UX Maturity Model

Normal Modes

Stage 5: Mastered

UX is an institutional value that every member of the organization shares equally in upholding. Feedback about the application's usability is captured proactively and transparently with a in-house usability lab, even if uncovered issues cannot all be resolved in the immediate future. The development teams use a robust design patterns library to facilitate rapid development, with assistance from a UX expert as needed.

Every team member's contribution is known and valued. Users are treated with dignity and respect.

RISK: Slip in application's performance as hubris leads team members to make false assumptions for complex or tricky issues. Lack of ongoing education, which can be expensive for such a large team, may play into hubris, knowledge, and limited skills. (Dunning-Kruger Effect)

Stage 4: Committed

Projects strive to balance business, technical and user needs with great success. UX is the responsibility of several specialists who have titles like UX Designer, Information Architect, and Usability Specialist. Major portions of the application are overhauled, often in a phased redesign. Usability testing, if conducted, is at least partially outsourced. Quantifying the ROI on projects includes UX.

Some traditionalists remain skeptical. Users and UX-related roles momentarily marginalize all other project roles in terms of perceived importance. The potential negative effects are somewhat neutralized by the organization's excitement over seeing positive feedback from users and visible progress toward successfully meeting project objectives.

RISK: Identifying and hiring qualified UX-related job candidates.

RISK: Excessive focus by UX team on meta activities that provide little residual value.

RISK: Never progressing to a point where UX is the responsibility of the whole team, not just individual contributors.

Stage 3: Emerging

Personas emerge as a tool to connect team with users. Pilot programs may emerge, though methods for obtaining user feedback are poorly structured. UX is considered a "nice to have" optional add-on feature to the application, so the ability to quantify investments is explored. Many still view UX as simply pretty "design." UX is seen as a zero-sum game versus technical imperatives and business objectives. Funding and staffing for UX efforts is limited.

The concept of UX as an institutional value is a political battle between two sides: the dogmatic believers and the skeptical/no-frills/paternalistic traditionalists. Believers are hampered by their naïveté & lack of specificity, but helped by obvious application problems coupled with user feedback. Traditionalists are aided by a strong institutional legacy that protects or promotes their dismissive/hostile attitude toward UX/usability, while they're hampered by feedback from the application's users.

RISK: Unless organization leadership signals approval for UX in both financial and symbolic ways, UX efforts will collapse and team will revert to Stage 1.

RISK: Frustrated early adopters may flee to more mature organizations and efforts will revert to Stage 1.

Stage 2: Exploring

Little institutional awareness of how users engage with application. Using more organized language from previous ad hoc reports, users now state the application is "difficult to use," "difficult to learn," "cluttered and ugly," and/or "unusable."

One or two like-minded individuals from the product/project team begin to research user-centered design as a way of mitigating future issues. Armed with information about another way, they approach members of the team and leadership about their findings.

RISK: Feeling ineffectual, team members move on to "more solvable problems," like feature enhancements, complete redesigns of the application, or other jobs (internal or external).

Stage 1: Unimportant

No institutional consideration for how users engage applications. If a user has difficulty with the application, the user is often belittled and/or mocked. Technology/design team is arrogant in their assessments of how applications should be built and defensive about any feedback which criticizes the application. Product/project team is bewildered about how to improve application for better outcomes.

UX isn't even on the radar as a possibility. If awareness exists, the concept is often derisively considered a frivolous activity, akin to "putting lipstick on the pig" or adding in wiz-bang features of little substantive value.