Introduction

Contextual design is about how data can be used in organizations to design products that meet the needs of the customer. It focuses on the importance of getting the right data that will help take right decisions. The focus is on designing effective solutions. Data gathered from customers is the basic criteria that are used to decide what a product should do. It acts as a guide while designing and helps avoid claims about "what customers may like," which at times is misleading.

While collecting data about the customer and his needs, the problem that arises is the vast amount of data that gets collected. Complex customer data should be managed using certain tools in such a way that they are not overwhelmed and can easily identify the patterns and understand the meaning without getting lost.

A team designing a response for a customer needs to work with the customer carefully. A good design is one that matches optimally the work practice that a new system will use and the current way of working. The focus is on increasing efficiency but at the same ensuring that there is an easy transition. An innovative design in addition to offering newer working styles should have some substantial benefits that justify change.

While designing there is a need to first identify what issues or problems should be addressed, what functions or features have to be included, etc. The next important stage is to check up on progress along with the customer to ensure that progress is on the right track. Contextual design has a well-defined process whereby interpersonal issues are taken into account and there are well-established procedures that help a team decide between design alternatives based on the data. Members of a team have well-defined roles that help increase efficiency..

Credit; http://communicationtheory.org/contextual-design/

Stages of Contextual Design

1) Contextual Inquiry: In this stage it is important to understand the customer, his needs and how they work every day. Interviews should be conducted as customers work. The team then discusses their unique perspectives of the data so that they develop a shared view of their customers.

2) Work Model: At times understanding a customer's work can be complex when multiple departments of an organization are involved. In such scenarios work models or diagrams can be created to get an idea of what work is being done.

3) Consolidation: When solutions are designed, they may at times be required to serve the needs of an entire customer population. In such a scenario all individual diagrams of the work of various customers should be put together in order to identify any common patterns. This is done through an affinity diagram that shows the scope of issues and consolidated work models that shows the underlying pattern and structure that needs to be addressed.

4) Work redesign: The consolidated data that is collected helps the design team to find ways in which technology and other changes to organizational procedures can be introduced to help improve work. Storyboards are used as part of this process to define a new work system.

5) User Environment Design: This helps a user understand the various parts of the system that has been created, the functions it serves and how it fits into other existing systems.

6) Mock-up and test with customers: Testing through prototypes is essential to eliminate problems at the earliest. Mock-ups are redesigned together by the design team and the end-user to ensure that it meets the requirements better.

7) Putting into practice: While introducing a product, solution or new work system, at times there may be resistance. Existing resources and skills should be used to deal with such issues. Contextual design has to be tailor made to each organization. Systems that work for a small organization may not work as effectively for a larger organization.