Dealing with technology backlash

Technology at Work

At Fluke our engineers are tasked with the challenge of designing complex and rugged tools for measuring electrical circuits – very useful tools. But as anyone who has ever worked with test tools knows, sometimes more is less. Feature packed instruments with too many buttons or controls buried under layers of user interface can not only be frustrating, they can be giant time wasters. So balancing the "gee whiz" factor with ease-of-use can be tricky. At the 2002 Fluke Engineering Conference, a well-known observer of technology offered up some advice that all product designers need to keep in mind.

There's a cure to the technological "indigestion" we're suffering from, according to Peter de Jager, a consultant on issues relating to the future and technology. De Jager, the keynote speaker at the 2002 Fluke Engineering Conference, addressed the topic of dealing with "technology backlash" by exploring how technology companies can contribute to the drive for simplicity and establish a framework that supports customers – and individuals – trying to get control over the pace of change.

Contrary to popular belief, we're not conditioned to resist change, according to de Jager. If given choices, most people will embrace technological change. Using the Amish as an example, de Jager pointed out that the key is to know and focus on what is important. "The perception is that they [the Amish] are technology-adverse. This is not true. They do use cell phones, for instance. Their approach to deciding whether or not to adopt a new technology is simply to ask the question: 'Will it draw us together as a community or drive us apart?'"

It's a lack of control, or absence of choice, that causes people to be wary of the next new thing. De Jager believes that, in this case, resistance to change is a positive force and that companies need to pay attention when customers are slow to accept the next generation product or service. It's likely that the customers are resisting complexity, and are right to do so.

"Complexity has little to do with the actual device," said de Jager. "It has more to do with our expectations of how things should work. Things like understanding how a computer mouse works are often confusing to someone who doesn't have the context or body of knowledge that we take for granted. In adhering to the 'real men don't need documentation' mentality, we forget that our users may not have the language with which to explain why something doesn't work in a way that is intuitive to them."

"We suffer from 'galloping feature-itis,'" continued Jager. During the process of developing a new device or updating a current model, most companies get customer input. In making an honest effort to respond to customer requests, a company packs every feature and function possible into the device, and then wonders why its customers find the resulting product too complex to use or operate. "If we listened to everyone, we would have devices with hundreds of buttons/switches/functions. How do we stop this?"

In spite of the general impression that the world is in a state of "future shock," de Jager pointed out that many technological advances have had a very positive impact on our society in general over the past 100 years, but it hasn't happened that way by accident.

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