



## Group design workshops

Generating design requirements through collaborative exercises

Hal Shubin, December 2005

*Picture this: Product managers, engineers and a physician sitting around a table decorating blocks of wood with stickers and markers. Online service representatives, business analysts and product managers sketching ideas for Web pages on oversized Post-It pads.*

Why are these busy professionals doing arts and crafts projects? They're not playing; they're collaborating on research that will lead to more effective product planning. Sharing ideas early in the process will help them write better specs and marketing documents, and lead to better designs.

Collaboration in group design workshops is an important part of the Discovery phase of the design process at Interaction Design.

A recent participant said, *"The group design session helped uncover new features as well as interesting twists on existing features. Some make market sense now, others may in the future."*



Discussing and sketching ideas led to a successful new Web site

## The process

The basic process is simple: small teams brainstorm about problems in a few usage scenarios and then sketch out their ideas. At the end, each team shows its work to the whole group, including the assumptions they made. The simple drawing exercises help them explore all of the details of each scenario. (And we don't judge anyone on drawing ability.)

Co-workers work together with nothing to think about but design. We frequently see people bring up ideas they've had, but have not had a chance to share. This strengthens the design process by exposing features or potential problems while it's early enough to consider them. As one engineer said, "We were taken out of our little worlds – we had to set aside time to think about UI issues but we weren't given time to overthink solutions, or get bogged down in

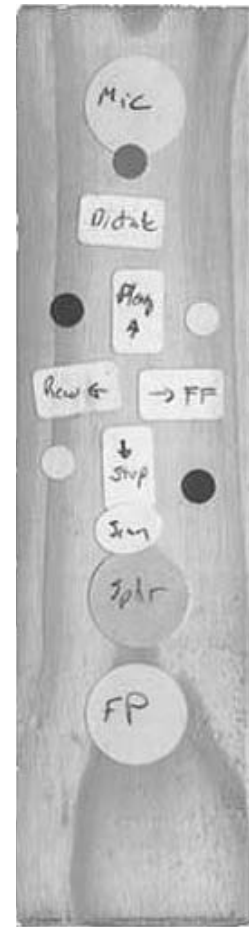
the details. This promotes ‘thinking outside the box.’ We had to talk to people from other organizations. We got some insight into how they struggle with the product (which is very different from how Engineering struggles with it).”

It’s an obvious choice to include product managers and lead engineers in planning sessions. But there are others who can contribute to good product design, including telephone support, documentation and QA. All of these people have direct customer contact or other deep knowledge, and they want to contribute. Users themselves can participate, too.

### Benefits of Group Design Workshops

We’ve seen many benefits in each Workshop:

- > *Provide a forum for collaboration.* These sessions let participants talk about their design ideas. They *have* ideas, but probably don’t have any time to discuss them. The collaboration is exciting; participants frequently need reminders to stop talking and start drawing, and more reminders to stop drawing.
- > *Understand the user’s point of view better.* We start a design project by thinking about who the main users are and by writing stories about their tasks. These are called usage scenarios, use cases or personas. Whatever the name, they make us think hard about design requirements. Good scenarios can help us decide which features we need and which are not useful enough to include.
- > *Develop and verbalize ideas.* All team members have ideas about product design. The Workshops provide time for people to just talk about design and share ideas that they will otherwise keep to themselves.
- > *Give a voice to all team members.* Many of our participants do not typically participate in product design. We invite them because their work gives them special knowledge of users and the product.
- > *Develop initial design ideas.* Results of the workshops always provide good starting points for product design. They are also a great way for design consultants to quickly learn about what you’ve been thinking about for months or longer.



A microphone prototype made of wood & stickers.

Can we use Group Design Workshops to get a design project going at your company? Contact Hal Shubin to find out. Let’s discuss UI design, expert product reviews or usability testing for your software or hardware project: 617 489 6595 or [hal@user.com](mailto:hal@user.com).