

William M. Gribbons explains why, increasingly, leading organisations demand a balance of the user perspective with the traditional focus on technology, and how business schools can fulfil this need

Thirteen years ago, a group at Bentley University recognised an opportunity to reconsider the relevance of human-technology interaction – the discipline known as ‘Human Factors’ in business education. We saw technology slowly becoming a commodity rather than a point of difference, and we sensed a growing dissatisfaction with the return on investment for information technology and its unexpectedly high life-cycle costs. We recognised a contributing factor to these conditions was the traditional narrow focus on the technology itself, and the development community’s failure to properly consider the needs and abilities of the end user or customer.

What emerged from this analysis was the need for a new and comprehensive strategy focused on the user experience, independent of whether this strategy is applied to an internally facing IT system or to a product that competes in the open market.

Traditionally, ‘Human Factors’ graduate programmes were most often affiliated with schools of engineering, or possibly psychology. The programme at Bentley is one of the largest in the world, and we chose to locate it in our school of business.

The reasons behind this thinking, and the implications for the business community, are two-fold:

1. In the development and implementation of information technology; business, regulatory, and technical requirements must now be balanced with the needs and abilities of the end user (the human factor).
2. For producers of commercial technology products or technology-enabled services, competition is increasingly defined by the quality of the user/customer experience in addition to the capabilities of the core technology.





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The rules of the technology marketplace have changed, and business schools must adapt accordingly. Although today's business organisation is increasingly built on the back of complex IT infrastructures, business schools often question the role of information technology in the curriculum. We believe it is highly relevant in the business education curriculum. However, business schools must complement our traditional focus on the strategic, technical, and management aspects of IT with a significantly closer consideration of the user of this technology – Human Factors. The human factor is a consideration in product management components of MBA programmes, as well as in new technology product development and marketing courses. A narrow focus on technology's engineering and functionality is no longer adequate in today's marketplace.

Changes in the market do not happen overnight. We have witnessed a slow and steady migration from the narrow and deep focus on technology and process of twenty-five years ago, to an increasing attention to enhancing the usability of that technology in the 90s, to today's increasingly sophisticated view of the user experience. Most IT organisations and producers of commercial technology have slowly evolved to meet these changing demands. This evolution has not minimised the importance of the technology itself; instead, each stage builds on and adds value to the one that preceded it. IT organisations that systematically align the development and implementation of new systems with the needs and abilities of the user have lowered lifecycle costs by improving system acceptance, enhancing productivity, minimising errors, and reducing training/support costs. The commercial marketplace for technology products has realised similar benefits and gained a competitive advantage from a development process focused more closely on the end user.

At Bentley University, we set out to create a model of the user experience (UX) that meets the demands of today's business community and the producers of technology and technology-enabled services. We adopted a trans-disciplinary approach, blending the best of business with the arts and sciences. We defined the user experience as the careful alignment of human behaviors, needs, and abilities with the core business value delivered through a product or service. Depending on context, this experience may have psychological, cultural, physiological, or emotional components – most likely, a combination of the four. We

optimise this experience through the detailed study and assessment of "people" in the appropriate use environment. To avoid repeating the past mistakes of a narrow focus, the UX model carefully balances a user perspective with the goals of the business, including technical and regulatory requirements. The model recognises that this balance must shift based on the conditions and requirements of a particular use environment.

In practice, this model guided the design of a new graduate programme and a research consulting center at Bentley University. Key to our success has been our location in a business university. The educational experience is built on a strong foundation in human behavior, complemented by rigorous research methods needed to identify user and business requirements, and culminating in the exploration of a range of innovative design solutions. Some students focus exclusively on user experience research and design while many MBA candidates receive a dual degree in business and human factors to pursue careers in product management. At the same time, we increasingly collaborate with marketing colleagues, both at our institution and others, to explore the implications of the user experience for their programmes. In many branded technology organisations, the user/customer experience defines the brand itself.

Success is often measured in the academic community by the placement of graduates. UX professionals with a deep knowledge of the user, an appreciation for the goals of the business, and an understanding for the enabling potential of technology are in great demand in information technology and commercial development organisations. UX professionals work alongside business analysts, IT project managers and product managers. Through their research and design efforts, a carefully orchestrated user experience has become a significant point of differentiation for the world's most progressive technology producers and leading business organisations. Time will tell what lies ahead for new technologies and how these changes are addressed in schools of business. We are confident that the role of the user experience will only grow in prominence. **gf**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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