD resources to their teams, and one central UXD organization manages these people. The benefits of this model are similar to the central model. In addition, the central organization does not become a cost center because other divisions pay for UXD resources. However, managers in each division may feel that UXD practitioners who are not part of their organization are not core or central to their business—and they can decline to pay for the individuals at any point. This challenge becomes more likely when managers need to reduce headcount and do not want to eliminate the individuals whom they “own” (who report to them).

- **Distributed model**, where there is no central UXD group, but UXD practitioners (and smaller groups) report directly to the divisions for the products on which they work. One benefit of this model is that such people are viewed more as “insiders,” as part of the team. While an increasing number of companies are using this model, it poses many challenges for the UXD groups and their influence. There is often no explicit sharing of resources or processes across UXD groups, and destructive competition can arise. Unless each UXD group is large enough, practitioners can end up reporting to a manager who does not understand the value of the UXD function. In addition, without a central UXD group, there is no team responsible for UXD process, standards, or infrastructure.

At Cisco, these more traditional organizational structures met with some success. One group within the centralized model was able to show a ROI of more than 10x, or $50 Million USD annually. However, $50 Million in a company that grew from $4 Billion to >$30 Billion from 1999 through 2006 was barely noticed. Attempting to improve the usability, usefulness, and desirability of too many products at one time diminished the Cisco UXD group’s ability to gain the sustained support of senior executives. The Cisco UXD group needed a different model.

Senior leaders at Cisco, and other companies, both in mature and emerging markets, are held responsible for steep revenue growth. As such, they are in search of the next “advanced technology” (AT). AT’s are disruptive innovations [6] that differentiate one company from its competition, resulting in large revenue increases. To become strategically relevant, the Cisco UXD team needed to deliver disruptive innovation that changed the way people thought about and interacted in a domain.

Therefore, these executives want to invest in groups that can drive radical differentiation. They may also invest in groups that incrementally increase revenue or decrease costs (such as prior Cisco usability teams), but they are likely to invest the most in groups who prove that they can stimulate disruptive innovation [6].

Attempting to improve the usability, usefulness, and desirability of too many products at one time diminished the Cisco UXD group’s ability to gain the sustained support of senior executives. The Cisco UXD group needed a different model, so it could increase revenue geometrically instead of incrementally. To influence a complex-systems company [6] such as Cisco, the UXD Group needed an ROI of 100x to 1000x.