Focus group

Introduction

Any development activity should ideally be preceded with a thorough user understanding and investigation of the usage patterns, expectations from the product and other key elements like skill sets of the end user, their behavioural, cultural study etc. This kind of analysis comes in very handy while designing and architecting the solution. The user study guides the design team in putting together software which would be both efficient and easy to use for the end user.

A qualitative research needs to be done to understand the user's domain and their usage pattern. There are lot of techniques to understand the user's requirements etc each with their specific outcomes. Focus group is one such form of qualitative research, in which a group of people from a specific user group are invited to change thoughts and feelings about certain subjects, products, services etc. A focus group is more like an informal discussion group where Questions are asked and the participants of the group are free to discuss and debate amongst themselves. The freedom of speech and expression gives the participants the comfort to express their thoughts about the questions and services openly; this then leads to valuable insight into the psyche of the end user.

Generally a focus group is steered by a moderator or a group of moderators, who ensure that everyone gets a chance to express them. It is the job of the moderator to ensure that the right questions are posed and the overall discussion does not get into a tangent and sticks to the points being discussed. The moderator is also responsible for ensuring that an individual or a group of individuals or a specific though process doesn't end up hijacking the entire group. S/he has to make sure that there is some sort of a level playing field between individuals and ideas for the overall focus group to be relevant and meaningful in the larger context.

There are various types of focus groups, for more on that look at Wiki link on focus groups.

How to conduct a good focus group exercise

Prepare well for the session

Preparing well for the activity is very important from the moderator's point of view. S/he should be absolutely sure about what they want to achieve from the exercise, what the key points that need to be discussed are and who are the potential participants in the focus group activity. You should note down the key questions, keep re-asking those questions to yourselves until you arrive at the conclusion that those are indeed the most important points that need to be discussed. Having done that carefully select the participants for the exercise, make sure you have a diverse background of people in the activity as that would ensure you get different viewpoints which should help you in understanding the user expectations and requirements much better.

Plan and execute the session well

After having done the ground work in terms of setting the objectives, finalizing your key questions and take away from the session and deciding on who the participants of the session are going to be, you should get down to getting the logistics of the exercise right. Plan the meeting venue and time in such a way that is convenient and comfortable for the participants to attend. Generally mornings or during the lunch is good time to conduct the session, as people tend to be in a hurry to leave during the evenings. Also make sure that you enough room to accommodate all the invitees, refreshments and other things also need to be taken care of well in advance to avoid any last minute hassles. Plan to record the meetings so that you have the liberty to go back to the tapes in case you missed out on anything during the meeting. Facilitate the session well by sticking to the agenda and ensuring that everyone gets a chance to talk and express them. Use the right moment to pose the right questions and ensure that you use the right words for the questions, so that the participants are able to understand you well.

Advantages

A focus group will most likely give better results than a one-to-one interview, because the participants can help each other to get more and more ideas. Also since the focus group generally comprises of people from different backgrounds, they come with different opinions and thought processes, this diversity brings in more points which can then be deliberated between the participants to get a more meaningful result out of the exercise. It is also ideal in case of user requirement gathering or brain storming kind of situations where the idea is to think out of the box to come up with new solutions. Marketing teams seem to rely quite a lot on focus group meetings to come out with new strategies and ideas. Also when evaluating with focus group, the benefit of interaction is clear. One person may not remember all the observations s/he has made but the memories might be triggered by something someone else says.

Disadvantages

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On the other hand, if there are some very dominant members in the group they might skew the outcome. They might end up overpowering their opinions over the others; this would mean that only a few ideas come out and others feel shunted out, which is not a good outcome. The group moderator needs to be experienced so that s/he can steer the discussion in a way that everyone can have her/his say. They need to ensure a level playing field and allow everyone a chance to speak; they also need to make sure that the group sticks to the agenda at all points of time. That way the group will give the best result. Another problem with focus groups is the issue of observer dependency, the results may be influenced by the researcher, raising questions of validity.

Application of focus group

Focus groups can also be arranged to evaluate usability of an existing application, for example. It then helps to discover how the system being tested differs from the user's expectations. This can be used in an iterative manner if possible to plug the short comings at each stage of the development process to minimize the cost and time impact at a later point in time. Focus groups can also be used by the development team while deciding on the design and architectural aspects of the application specially if it's big software in question. The design team can sit together and brain storm to come up with best approaches and practises for the final software.

Resources

More about focus groups can be found from:-

Focus group on webcridle

Usability first

Focus group on Useit.com

Management Help

--- Edited by Mayank on 21\06\2009 ---

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