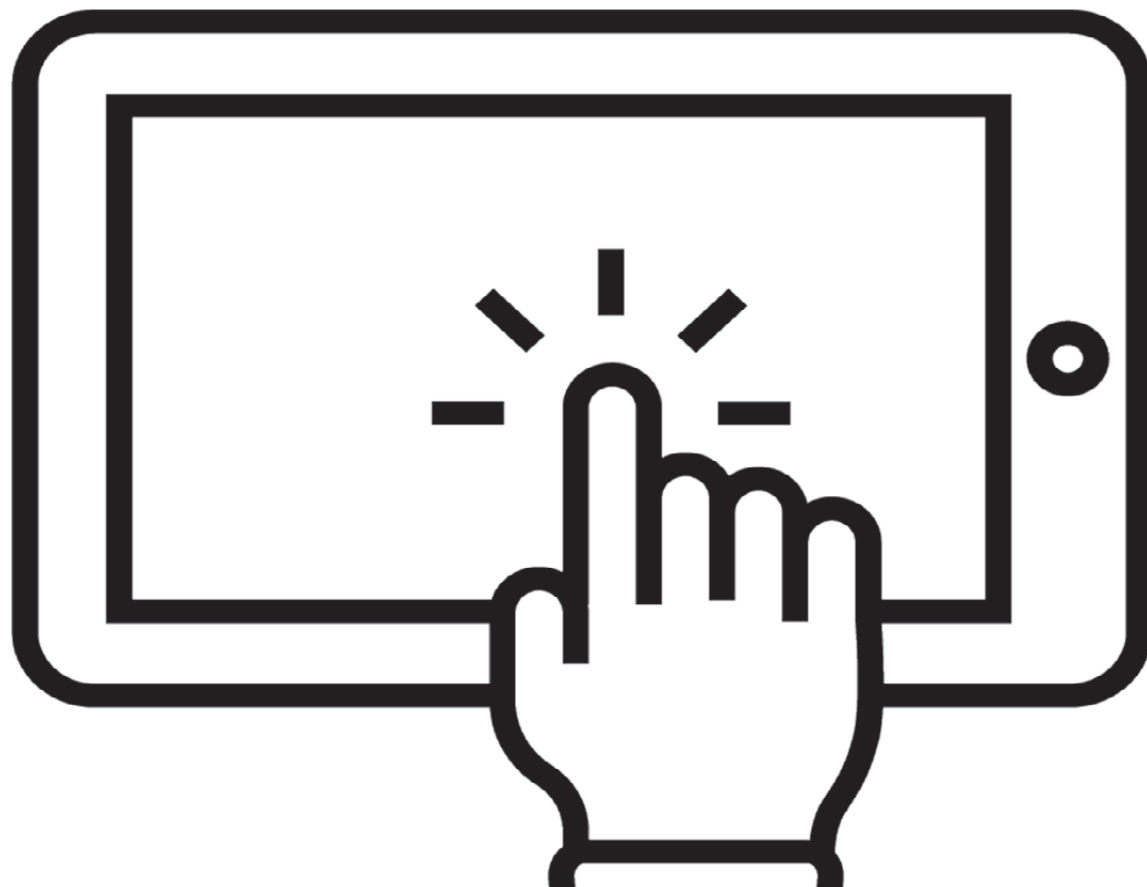


THE GREAT UNKNOWN



UX has become the buzzword in AV, but a lack of a clear understanding is slowing its progress says **Paul Milligan**.

Hands up who knows what UX is? Everyone knows what it stands for (user experience) but this is where knowledge seems to end for many of us. UX is often used to describe web page design; is your site easy to navigate? In AV terms it's been used to describe GUI design; is your AMX touchpanel simple to use? UX is really a philosophy which puts the user at the centre of every design decision, and this lack of expanded knowledge is a big problem in the AV industry says Adam Banks, co-founder, UX-Study, an agency specialising in designing and creating spaces for research. "People don't even know what

they don't know. The whole concept is so alien to them. They don't even realise what it means or what it is." Part of the reason he says is that the AV industry hasn't progressed at the speed it thinks it has. "Go back 15-20 years, we added an AMX panel with an interface designed by someone who doesn't know a great deal about UX design. Fast forward to now, you've got an AMX panel or Crestron panel with a much higher resolution interface, but it's still designed by someone who doesn't know about UX design."

Definitions on UX may differ but they all follow a similar pattern; designs must be consistent and must be user focused. Trade body AVIXA is

currently writing a standard on 'User Experience Design for AV', out later this summer. To help clear up confusion around the term, AVIXA defines the standard as: 'focusing on human interaction with such systems and will incorporate elements of ergonomics, aesthetic factors that prompt intuitive engagement, automation, web development, AI/sensing; and other disciplines'.

The message of UX is slowly getting through argues Tony McCool, head of interactive and collaborative solutions pro-AV, from distributor Exertis. "The choice for customers can be confusing. We shifted our language and changed our approach. We never speak about

...WITH JUST ONE CLICK!



Users do not care about your AV design, if it's not meeting users' needs, it's pointless.

Adam Banks, UX-study

products first. We always talk user experience and expectations; what do you want to do? How do you want to work? What do your face to face meetings/gatherings look like? Only when we know this can we consider thinking about products.”

The industry is clearly behind where it should be with UX, and that may be because of the way we are all built explains Greg Jeffreys, director of Visual Displays, and a member of the AVIXA UX standards task group. “One of the big stumbling blocks is that we’re all technologists, we’re all geeks and nerds. We’ll walk around ISE and see a

fantastic new widget and then think I can’t wait to find a project that we can use that on. Whereas in reality, if you are going through the UX process, which is based around human-centred design, it has nothing to do with technology, you need to engage with the users, you need to interview them to extract their needs, not give them what you think they need. That’s a very skilful but separate process.”

Chris Maritz, client relations specialist at system integrator Prosirius, believes the industry did drop the ball when it came to UX, but the Covid-19 pandemic has made people reassess it in the last 12 months. “Humans

were sardines carted from one transport facility to a seating arrangement back to a flooded freeway of cars all to just get home. AV was no different – more bells, more whistles, a new Zoom lens! But no real ease of user experience. Touch screens on tables and native Teams/ Zoom experiences started bringing this back to par but I still feel we have a huge way to go to convert the mundane into the insane.”

One example where AV is lacking when it comes to UX is that no major company currently has a UX team or even has UX roles within its workforce. How will the industry

ever embrace UX if the skills are not valued enough to pay someone to do it as a full-time job? Change must come from the top says Jeffreys, “UX has to be a C-level thing. The person holding the money and the one that’s going to invest in the building must understand if they followed this route they could save a whole bunch of money when they’re building the building, and they could save a whole bunch of money when they’re running the building, and they could make a lot more money by their buildings being much more occupiable. It has to be a gangster move, it’s going to

be very hard to address this as a bottom up thing.” We must start to get people with UX skills in to AV businesses or nothing will change says Banks. “If you are going through a user journey from someone wanting to design something, save it, edit it, a design system gives you descriptions of how that journey should work. These are the underlying systems that most companies use now, but the AV world just doesn’t. The nearest the AV world gets to a design system is ‘Bob’, who has been designing touch panels for the past 20 years and has a load of icons saved on his Windows laptop. That was true 20 years ago, and it’s true now.”

A UX team should be a given for any organisation in the AV world says Rory Brannigan, CEO from integrator ISDM, “It’s an investment into the satisfaction of your customers and will strengthen the relationship.” If there has been a reticence from the AV world to embrace UX in the past, Brannigan offers one explanation: “A preoccupation with user experience and the drive for change can make for uneasy bedfellows and perhaps



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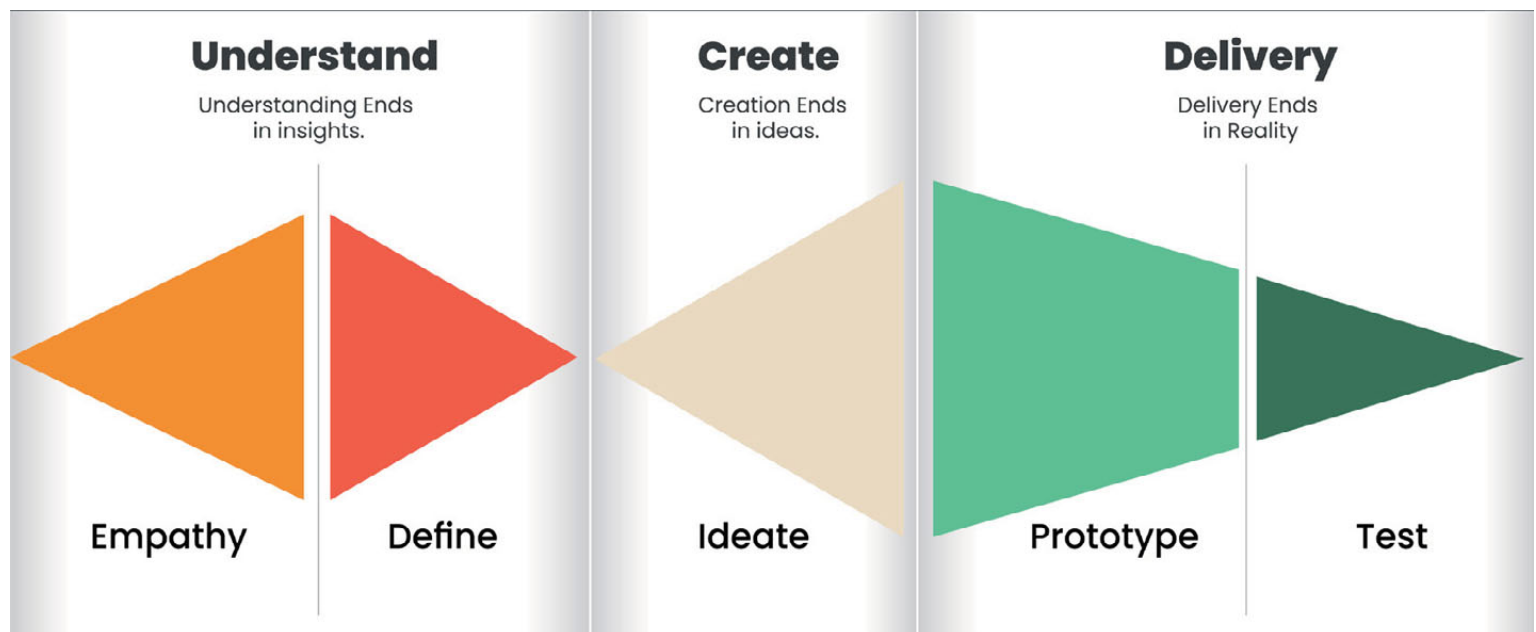
the AV industry feels that being drenched in user feedback all the time, would slow the innovative progress that it has enjoyed for so many years. Innovation is often coming up with products and solutions which people didn’t necessarily ask for, or even know that they needed. No one was lamenting the fact they didn’t have Netflix or an iPhone in the 1980s for example.”

As Jeffreys details above, are we as AV people too attracted to new and shiny things at the cost of usability? Can we be too detached from the end user and is that in turn hurting effective UX? “Unfortunately, yes,” says McCool, “but customers are wise to this now and are demanding a simple approach. Customers are thinking more about look, image and feel in their workspace. They don’t want an eyesore, they don’t want cables, they don’t want something on the desk.” There are simple UX techniques the industry can employ says Jeffreys that will make a difference to the final install. “If you look at a UX-driven project, apart from the fact that it’s completely different, it’s an

iterative process, and you will loop back as much as you need to. One of the foreign things to us in AV is prototyping and ideation. Prototyping can just be done with Post-It notes, but to actually have a creative and thoughtful process, to work through a problem or an issue, that is something that’s completely foreign to AV professionals, and it puts them in an uncomfortable place.”

There is one fundamental aspect of design that is sorely lacking says Banks, we don’t study those we are supposedly designing for. “I worked in the AV world for 15-20 years, thinking about the people who design systems I can count on one hand the number of times they watched and observed real users using those systems, it is incredibly rare.”

Whatever you are designing, there are two ways to plan it; engineer-lead design, or user-lead design. Engineer lead design is the ‘we know best’ school of thought, we know what people want, you need x and we can build x because we are the experts. User-lead design is the exact opposite. The thinking is



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Greg Jeffreys, Visual Displays

much more we are technicians who can create something when we find out what we need to create. And we will go out and learn from our users. And the only place we can know what to build is by learning from our users. The latter approach needs to play a much bigger part in the AV world says Banks, "The people designing things need to be more humble, have more humility and say we don't know." The fundamental question we must always ask ourselves as an industry says Brannigan is: "Are we solving problems, and making things better? Or is this change for change sake?" His company (ISDM) has created a customer success team, whose job it is to work with end users.

If we agree there is a lack of UX skills and knowledge in the AV sector, how do we go about correcting this? Do we upskill ourselves or buy the talent in? "I think the larger AV practices should definitely think about hiring UX people, because it's not a technical skill, it's a cultural shift that has to take place, and you learn by doing. Unless you are doing UX on a daily basis it's actually very hard to keep yourself honest, because unless you've got established

disciplines and practices it's very hard not to end up going native and reverting to type," says Jeffreys. There are three ways to go in bring in the skills you need says Adam Banks; hire an in-house UX team, hire a UX agency or hire a UX freelancer. He would suggest the last option, "There's some really very good freelancers who you can hire in for three months to work with you. AV consultants and integrators will see how professional UX people work and can learn from it." Could AV consultants try to skill themselves up in UX maybe? "It takes a lot of training a lot of time to be good at. Learn the basics absolutely, but what they shouldn't expect to be able to do is to become a fully-fledged UX professional, because it's a whole different skill set and a whole different profession," adds Banks.

If UX knowledge on the ground is limited, are there mistakes people are making around UX, and more importantly, how can we avoid repeating them? The mistake is designing things backwards, and I know this because I did this for a very long time when I was an AV designer," says Banks. "Users do not care about your AV

design, you can make the most wonderful, beautiful, clever AV design, if it is not meeting user's needs, it's pointless. What they need to be doing is starting from basic principles and starting from a user led approach. They need to be doing a lot of research all the time."

Research is a fundamental part of UX adds Banks, and this is where the AV world is letting itself down. "If a big bank goes to an integrator and asks them to design a suite of meeting rooms, what they should do is follow a user-led approach and say we'll need access to your users, we will need to discuss what they need to do and how they need to do it. We have people who can turn those user requirements into technology into systems into user interfaces. They don't do that. What they do is say we build meeting rooms. We'll just build you what we did last week. What they did last week was built and deployed and then they walked away. They didn't check. They didn't follow up. They didn't do any research into does it work on a functional level? Does it work on a user level? Does it meet people's goals and needs? What workarounds or people having to do?"

When looking for help on UX, do not fall down the trap of someone offering you an expert review adds Banks. "When you design something, someone will come in and look at it, whether it's an app or a web page or a process or a system, and they will do an expert review, they will be your user and tell you what you need to do. And the whole thing is utter rubbish. If anyone tells you they can do an expert review, do not employ them because they're saying I'm an expert user, there's only one expert user, it's all your users. That is it. The only place you can learn what's needed, is from them." As this final example from Greg Jeffreys shows, it won't take much for the AV world to embrace the fundamentals of UX, and the benefits will far outweigh the investment in time: "If AV practitioners put in an enterprise level solution at Morgan Stanley or Barclays, have they talked to the users before they put them in the room? Do they talk to them after they're in the room? It's such a fundamental thing, it also represents a massive opportunity for people who are willing to embrace this." 🗣️