Editorial Board Thoughts: Eating Our Own Dogfood

Michael Witt

I'll never forget helping one of my relatives learn how to use his first computer. We ran through the basics: turning the computer and monitor on, pointing and clicking, typing, and opening and closing windows. I went away to college, and when I came back for the holidays, he happily showed off his new abilities to send emails and create spreadsheets and such. Despite his well-earned pride, I couldn't help but notice that when he reached the edge of the desk with the mouse, he would use his other hand to place a photo album up against the desk and roll the mouse onto it, in order to reach the far right-hand side of the screen with the pointer. When I picked up his hand and the mouse and re-centered it on the desk for him, I think it blew his mind. He had been using the photo album to extend the reach of the mouse and pointer for months! It occurred to me that I should have spent more time with him, not just showing him what to do, but watching him do it.

Those of us working in information technology have a tremendous impact on library staff productivity by virtue of the systems we select or develop and implement. People working in most facets of library operations trust and rely on our hardware and software to accomplish their daily work, for which we bear a significant burden of responsibility. Are they using the best possible tools for their work? Are they using them in the best way?

A great deal of effort has gone into user-centered design and improving functionality for our patrons, but in this time of reduced budgets and changing staff roles, it is important to extend similar consideration to the systems that we provision for our co-workers. At its best, information technology has the ability to save time and add value to the library by creating efficiencies and empowering people to do better and new work. Whether we are evaluating new integrated library systems or choosing the default text editor for our workstations, we are presented with opportunities to learn more about how our libraries accomplish work "on the ground" and reconsider the role that technology can play in helping them.

The phrase "eating your own dog food" is so common in software development circles that some have begun using it as a verb. Developers engage in "dogfooding" by using new software themselves, internally, to identify bugs and improve usability and functionality before releasing it to users. This is a regular practice of companies such as Microsoft[1] and Google[2]. Setting aside any negative connotations for the moment (Why are people eating dog food? And exactly who are the "dogs" in this scenario?), there is a lot that we can learn by putting ourselves in the place of our users and experiencing our systems from their perspective.

Perhaps the best way to do this is to walk around the building and spend time in each unit of the library, shadowing its staff and observing how they interact with systems to do their work. Try to learn their workflow and observe the tasks they perform—both online and offline. You don't need to become an expert, but ideally you'd be able to try to perform some of the tasks yourself. In one case, we were able to identify and enable someone to design and run their own reports, which helped their unit make more timely decisions and eliminated the need for IT to run monthly reports on their behalf. If these tasks support user-facing interactions, you might get some good usability information in the process too. For example, I learned more about our library's website by working chat reference for an hour a week than I did in two years of web development team meetings!

Part of this process is attempting to feel our users' pain, too. Do you use the same locked-down workstation image that you deploy to your staff desktops? There is also a tendency among IT staff to keep the newest and best machines for their own use and cycle older machines to other units. I understand—IT staff are working with databases and doing developing software, and so we benefit the most from higher-performing machines—but keep in mind that your co-workers likely have older, slower machines and take the lowest common denominator hardware into account when selecting new software.

By walking a mile in your users' shows, you may gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of the other units of the library and how they work together. Because so much work is done on computers, people working in information technology can often see a broad picture of the activities of the library. We have the ability to make connections and identify potential points of integration, not only between machines but also between people and their work.

References

1. Pascal G. Zachary, *Showstopper! The Breakneck Race to Create Windows NT and the Next Generation at Microsoft* (New York: Free Press, 1994): 129–56.

2. Stephen Levy, "Inside Google+: How The Search Giant Plans to Go Social," http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/06/inside-google-plus-social/all/1 (accessed July 12, 2011).

Michael Witt (mwitt@purdue.edu) is the Interdisciplinary Research Librarian and an assistant professor of library science at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. He serves on the Editorial Board of *ITAL*.