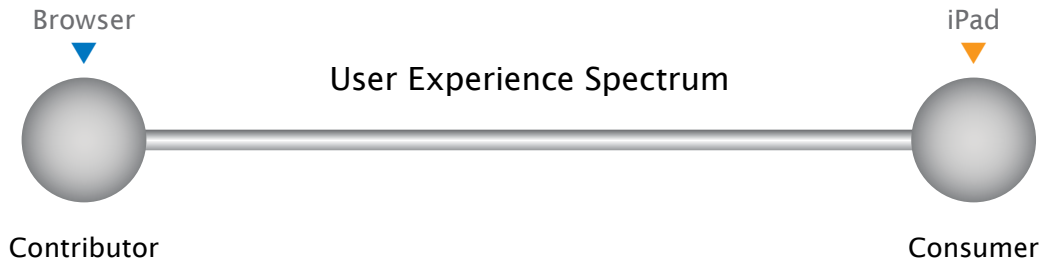


The User Experience Barbell

Joe Ruck, BoardVantage CEO



Software vendors often talk of a “typical user”. The premise is that once you tune your design to meet that user’s needs you enter a promised land where a small amount of development produces outsized results. That is a seductive notion. What developer would not sign up for that?

Unfortunately, it does not square with reality. We learned that lesson early in the board portal market—where the ideal experience for a director, and that of a member of the CS Office, are virtually opposites. Yet both experiences should be tailored to expectations or the system will be frustrating to one or both of these key constituencies. This divided model is also evident in leadership team communication where an executive and an administrator will also expect different experiences. Beyond minimal of training—say 20 minutes—a typical executive is simply not open to spending time learning new tools.

That is why BoardVantage has abandoned the pursuit of that mythical typical user.

Rather than designing to a single user experience cluster based on a common use pattern, we develop our software to cover a spectrum of user experiences with the end points representing radically different requirements. On one end of that spectrum lies “the consumer”, on the other end “the contributor”.

The Consumer

The consumer category includes members of the leadership team, typically executives and directors. They access the system on a periodic basis, but when they do, it is critical that they locate what they need promptly. Understandably, they value simplicity over all else. It’s for that reason the iPad has been an important new influence for this group. But whether they prefer a browser or the iPad doesn’t matter. The design principles to meet their needs transcend the device. They can be summarized as follows:

- » Configurability—Highlighting essential functionality while stripping out what’s redundant
- » Presentation—Enrichment through graphics, branding and, in the case of the iPad, animation

Observing these principles allows us to provide a compelling experience while leveraging the unique strengths of the underlying device. But addressing only this user experience cluster is inadequate. That’s because the needs of the second constituency are diametrically opposite to the first.

The Contributor

In contrast to consumers, contributors “live in” the system. They rely on process functionality for hours at a time, often in high-pressure situations. While consumers are adverse to tools,

contributors embrace their tools, particularly the Office suite. For them, high personal productivity in the system is a non-negotiable requirement. What they seek is:

- » Continuity—User experience paradigms that are modeled after the familiar desktop environment such as drag-and-drop, right-click, a folder tree structure, etc. In effect what they require is an extension of their current environment.
- » Integration—Tight coupling with existing desktop tools such as edit-in-native, calendar syncing, email alerts and others

It is important to note that these experiences are diametric opposites, a barbell distribution. That is also the reason they present such a challenge. Nevertheless, both implementations need to be executed flawlessly if the product is to be accepted by the customer base. This involves a large investment in design. Today that means not just the browser, but also tablets—notably the iPad—and Android devices as they mature.

Meeting Rising Expectations

Simultaneously, driven by the superior esthetics and usability of consumer devices, customer expectations about user experience are rising. Business users routinely encounter first-rate UI design in their consumer apps only to be disappointed when they return to the office to use business apps. It's no stretch to forecast that this discrepancy cannot last. Whether it's a branded experience, desktop environment or the iPad, the bar is being raised. And this has ramifications for business software vendors.

Given the compounding effect caused by divergent user requirements, a multiplying number of platforms and rising customer expectations, successful designs must go well beyond touching up the look-and-feel to deliver a good user experience.

Sensitized by the user experience demands in the board portal space, we believe that staying ahead of these trends requires a modern architecture. This was a key factor in our decision to develop NextGen as an RIA (Rich Internet Architecture). Only modern frameworks are rich enough to accommodate the evolving needs of today's customers. For BoardVantage, this meant a seven-figure engineering investment, but the pay-off is significant. Now, regardless of which end of the barbell a user represents, we are in a position to meet the ever-rising expectations for a more compelling user experience.

Take-Aways

- » BoardVantage's track record with demanding board members has sensitized us to the importance of user experience. It taught us there is no "average user". Instead, there is a barbell distribution in user experience expectations. Good design meets the needs of both ends of that spectrum.
- » Contributors value continuity and integration for high personal productivity.
- » Consumers value configurability and presentation for ease-of-use.
- » Only Rich Internet Architectures are able to keep up with the rising expectations for a better user experience.