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## The Expert User Trap

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### OVERVIEW

Prior to the development of a product, engineers and marketers prioritize the input they receive from experts and often apply them literally in the development of new products. Typically, a few very important users are selected and their perspectives are prioritized over a wider group of stakeholders that should influence the design of the product. Through the years I have seen three types of expert users, the inherent risks and opportunities they represent, and how to best leverage them in the development process.

### THE SUPER USER

Susan can use similar products with her eyes closed, never reads an instruction manual, and finds alternative ways to use your product. She's a friend. She gives you free, unsolicited advice on how to improve your product. She does 350 surgeries a year using the same tools in the same way, the equivalent of one surgery a day. She appears to be on cruise control as she performs the surgery in 40 minutes while others take 90 minutes or more. Her support staff runs like a well-oiled engine as they hand her tools before she needs them.

Her perspective can also derail your development success. Her point of view is like a knife – useful when used correctly, but dangerous when used incorrectly.

You see, the problem is that Susan and her team are unique. No one can touch her when it comes to using your product. And there's the fact that she brings a huge potential sales volume. She's so good she skips using simple tools because she can. She's driven by speed and is trained to use your product so expertly that she could do so in her sleep. Yes, she and her peer group do surgeries with great frequency and speed, but the expert class that she represents is extremely small.

And then there is Jim. Jim's a generalist surgeon who may perform 10 to 15 surgeries a year. He and his surgical team are slower in surgery. Jim is humble, quiet, and willing to answer any question you have. Jim should be your best friend. You see, if you can make Jim happy, you can probably make his friends happy as well. In fact, Jim has a lot of friends like him...A LOT. There are probably 30 Jims for every Susan.

But the product Jim needs is an error-proof solution. He'd rather have 3 tools to do the same things Susan does with one. What do you do?

The expert user is a challenging, but important and potentially profitable stakeholder. The best route to deal with this user is to seek her opinion on the system level, but keep her out of the component level design. This is where the inexperienced user is more important because if you can develop the simplest, most user-friendly design, you'll make a more profitable product for a much larger market.

### THE LOUDEST VOICE

The second expert I want to introduce you to is Chuck. Chuck is a corporate executive who has a track record of getting things done and these successes have elevated him onto a pedestal. He's the final say in every major decision and has a knack for pointing out shortcomings. He knows how to get things done and makes the tough decisions. He can also derail your development process.

You see, he's also someone who has to make every decision. You never contradict him in

public... or in private either. People cringe when they come to him for approval because he rips their ideas to shreds. He makes others shiver and demands absolute attention when he speaks.

You've spent hundreds of hours researching customer perceptions of your products and you know you need a flexible, modular approach. The old piecemeal approach to product development has resulted in one-off products that are no longer relevant to your customers. So you present the data. Everyone in the room is nodding their heads in agreement. The data is irrefutable. And then Chuck informs everyone that customers love the products as they are. You try to reason with him to no avail. The meeting goes silent. Some join his bandwagon and soon you find yourself lost.

Chuck's judgment may have been influenced by a variety of things. He may have incorrect or biased information. He may feel threatened. Unfortunately his influence easily outweighs the perspective you or others may have brought to light, and once he's spoken, it's difficult to steer back in right direction. You ask him to explain his reasoning, but he won't articulate it. Perhaps he has ulterior motives and chooses to not divulge them or he may feel slighted and infuriated. You may never know why.

On the flip side, Margaret's opinions are glossed over because she's reserved. Everyone assumes she has nothing important to say. Margaret is a thoughtful, unbiased individual who has the knack of seeing the big-picture. Her timid nature undermines her ability to affect the outcome for the better. Your ability to get Margaret's opinion in a group setting is tricky yet critical. The simple act of seeking her input allows the quiet voice to be heard and can yield insights that are otherwise lost.

The loudest voice is a dangerous, but important stakeholder. If handled incorrectly, it can lead the team down the wrong path if no one is brave enough to speak up. It is critical to find a way to expose everyone's opinion. Have people leave their titles outside the room and solicit opinions from the quietest individuals first.

### **THE KNOW-IT-ALL**

The third expert is you. You have a key role on the development team. You've been spending countless hours solving problems left and right and the result is a thing of beauty. You come up with ideas 24-7 and know the final product inside and out. You have thought of every possible solution.

And yes...you can be blinded by your own expert perspective.

You know the design so well that only you know how to use it. You've been so focused on all the details and solving issues that you are blind to obvious oversights. You've overcomplicated the product and have made assumptions left and right. It takes a person with a PhD to operate your product. The problem is that others with less experience fumble and get frustrated when they use it. You give them instructions, but they have had such a poor experience that there's only a slim chance of making the product work before they give up.

You see, you forgot the simple act of stepping back periodically and divorcing yourself from the design to keep perspective. You're defensive when people provide critiques so people stop providing it because you won't listen ("not-invented here"). You must separate yourself from the output and realize the product does not define you.

Seek inputs from individuals like Gloria and Andrew. Gloria is a veteran who has seen various products in the field and has dealt with many late stage development issues (manufacturing, inspection and testing, and post launch support). What Gloria can provide are insights on how to avoid items that will create big headaches in the future. Andrew on the other hand is not familiar at all with this type of product. He fumbles with it and makes decisions on how to use it based on products he already knows. Watching how he misuses your design can provide you with you insights on how others may do the same. And they will! Contrary to your belief, it is as important to know how the product may fail or be misused as it is to know what works well.

Seek others to help you determine how to improve the product without being defensive and

don't bask in glory from compliments. Criticism often comes after praise, and you need to be listening. Seek the "buts" and understand the reasons behind them. Consider having the product used by an inexperienced person. Listen and observe. Dealing with how they misuse the device is key to making the product truly great.

### SUMMARY

Your key stakeholders are both instrumental and potentially detrimental to your product development success. You need to know how and when to use their input as well as how to navigate through the traps they unknowingly set. By trying to please a single expert, you quickly lose perspective, objectivity, and effectiveness at true innovation. A developer needs to balance user input from expert stakeholders by suspending judgment and taking a detached, contextual view of ideas that are rooted in personal experience. Exploring the expert user motivations rather than solutions they suggest best does this.

Once you find yourself trapped in the quicksand of a single expert user perspective, seek balance through outside voices, especially opposing ones. By exploring and choosing solutions with the whole opportunity in mind, you will find yourself onto the path to superior product development success.

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