

Why hire a usability specialist when you can do it in house?

After all, how hard can it be to ask some questions and make some observations? This is a natural reaction to have; however, there are several advantages to hiring a usability specialist.

- **The moderator's attitude can directly influence the evaluation:**
A usability study is very psychological, but not only in the obvious way – that it's an exercise in understanding a user's way of thinking about a product. The interaction between moderator and participant, the environment, social pressures, and many more factors make a usability study a psychological exercise. Only a skilled and experienced moderator can take this into account and see through reactions to understand the bigger picture. Moderators have to be approachable, friendly and non-judgmental because anything less could skew the participants' reactions and consequently, the resulting data.
- **The moderator must present questions with absolutely no bias:**
Anyone can ask a question, but it takes skill and experience to form questions so as not to bias the user. Even the tone of voice can lead participants to react a certain way. All questions must be asked with a neutral tone so as not to create a bias. This may sound simple, but regularly, follow-up questions that are not in the script need to be asked, and it is imperative to maintain a neutral tone.
- **As a third-party, a usability specialist can provide an objective perspective and has no direct interest in how the results turn out:**
An employee of a company will often have an opinion or context that influences her/his interest in how the study turns out. Sometimes a project is political, meaning that there are conflicting opinions within the company. An employee conducting the study could already be wrapped up in the politics, could be concerned with the way the study is conducted, and could be concerned with the user reactions and overall findings. As a result, an employee conducting the study could end up directly or indirectly skewing the evaluation.
- **A usability specialist knows what kinds of questions can be asked in what context:**
One may assume any type of question can be asked, but depending on when it is asked or how it is asked can dramatically affect the user's response. It takes skill and experience to know how and when to ask a question.
- **A skilled usability specialist can read people:**
At times, people will say 'yes' when their body language means 'no'. A skilled moderator can tell when this happens and can ask questions to dig deeper into this reaction.
- **A skilled usability specialist uses finesse to keep participants on topic and to pinpoint contradicting reactions:**
People can contradict themselves when stating an opinion or interpreting something. Usually this is unintentional. A skilled moderator picks up on this contradiction and explores how this has occurred without being confrontational and making the participant feel as if s/he has done something wrong. If the interaction between moderator and participant starts to feel more like an interrogation than a conversation, the participant is more likely to shut down and disengage from the situation, rendering the remainder of the evaluation useless. Sometimes participants don't answer questions directly, don't understand a question, or don't stay focused on the relevant topics. That's when an experienced and skilled moderator adroitly maneuvers the conversation to get back to the question at hand without insulting or embarrassing the participant.