

bulletin

Joseph A. Konstan

From the Editor

TechNews, HCI, Business, and Success

"What do you think of TechNews?" seems to have replaced "how's the weather?" as the salutation of choice in our field. (Perhaps people just don't want to hear about the weather *here in Minnesota*.) Indeed, I've heard dozens of people comment how useful they find this awareness service. But what strikes me most is the number of SIGCHI people who feel ACM's service must have been designed with them in mind. Comments such as "I really like the content, though perhaps more hard-core technical types wouldn't" seem common.

Of course, as SIGCHI people, we can then move into a discussion of the four-level TechNews interface and how most of us decide to read it at a particular level or two (I personally like going to the web page directly for the longer introductions). But I want to reflect for a moment on what it is about TechNews that would both appeal to SIGCHI members and make many of us feel that we are receiving

content not really targeted at the mainstream of ACM members. I think the answer reflects how far our community has come into the mainstream of society, if not necessarily the mainstream of computing.

Personally, what I like about TechNews is the *News*--the focus on content that is relevant to business, consumers, and commerce. TechNews articles talk about the success of Linux in the real world, not the technical details of its implementation. They discuss the future of audio and video entertainment, not the architecture of MPEG-7. In other words, they focus on users and their tasks, not on technology for its own sake.

To some extent, ACM's TechNews reflects the progress of HCI as a field, and SIGCHI as an organization. I remember sitting around at CHI conferences less than a decade ago having discussions where academics and practitioners exchanged stories about

how little respect we received from our colleagues. Computer scientists, software engineers, and other technical people thought of our work as "soft." In recent years, and I'm sure at CHI 2000, the conversation has changed. How's your company doing? Have you gotten that product out? We're trying to hire good HCI people -- do you know any? Suddenly, it seems, HCI is extremely marketable. And respectable.

What happened? Has the rest of the world changed? Somewhat, but mostly I think we've shifted our focus. As a community, we've long known that usability mattered. We cited examples of companies, such as Apple, that built great businesses around usability. But we kept trying to measure ourselves against Computer

Science, Psychology, or another "pure field." The world *has* changed. Success, even in academia, seems more closely tied to the boom in the technology market. New blue-chip companies have emerged with real concerns about usability. While the technically sophisticated may scoff at AOL or Microsoft Word, the marketplace has shown that ease of use brings users--users who never would get on-line by sending commands from the keyboard directly to their modem or author documents with Emacs and TeX. In other words, usability leads to customers; customers lead to success.

What does it mean for us to suddenly be marketable? Is this a golden age? the beginning of the end? Or does it reflect a real opportunity to change the way technology is designed to interact with people? I think we are at a critical time where we can make a huge difference, if we can deliver. We have made great strides in developing and promulgating processes to support usability. We continue theoretical work, but need to accelerate our efforts to create and package theory in ways that allow

it to be readily applied to mass-market problems. And, in our biggest challenge, we must redouble our efforts to train people; there is an acute lack of HCI faculty, researchers, and trained practitioners. Fortunately, as we grow this field, we can point to increasing real-world success and use it to attract both people and capital.

In the meantime, I will continue to scan through TechNews and marvel at how many of the stories "are really about" HCI. And, of course, I'll keep asking "how's that company doing?" and "do you know any good HCI people looking for job?"

Erratum

Due to font and printing problems, the April 1999 article titled "It's not Greek to me: Terminology and the Second Language Problem" by Giorgos Lepouras and George R.S. Weir was printed without the Greek characters. Thanks to the efforts of the authors, a corrected version can be found on the SIGCHI Bulletin web site (<http://www.acm.org/sigchi/bulletin>).

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