What Every CEO Should Know About Creating an Effective User Experience Practice

A Conversation with Eric Schaffer
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With more companies placing emphasis on customer experience, it appears that business executives are realizing the importance of user experience. How have things changed in recent years?

It's interesting because if you go back five or eight years, CEOs weren't as interested in establishing a strong user experience (UX) practice. There's been a big shift and today most executives get it. In fact, they're intent on a UX focus, because they know it's a differentiator. In the digital market, you no longer gain an advantage by having fast servers or clean code—everybody has that. You differentiate based on customer experience—you live and die by it.

The good news is that executives are now saying, "I need to make sure our company provides excellent customer experience." Executives see that companies with better customer experience capabilities have increased growth in their valuation. It's really becoming a core issue. Today, executives clearly understand the importance of customer experience, yet most business executives simply don't know how to get started in this area.

So many companies now realize the importance of great user experience. But, it sounds like there are some serious challenges.

I get to work with organizations all around the world, and I've seen a recurring series of mistakes executives make once they've decided to make customer experience a priority. Not everyone will make all these mistakes, but we can learn a lot by looking at the mistakes of others. Typically CEOs take certain steps once they've decided to move their organization toward customer centricity.

The Impassioned Speech

The first thing CEOs do is *talk* about the importance of customer experience. They think that their employees will listen, understand the importance of good user experience, and start to create better products. This seems logical.

Unfortunately, that's not how things work. I've sat through many passionate speeches from business leaders driving home the importance of customer experience. Everyone agrees—which is part of the problem. Since there is no one in the organization intentionally trying to torture customers with technology, there is really no impact to the impassioned speech. Besides that, UX work is not a function of passion and good intentions. It is a tough engineering discipline that requires serious training, methods, and infrastructure. So the good wishes are not very useful.

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Training

CEOs eventually realize that words alone don't create results, and move on to investing in UX training. Sometimes they give a bit of training to all their staff, so they appreciate UX. This is mostly just frustrating, as they appreciate UX but can't actually do it. And it is also sometimes really detrimental, as a little knowledge is dangerous, and staff who know very little usually overestimate their knowledge and really screw things up (see the Dunning-Kruger Effect).

Alternatively, other executives invest in serious training and certification for a small group of people. These individuals then have the expertise to do UX work. But without a supportive culture, methods, standards, tools, etc., this trained team cannot be really effective or efficient. They are frustrated. They do make things better, but it is often hard to see their impact (as they are always spread thin). And often individuals exit the company to find a more serious UX operation.

Design by User

CEOs sometimes read the term "Customer-Led Design" to think that customers should be brought into the process and define the designs. Unfortunately, the customers they bring in are usually experts and so have a view of the domain that is not representative. They suggest designs that only experts can use. And in the end, customers are not designers. While they can be helpful as subject matter experts, they should never lead the design.

Hire an Expert

The next thing executives will typically do is recruit highly skilled UX designers. These designers are often famous for working at big companies on large, successful projects. Yet, this strategy alone doesn't work, because even though they've hired wonderful designers, they're ignoring the most important challenge—creating a mature process-driven practice. It's like saying, "I'm going to build a hospital, and all I need to do is hire some surgeons." A hospital takes much more then super surgeons. It needs plumbing, and operating manuals, and legal standards… There are a lot of things involved with building a hospital. It works the same way with user experience design. You can't just hire good designers and wait for things to get better. In fact, it usually pushes things in the wrong direction.

> **"Even though they have hired wonderful designers, they're ignoring the most important challenge — creating mature process-driven practice."**

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What happens is the UX professionals will say, "OK, I know how to do this. All I need to do is get some more people like me on board to work on all these projects." Then, they'll go and hire ten or twenty more people and work with them in a completely uncoordinated way. It's like filling an empty building with surgeons, and telling ambulance drivers to just drop the patients off at the back door.

Hire a Consultancy

"There needs to be internal staff who can tell the difference between quality UX design and the unfortunately commonplace well intentioned fake."

The next move that the CEO will make is to start hiring consultants to handle particular projects. They'll come in and create wonderful designs, and then they go away. Then what happens?

Hiring consultants might be part of the solution, but it's not enough. Even worse, a company might get vendors who aren't really UX people, but might be visual designers or programmers. Then things can really turn out poorly for the user experience. There needs to be internal staff who can tell the difference between quality UX design and the unfortunately commonplace well-intentioned fake.

What do you mean by "fake" UX?

I don't intend to be unkind. But after 60 years of UX work, our field does actually have an established best practice. This is not done by asking visual artists to create "something user-centric." And I have seen untrained history majors, English majors, and programmers all asked to somehow magically create a usable design. I created the CUA and CXA certifications because I feel that our field is in danger from this type of "fake" UX work, just as much as Prada™ and Burberry™ suffer from knockoffs.

How can you tell UX work is "fake"?

If you don't have training yourself, it is hard. So you need someone in your organization with training. But also, check the UX staff's education, training and certifications. You can also look for telltale bad practices like using a lot of survey data, group focus sessions, and eye trackers. And, also see if the criteria of success is that the executives like the design (as opposed to testing with users). All these are sure indicators of amateur work being passed off as serious UX design.

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OK, so CEOs talk about UX, train people, hire someone, hire a consultancy….
And they are still not there?

Nope.

Design by Executive

Then in desperation they try to do it themselves. They might do this strategically by dictating a UX initiative. Many organizations tell everyone to make things SIMPLE. But simplicity is not really the path to good design. Sometimes designs should be complicated. And sometimes what seems simple to one person just isn't. Or they might demand designers have EMPATHY. Or be INNOVATIVE. One eCommerce executive after hearing me talk about persuasion engineering asked his staff to have a SCARCITY initiative. These are the kinds of initiatives that make designers roll their eyes and get the idea that UX is fluffy and common sense.

Executives also try to do the design by reading about trends in technology and dictating programs to do the latest technological thing. They say, "We need to use personalization; we need to code our product for mobile devices; we need to use social networking." Whatever it is, they'll choose a flavor-of-the-week technology and expect so see results. That doesn't work, either.

But what is even more painful is when they start to do detailed design. Senior executives are generally not designers. But there is a problem. Once you design something, because you know what it is, it seems to jump out at you and make sense. Because you already know what it means. And we also know that people overvalue their own designs. So now the senior executives are designing, feeling like they are a reincarnation of Steve Jobs, and the staff has to figure out how to explain that only the executive understands the design (I get hired for this job on occasion).

"Simplicity is not really the path to good design. Sometimes designs should be complicated."

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This seems like a really long and painful road for the CEO.

It is painful to experience and painful to watch. I think it is the most critical issue in the UX field today. We need to have an answer when the CEO asks for good customer experience design. It is a major differentiator because so very few organizations succeed at getting good at UX work. Of those that deliver good designs, I think only a fraction have a sustainable, process driven practice that is built into the organization's culture. I suspect more than half are great because they can"call Tony." And Tony is really smart. If Tony leaves the company, the capability is decimated. It is not OK to depend on the craftsmanship of Tony.

So, what should CEOs do once they've decided to make customer experience a strategic priority?

There is only one right answer. CEOs need to have a strategy for moving ahead. They need to be serious about building a practice around customer centricity within the organization. In fact, customer centricity has to become part of the DNA of the organization. And they must recognize that this capabilities-building work has to happen concurrently with the critical projects needed to run the business. It is like changing the wings while the plane is in flight.

The CEO needs to think about it like they are going to build a hospital. It's not bad to have surgeons. It's not bad to have good technology. It's not bad to have some good training, or to get help from consultants. But, if you're going to do things properly, there is a lot more work to be done. You need help from experts skilled in building hospitals.
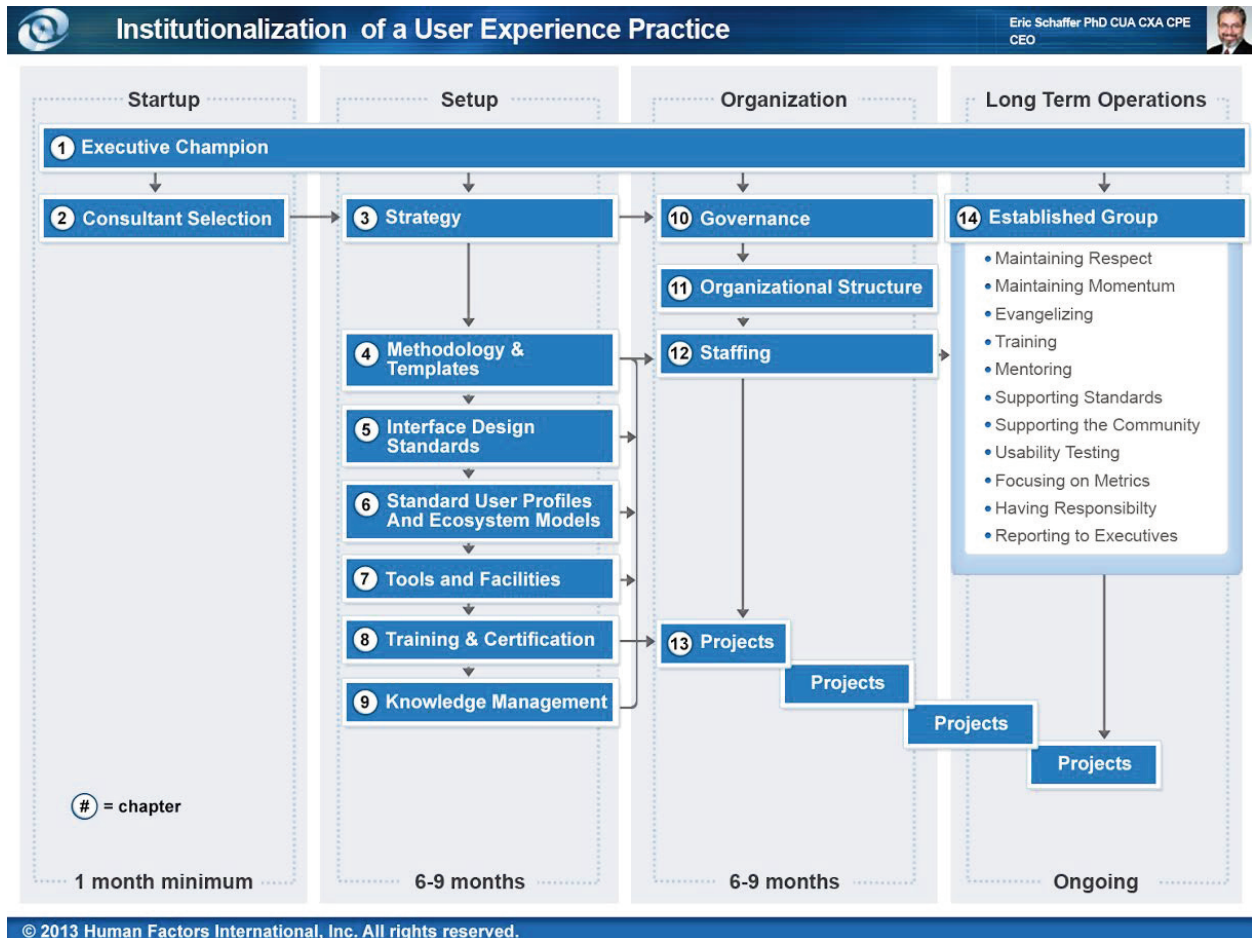
I'm writing a new edition of *Institutionalization of Usability: A Step-by-Step Guide*. (Of course the new edition will be Institutionalization of a User Experience Practice.) I'll share a quick peek of a draft of the new process chart.

"Customer centricity has to become part of the DNA of the organization."

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This new chart has the same old message from the book I wrote a decade ago. There are a whole set of things that come together to make an effective practice.

Get it right and your UX work will be a key business differentiator. Your UX practice will be fast, cheap, and good. But leave out a few parts and the practice will limp along. And today you can't afford that.

So you help many companies though institutionalization programs. What is the

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most serious problem you run into in these projects?

Today, it's very rarely lack of support from the CEO. The CEO gets it in a heartbeat.

It is never an issue with infrastructure because we have developed as close as you can get to a UX infrastructure in a box, all ready to be customized. We have training and certification in place. And we can help with tactical needs so there is time to change the wings without the organization suffering through a painful transition.

But many organizations have problems with governance. Often, it really boils down to the mid-level managers not really understanding the value of user experience. We need to get them on board with the process.

It might not be that they are opposed to the idea, but they may already have established routines and ideas of how things should be done. So we know to concentrate on governance.

Education is important. So are closed loop and stage gate approaches to making sure that the UX work gets done. The CEO should KNOW that UX processes are routinely being completed.

And not have to hope that someone thinks to call Tony.

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About Eric

Dr. Eric Schaffer
Founder and CEO
Human Factors International

Dr. Eric Schaffer is the founder and CEO of Human Factors International, Inc. (HFI). In the last quarter century, he has become known as the visionary who recognized that usability would be the driving force in the "Third Wave of the Information Age," following both hardware and software as the previous key differentiators. Like Gordon Moore's insight that processor power would double every 18 months, Dr. Schaffer foresaw that the most profound impact on corporate computing would be a positive online user experience—the ability for a user to get the job done efficiently, easily, and without frustration.

Dr. Schaffer's book, *Institutionalization of Usability: A Step-by-Step Guide*, provides a roadmap for companies to follow in order to make usability a systematic, routine practice throughout their organizations. Dr. Schaffer also co-developed The HFI Framework™, the only ISO-certifiable process for user-centered design, built on principles from human-computer interaction, ergonomics, psychology, computer science, and marketing.

Dr. Schaffer has completed projects for more than one hundred Fortune 500 clients, providing user experience design consulting and training. He has recently been traveling the world teaching HFI's course, How to Design for Persuasion, Emotion, and Trust.

Dr. Schaffer is a member of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society and a Certified Professional Ergonomist.

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