Heuristic Analysis

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What Is This and Why Do It?

Heuristics refer to ways in which a system interface supports users in learning the system's function and use. This exercise, along with usability testing, is an effective way to assess the usability of a system. These can be thought of as the elements that make an interface "intuitive."

An heuristic analysis is a methodical assessment of a system against chosen industry-established guidelines. Those guidelines are chosen by specific company goals and priorities. When a handful of project collaborators each contribute an assessment, objective trends begin to emerge which give direction for the product team on where to focus usability improvement efforts.

In addition to identifying and defining usability concerns for planning actionable work, when a team completes a heuristic analysis together, they build a common vocabulary and understanding of effective ways to talk about the user experience of the software.

How Does It Work?

When

This exercise should be conducted as an exploration and assessment of a product as a whole. It is more effectively used as a means of identifying areas of potential concern, as well as getting a team into a place of mutual understanding about standards and priorities. It is not very effective at diagnosing the impact of a specific concern or identifying a solution.

A heuristic analysis is conducted as a discovery for potential issues or failures to meet standards.

How

Interface Design as a field has a variety of standards, strategies and patterns with varying purpose that can be defined as "heuristics." There is no universal template for heuristics standards that apply to all systems. Rather, the heuristics used to asses a system should be identified from recommendations of UX and Usability specialists. These people should work closely with the business to define and prioritize heuristics that have meaning and importance to all stakeholders involved in a product's success.

Once a template for the analysis is set, any number of stakeholders can complete an analysis. It is good to have between 4-6 analyses. The researcher leading the query will then take the individual analyses and create a summary of themes and insights with average scores.

Outcomes

Quantitative outcomes include:

- Benchmark scores that can be used for comparison against future analyses
- A list of specific problems that can be addressed to improve system usability, user control and even aesthetics
- Initial recommendations for addressing those problems based on meeting heuristic standards

Several outcomes to a heuristic analysis are qualitative.

- Clear definitions of standards for the interface
- Understanding of where the system meets or fails company standards
- More maturity within teams for identifying and discussing UX problems

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