

# How Can Usability Be Certified? A Practical Test of Your Skills

**Rolf Molich,**  
DialogDesign,  
Skovkrogen 3,  
3660 Stenlose, Denmark,  
molich@dialogdesign.dk

**Nigel Bevan,**  
Serco Usability Services  
22 Hand Court  
London WC1V 6JF, UK  
nbevan@usability.serco.com

## ABSTRACT

In this SIG experienced usability professionals will carry out a practical test of prototypes of tasks that could be used for certification purposes. Based on the specific test results and experiences, we will discuss how good we should expect usability professionals to be, what type of questions test the skills of a usability professional, and whether problem solving questions are an appropriate component of a certification process.

## Keywords

Certification, self-assessment, usability.

## INTRODUCTION TO SIG

Usability is more and more critical to the success of software interfaces and websites - but many practitioners have no formal training in it. Today, anybody can buy a golden nameplate that says "John Doe, Usability Expert." That's why proven knowledge of usability should be a key professional advantage. But how do you demonstrate it objectively to an employer or a client? At the moment we have no objective measures of professionalism in the usability area and some bad work is being carried out in the name of usability.

Many people have suggested that formal certification is the way to distinguish between amateurs and professionals.

Certification procedures may also be used for non-offensive self-assessment: Help a person appraise and develop his or her knowledge about a particular usability topic. A self-assessment can be an educational experience for a participant. The questions are only the beginning of the procedure. They are developed to help the participant think about the concepts and decide whether to pursue the matter further.

Many people have opinions about the usefulness of certifications and self-assessments. The organizers of this SIG feel it's time to get some real data from our users, the usability professionals.

One of the key tools that usability professionals use to determine the usefulness and usability of a given concept or product is usability testing of a prototype. A test of a prototype of realistic certification test tasks will shed

important light on the possibilities and limitations of professional certification. In other words: The organizers will make up sample certification test tasks and ask the SIG attendees to solve them. Specifics about the sample certification test tasks can be found in the Content section below.

The prototype test will be followed by a discussion with the attendees (the test participants), who are potential users of the certification and self-assessment procedures.

## CERTIFICATION WORK IN PROGRESS

An international working group was convened at the invitation of the Usability Professionals Association. (UPA) and SurgeWorks in Salt Lake City, last November to develop a certification consortium of usability organizations and firms. A detailed report of the working group meeting will appear in *interactions* [2].

Under the proposed scheme, evaluation for credentialing might include techniques such as:

1. Submission of a brief describing the use of UCD on a project (how and why UCD principles were or were not applied).
2. A written examination of problem-solving style questions, requiring essay responses.
3. A structured interview with assessors approved by the consortium.

This SIG addresses the second evaluation technique in the list.

## CONTENT

We will divide the 90 minutes that are available for this SIG into three modules of approximately 30 minutes each (for details, see the draft schedule in the following section). Modules 1 and 2 will be tests of realistic examples of certification test tasks. Module 3 will be a discussion of the usefulness of the certification tests.

Module 1 will present a set of tasks for a usability test. Attendees will be asked to comment on the suitability of a set of given tasks for a "think aloud" usability test of a given website. The task set will exhibit a number of problems that previous research [1, 3] has shown are often present in

professional usability test task sets. After completing this test, attendees will get a chance to compare their findings with a master list of findings compiled by the organizers.

Module 2 will present excerpts from a website dialog with particular focus on error handling and phrasing of error messages. Attendees will be asked to comment on the appropriateness of the error handling and to suggest specific improvements. The error handling will exhibit a number of violations of design rules for good error handling [4], for example “prevent problems,” “provide constructive advice,” “express yourself as you would if the user was standing in front of you.” After completing this test, attendees will get a chance to compare their findings with a master list of findings compiled by the organizers.

To ensure that the prototype tests are not invalidated by trivial errors in the test tasks, the organizers will carry out dry runs of the test tasks ahead of the SIG with students and local SIG chapter members.

The SIG will only look at 2 questions out of what would be a very large set. So the conclusions will be of a general nature. In module 3 we will use the attendees’ experiences from the prototype tests to discuss the following questions:

- Did you learn something useful from these exercises?
- How can test tasks and answers be validated?
- How good should we expect usability professionals to be?
- What type of questions test the skills of a usability professional?
- Are problem solving questions an appropriate component of a certification process?
- Is the approach valid and useful for self-assessment purposes?

Participation in the tests will be completely voluntary. Results will be strictly confidential: Attendees will score test results themselves, and each attendee will decide whether he or she wants to share their scores and detailed findings with other SIG participants.

#### DRAFT SCHEDULE

Time in minutes

0 - 10	Present schedule and organizers. Brief presentation of ongoing certification work.
10-20	Work with usability task set
20-35	Discuss problems in usability task set
35-45	Work with dialog
45-60	Discuss problems in dialog messages

60-90      Discuss the appropriateness of sample test tasks for certification purposes.

#### RELEVANCE TO THE HCI COMMUNITY

Professional certification and self-assessment is important for the continued development of the usability community.

#### DETAILS OF PROPOSERS

*Rolf Molich* owns and manages DialogDesign, a small Danish usability consultancy ([www.dialogdesign.dk](http://www.dialogdesign.dk)). Rolf has considerable experience teaching intermediate and experienced usability professionals from conducting the Advanced Usability Testing Methodology tutorial for CHI and for the NN Group. Rolf managed the Comparative Usability Evaluation effort where seven professional teams and two student teams usability tested the same website.

*Nigel Bevan* who is Research Manager at Serco Usability Services has wide experience of the practical application of usability methods ([www.usability.serco.com/trump](http://www.usability.serco.com/trump)) and has contributed to several international standards. He is a member of the working group developing a proposed certification process.

#### RELATED PROPOSALS

This SIG is a personal initiative of the authors, independent of the certification working group.

Nigel Bevan is co-author of a related SIG proposal “A proposed scheme for certifying usability practitioners.”

Rolf Molich is co-author of the SIG proposal “Tips and Tricks for a Better Usability Test.”

#### REFERENCES

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4. Shneiderman, B. Pracnique: Designing Computer System Messages, *Communications of the ACM*, vol. 25, September 1982, 610-611