User-Centered Design for Kuali ERP Software

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Perfection (in design) is achieved not when there is nothing more to add, but rather when there is nothing more to take away
-Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Developing feature-rich software that meets the needs of higher education institutions of all shapes and sizes is not an easy task. And, designing feature-rich software that is intuitive and easy to use is a far more difficult endeavor.

For more than ten years, Kuali has offered robust, open source, community-developed administrative systems designed to serve the needs of all higher education institutions. With more than 100 adopters, the software continues to be enhanced to meet the changing needs of higher education.

Soon, Kuali will have a new look and feel that will greatly enhance the user experience. Thanks to a significant investment by the Kuali Foundation, work is currently underway to improve the overall simplicity, consistency, and usability of Kuali's administrative applications for both occasional and daily users.

The project is called the Kuali User Experience Initiative (UXI) and the proposed User Interface (UI) redesigns will be validated via User-Centered Design (UCD) practices and standards including:

- The design is based upon an explicit understanding of users, tasks and environments

- Users are involved throughout design and development

- The design is driven and refined by user-centred evaluation

- The process is iterative

- The design addresses the whole user experience

- The design team includes multidisciplinary skills and perspectives

The model suggests that software designed for different types of users with vastly different roles is often made easier by use of user-centered design principles and processes. The simple premise of user-centered design is that software needs to dynamically adjust to different users, or personas, based on different levels of experience, behaviors, and goals.

A persona is a fictional representation of a real user, who interacts with the software in a specific way, at a specific frequency, to accomplish specific goals. Persona-based application development helps provide clarity around the needs, wants, and behaviors of the most important system users and the steps they take to achieve their desired goals. The trouble is, a well-designed software for one persona may not work for another. Personas help us understand who we are trying to design software for, but user stories are the additional element needed to get a complete picture of what problem we are trying to solve.

User-centered design stories tell us the what and why of the problem. For example: when will users use the system, why they are using the system, and what outcomes they expect to achieve. User stories directly inform design, but iteration and feedback from users is what fine-tunes the original design into the final product. Often a user will not be able to describe the experience they want or sometimes they don't know what they want until they see it. That's why getting user feedback throughout the design and development process is essential to user-centered design.

When it comes to prototyping and iterative user testing, the Kuali community has a unique advantage over other producers of higher education software. Kuali is being built by the actual users of the system, so soliciting user feedback is as simple as walking down the hall. As a result, the pace of development is exceeding expectations.

I encourage you take a look at Kuali ERP. I'm pretty sure you'll like what you see!

If you are attending NCURA PRA [Pre-Award Research Administration Conference] in San Francisco this week, stop by the rSmart booth to learn more and see a sneak peek of the new user interface.