

COMMENT

FROM THE EDITOR

Trotting out my most entertaining “elevator definition” of ergonomics and my glibbest anecdotes would leave her with eyes glazed over.

OK, I felt a bit ridiculous standing there in the driveway, in line with the cars – on two feet, not four wheels – waiting to use the drive-through ATM at my bank today. I had once asked the bank manager, in passing, if they intended to install a walk-up ATM terminal in the outer lobby; she gave me a funny look and said, “Where’s your car?” I remember idly rubbing my sore elbow while I held my counsel about the troublesome ergonomics of the drive-through interface. She didn’t seem receptive to a scintillating lecture about human factors and how much benefit her corporation could derive from engaging a consulting group, like the one I work with at IBM.

Today’s encounter was a technological imbroglio; at one point there were three staffers peering under the ATM’s cover and calling tech support. The manager even walked out to the driveway with me to witness for herself the baffling refusal of the machine to respond to my pedestrian demands. She marched back inside to make more righteous calls to the support desk while I loitered in the parking lot, watching as cars kept driving up, cash kept dealing itself out, and life went on. Was this ATM somehow biased against customers not adorned with automotive habiliments?

The answer to the machine’s reluctance to facilitate my cash flow was laughably mundane (and classic): I stepped back in line between the cars and made a fourth attempt. I crouched way low to make certain the old parallax problem wasn’t causing me to hit the wrong buttons. This time, I noticed the crucial message about my new card needing to be “initialized” – it flashed by quickly at the top of the screen, completely obscured by the bezel and invisible to any standing user (or bank manager) of average stature.

My mind was reeling with human factors/ergonomics anecdotes about failures of everyday objects to be easy to use (as we read about in this issue), not to mention ergonometrics, use cases, and requirements validation techniques. But there were other network-wide problems with the system that day, and the staff seemed content to work the familiar channels to address these. So I shook my head in concert with the bank manager about “those wacky computers,” thanked her for initializing my card, took my cash, and walked away without uttering the word “ergonomics” even once.

I’ve been asking myself all day: “why?” I love my work and my profession. For nearly 25 years, I’ve been pinching myself to make sure I’m not dreaming that people would actually pay me to do something that is so gratifying. Human factors/ergonomics is, for me – and for many of you – more of a calling than a job. So why didn’t I “evangelize” the bank manager?

The painful truth is that I prejudged this woman, predicting that she simply wouldn’t care – that trotting out my most entertaining “elevator definition” of ergonomics and glibbest anecdotes would leave her with eyes glazed over, waiting for her eccentric customer to leave so she could trudge on to the next administrative problem. So, I chose to leave her with the feeling of a problem solved and did not burden her with speculations that her technology had an easily correctable design flaw.

Was I wrong? Have I shirked my responsibility to fellow practitioners? Have I missed an opportunity to make this world a better place to live in, however microscopically? Or did I simply spare another windmill from being tilted at? You tell me.

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