An Effective Design Walkthrough: A Step Towards Delivering the Best Design

~ By Taruna Goel

A design walkthrough is a quality practice that allows designers to obtain an early validation of design decisions related to the development and treatment of content, design of the graphical user interface, and the elements of product functionality. Design walkthroughs provide designers with a way to identify and assess early on whether the proposed design meets the requirements and addresses the project's goal.

For a design walkthrough to be effective, it needs to include specific components. The following guidelines highlight these key components. Use these guidelines to plan, conduct, and participate in design walkthroughs and increase their effectiveness.

1. Plan for a Design Walkthrough

A design walkthrough should be scheduled when detailing the micro-level tasks of a project. Time and effort of every participant should be built into the project plan so that participants can schedule their personal work plans accordingly. The plan should include time for individual preparation, the design walkthrough (meeting), and the likely rework.

2. Get the Right Participants

It is important to invite the right participants to a design walkthrough. The reviewers/experts should have the appropriate skills and knowledge to make the walkthrough meaningful for all. It is imperative that participants add quality and value to the product and not simply 'add to their learning.'

3. Understand Key Roles and Responsibilities

All participants in the design walkthrough should clearly understand their role and responsibilities so that they can consistently practice effective and efficient reviews.

4. Prepare for a Design Walkthrough

Besides planning, all participants need to prepare for the design walkthrough. One cannot possibly find all high-impact mistakes in a work product that they have looked at only 10 minutes before the meeting. If all participants are adequately prepared as per their responsibilities, the design walkthrough is likely to be more effective.
5. Use a Well-Structured Process

A design walkthrough should follow a well-structured, documented process. This process should help define the key purpose of the walkthrough and should provide systematic practices and rules of conduct that can help participants collaborate with one another and add value to the review.

6. Review and Critique the Product, Not the Designer

The design walkthrough should be used as a means to review and critique the product, not the person who created the design. Use the collective wisdom to improve the quality of the product, add value to the interactions, and encourage participants to submit their products for a design walkthrough.

7. Review, Do Not Solve Problems

A design walkthrough has only one purpose, to find defects. There may, however, be times when participants drift from the main purpose. A moderator needs to prevent this from happening and ensure that the walkthrough focuses on the defects or weaknesses rather than identifying fixes or resolutions.

In addition to these guidelines, there are a few best practices that can help you work towards effective design walkthroughs:

- The document or work product for the design walkthrough should be complete from all respects including all the necessary reviews/filters.
- Plan for a design walkthrough in a time-box mode. A session should be scheduled for a minimum of one hour and should not stretch beyond two and a half hours. When walkthroughs last more than three hours, the effectiveness of the design walkthrough and the review process decreases dramatically.
- It is best to work with 5-10 participants to add different perspectives to the design walkthrough. However, with more than 15 participants, the process becomes slow and each participant may not be able to contribute to their full capacity.
- Design walkthroughs planned for morning sessions work better than afternoon sessions.
- A design walkthrough should definitely include the instructional designers, graphic artists, course architects, and any other roles that have been instrumental in creating the design. You may also want to invite designers from other projects to add a fresh and independent perspective to the review process.
- Involving senior management or business decision makers in a design walkthrough may not always be a good idea as it can intimidate the designers and they may feel that the senior management is judging their competencies in design. With senior management in the room, other participants and reviewers may also be hesitant in sharing problems with the design.
- Effective design walkthroughs rely on a 'moderator' who is a strong Lead Reviewer and is in charge of the review process. It is critical that the group remains focused on the task at hand. The Lead Reviewer can help in this process by curbing unnecessary discussions and lead the group in the right direction.
- Design walkthroughs are more effective if the reviewers use specific checklists for reviewing various aspects of the work product.
- It is a good practice to involve the potential end users in the design walkthrough. However, in most situations it is difficult to get access to the end users. Therefore, you may request reviewer(s) to take on the role of the end user and review the product from the end-user perspective. These reviewers may be Subject Matter Experts or practitioners in the same field/industry who have an understanding of the
The effectiveness of a design walkthrough depends on what happens after the defects have been identified in the meeting and how the defects are addressed and closed in the work product. The team needs to prioritise the defects based on their impact and assign responsibility for closing the defects.

Design walkthroughs, if done correctly, provide immediate short-term benefits, like early defect detection and correction within the current project and offer important long-term returns. From a long-term perspective, design walkthroughs help designers identify their mistakes and learn from them, therefore moving towards continuous improvement. During the process, designers are also able to unravel the basic principles of design and the key mistakes that violate these principles. By participating in walkthroughs, reviewers are able to create a mental 'catalogue of mistakes' that are likely to happen and are therefore more equipped to detect these early in any product. By analysing the kind of defects made by designers, over time, reviewers can use this information to support root-cause analysis and participate in organisation-wide improvement initiatives.

Effective design walkthroughs are one of the most powerful quality tools that can be leveraged by designers to detect defects early and promote steps towards continuous improvement.

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Taruna has led and participated in various phases of the development life cycle including pre-sales and proposals, solution design, analysis (audience, task, content, requirements), curriculum and course design, interface and functionality design, content acquisition and development, visualisation, review, testing, and quality assurance. She has been actively involved in designing, developing, and delivering division-wide trainings for new recruits and ongoing training for content authors and designers in the areas of instructional design and technical writing.

Taruna was awarded the Performance Excellence award for 2005-06 and Performance Excellence award for 2006-07 by Rajendra S Pawar, Chairman of NIIT.

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