

Free / Libre / Open Source Software (FLOSS) Usability Sprints

Since February 2005, Aspiration and Blue Oxen Associates have been organizing Usability Sprints for the open source software community. These events bring together a diverse group of programmers, usability practitioners, project managers, and users to discuss methodologies for improving the usability of open source software (FLOSS) and to apply those processes towards specific software projects. In particular, we focus on projects that are widely used by the nonprofit sector. Past projects have included Mozilla / Firefox, Drupal, Chandler, WiserEarth, and Social Source Commons.

Background

Open source software has the potential to make a startling impact on nonprofit organizations and developing countries eager to improve their IT infrastructure. Unfortunately, the usability of FLOSS applications lags considerably behind proprietary counterparts, and adoption is suffering as a result.

The Wikipedia defines "usability" as follows (emphasis ours):

Usability is much more than a measure of how easily a thing (typically a software [application](#) (or a piece of hardware) can be used. It's not so much about the intentions of designers as it is about the needs of users. Usability addresses the full spectrum of impacts upon user success and satisfaction. Usability is accomplished through user-centered (not necessarily user-driven) design. The usability expert provides a point-of-view that is not dependent upon designers' goals because the usability expert's role is to act as the users' advocate. For example, after interacting with users, the usability expert may identify needed functionality or design flaws that the designers had not anticipated.

One reason for poor usability in open source software is that usability practitioners are not traditionally involved with open source projects. Another reason is that the distributed, often voluntary nature of open source development makes it difficult to perform usability studies. These studies usually entail physically gathering and observing users in a controlled setting in order to make the software interface more amenable to actual users.

We believe that stronger ties between open source developers, users, and usability practitioners could mitigate this issue. Additionally, we have a unique opportunity to create new methodologies for improving the usability of open source software and to apply and test those methodologies immediately on a real-world projects.

Goals

The goals of the Usability Sprint are :

1. **To build community between users, developers/programmers, and usability practitioners:** Individuals working in usability and open source rarely have an opportunity to convene, grow relationships and collaborate on applied projects. The sprints provide a venue for enhancing the social network of these different practitioners while focusing on concrete outcomes.
2. **To attract usability practitioners to actual non-profit-focused FLOSS projects:** While there is a substantial usability community focused on proprietary and for-profit software realm, little has been done to date to bring similar focus to bear in the non-profit software sector.
3. **To survey and design usability methodologies:** Participants develop methodologies for improving the usability of open source software that address the unique challenges of distributed software development in a nonprofit context.
4. **To apply the learnings towards real software projects:** Participants apply these methodologies on specific open source projects. This creates immediate value for important open source projects and enables participants to refine the methodologies based on real experience.

All materials generated at the sprint are published under Creative Commons license (<http://creativecommons.org/about>) to encourage the broadest use, adoption and ongoing enhancement of those resources.

Audience

The sprints are comprised of developers working on a range of open source projects, usability practitioners from both academia and industry, and users of specific nonprofit open source projects.

Agenda

The agenda is collaboratively designed by the participants in the weeks leading up to the event. The time is divided between usability work on specific projects, developing stronger relationships and shared language between the different communities, and visioning for the future.

Throughout the event, participants actively document their processes and outcomes on a public “Wiki” web site. The Wiki supports collective editing of pages by anyone viewing and wishing to contribute to the project. It serves as a hub to enable open ongoing collaboration and documentation of progress.

For More Information

If you are interested in sponsoring, organizing, or participating in future sprints, please contact info@flossusability.org or visit <http://www.flossusability.org/>.

About the organizers

Aspiration <<http://www.aspirationtech.org/>>

Aspiration connects nonprofit organizations with software solutions that help them better carry out their work. We want nonprofit organizations to obtain and use the best software to maximize their effectiveness and impact so that they, in turn, can change the world. We identify what is available and what is missing in the nonprofit and NGO software arena. We foster relationships, build user and developer communities, and offer delivery systems and sustainability strategies for NGOs and their tech support organizations around the world.

Blue Oxen Associates <<http://www.blueoxen.com/>>

Blue Oxen Associates is a think tank/consultancy devoted to studying and improving collaboration, with a special focus on the social sector. We are particularly interested in knowledge processes – how we share and acquire knowledge, and how we use tools to augment our abilities to inform, to learn, and to collaborate. We do commissioned research and consulting, and we host collaboratories as a way to share and apply our knowledge with others, and as a way to provide online tools to organizations who need them.