What Baseball Teaches Us about the Software User Experience

With the start of a new Major League Baseball season upon us, there is nothing better than a classic baseball movie to get into a baseball state of mind, and Field of Dreams is one of my favorites. The famous quote from that movie, “If you build it, [they] will come,” may attract baseball fans, but it’s a poor strategy for enterprise software. A better strategy is to provide a great user experience and feature-filled software built on a solid technology platform.
UX First, Features Second

The user experience (UX) is more important than ever in selling everything from baseball game tickets to enterprise software. Baseball fans expect the latest big-screen displays, scoreboards, and amenities when they attend baseball games. Web-enabled and Cloud-based software platforms provide far better UX than their predecessors, and software buyers are savvy. They, too, want a top-notch UX with their enterprise software.

UX comes first, and features second, when it comes to software selection criteria. Users want an intuitive and enjoyable (or, at least, not painful) UX. They still demand features and functions that meet their needs, but if vendors do not “wow” customers with the UX, it’s hard to make the sale.

The UX goes beyond the user interface (UI). In addition to the software look and feel, it considers accessibility, workflows, and other ways the user interacts with the product.

A Great UX Enables Software Adoption

Adopting new software and related information technologies offers several benefits, among them, to improve, standardize, and automate business processes. Better business processes can positively impact productivity, time-to-market, and other key performance indicators (KPIs).

Without a good UX, software users are unlikely to adopt the software, or they will use it grudgingly. Poor software adoption can adversely impact the KPIs the organization wants to improve. A great UX makes the software feel familiar, makes it easy to learn, and is forgiving the user when s/he makes an error.

Baseball Strategies Applied to the Software UX

When evaluating and selecting enterprise software, do not be fooled by bells and whistles and shiny user interfaces. Consider the following strategies to ensure that the software is a good fit for your organization, both now and in the years to come.
Have a Game Plan
Define your game plan before holding serious talks with potential software vendors. Understand your organization’s business and IT strategies, and the business drivers for your software initiative. Perhaps you are replacing an older environment, health, and safety (EH&S) system that no longer meets your needs, or recently acquired new assets and need a more capable system. Know your organization’s culture and IT maturity, and its ability to adopt new technology. And be realistic about budget, resources, and timing.

Fill the Highest Priority Positions
Be focused. Which EH&S business processes will you automate, and what are the specific needs and priorities? What will yield the greatest benefits to your business if managed in the new software?

If Title V air permits and air emissions management are your top priorities, then lead with that. Remember that task management, document management, alerts and notifications, metrics, and reporting support your EH&S needs, so you need these, too. If you can accomplish other objectives, fine, but focus on priorities.

Hold Try-Outs
Ask the software vendor to demonstrate the software as it comes “out of the box,” without extra configuration. In the demos, have the vendor walk you through several real-life software use cases (e.g., how a typical user would go about their daily tasks via the software) based on your prioritized needs. Make sure that the version of the software you see in the demos is the one that you will purchase if you select that vendor.

Manage Players
Identify your user community and what type of users will interact with the software—casual users who may report an incident, power users like EH&S subject matter experts, managers who want trend data, and others. Engage representative players early, and help them to become familiar with software data entry, data management, and workflows. All of these aspects will impact your users and their positions once you roll out the software.

Run Drills
Know what types of data your organization needs to enter, and which reports you need the system to generate. Test the native data display and reporting tools to see whether built-in reporting tools will meet your needs, or if you require more sophisticated tools.

Conduct Spring Training
Prepare a training strategy and training plan to meet needs of different audiences. The training plan must include training in line with user positions and job roles (i.e., how they will interact with the software). Separate the pitchers from the outfielders—train power users and administrators early and often; train casual users and managers at least once, well in advance of when the software goes live. Don’t forget the value of spring training (refresher training) to keep users engaged and up-to-date on the latest software features and functions.

Off-Season Management
Test the software configuration, administration, and maintenance functions before the software goes live. If you manage the database in-house, then test data backup and recovery. If a vendor hosts the software for you, then have them run backup and recovery tests and provide you with the results.

Change Your Roster
Once you have the system in production for a while, assess how the system meets your needs and priorities, and adjust the roster as needed. Have a software change management procedure in place to address the inevitable changing needs and priorities.

UX Critical for Successful Software Adoption
“If you build it, [they] will come” is a weak strategy for enterprise software. However, baseball can teach us a lot about creating a great software user experience, which is critical to successful software adoption. So, to paraphrase the quote: “If you build a great UX, they will come!”

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