

Improving the Usability of Career Web Sites

by Paul Bryan

Usability issues in career web sites cause qualified candidates to drop out of the process. This may be only a minor problem in a buyer's market, but it's a real brain drain in a seller's market.

Career web sites typically take a back seat to commercial aspects of a company's web site when it comes to usability. However, the hidden costs of a clunky career web site can be substantial for the enterprise as a whole. In the first place, consider the cost associated with qualified candidates, both internal and external, who do not succeed in posting resumes for open jobs. In addition, there is a cost in terms of the brand when a potentially large number of people have a negative encounter with the company. Participants in our tests have repeatedly said that they equate their experience with the career site as a first encounter with the company itself. Negative experiences can erode the value of the identity that the company is spending money to communicate through other channels.

Some would argue that it's a buyers market. If this is valid, it is only temporarily so. The pendulum is swinging, and at some point it will be a seller's market. At that point, it will be a competitive disadvantage to have a career web site that has built-in friction slowing down the flow of qualified applicants. This is the best time to fix usability problems, because the job market still hasn't hit the red-hot proportions of the late 1990's.

Another common argument for allowing career web sites to be difficult to use is the idea that some kind of "barrier to entry" is helpful. This would be valid if the objective is to only pursue candidates who are long-suffering and have the ability to solve complex riddles. Otherwise, an unusable web design is a dubious filter for a diverse range of skillsets.

Finally, the bottom line argument: It's too expensive to improve the career web site. This need not be the case. A process is described below that any recruiting team can perform to improve the usability of a career web site without undertaking a massive overhaul.

Identify user segments

An important step for improving the usability of any web site is to identify and prioritize the types of users that will be visiting the site. Some typical segments of career web site visitors include the following: internal candidates, experienced professionals, entry level candidates, and interns. Another way to categorize visitors is whether they are actively seeking a job change, or are they passively browsing through opportunities. Some user segments need on-screen help. Some segments are more concerned with benefits than others. Some segments want to see a prominent display of diversity policies, or benefits, or community projects that are supported. You can't design for everybody, and segmentation helps determine the most important segments to cater to in terms of the user interface.

Establish objectives of the site

Define the objectives that the career site should accomplish. Is the site merely a resume drop, or should it provide some filtering mechanism to the flow of career seekers? Should completion of the primary process involve a number of interactions, or should it be a super-quick process? Do you want to allow casual job seekers to view a job listing, or should visitors be required to register before seeing any information? Should current employees be required to identify the department they work in, or should they be allowed to search anonymously up to a point?

Research best practices

Review category-leading web sites, as well as the career sites of your leading competitors. Select examples of best practices, and deconstruct them to determine which elements of their design are within your budget and scope. More often than not, the best practices you'll want to incorporate are simply a better way of doing what you're already doing.

Conduct baseline user testing

User testing is the best way to discover usability issues. User testing can be as simple as asking a few people to complete key tasks on a web site while you observe. Testing any users is better than testing no users. Of course, the closer you can get to your target user segments, the more representative your findings will be. However, if you have not conducted any user tests of your career web site, you will be surprised at how many usability issues can be uncovered by watching any group of users attempt typical tasks. Some testing requires specialty audiences, and no other users will give an appropriate response. One example is testing accessibility.

The number of users you should test depends on the complexity of the interactions you are testing, as well as the level of usability refinement you intend to achieve. In one test of a corporate career site, we were trying to simply identify the most frustrating problems in their site, and after testing 8 users we felt like we had achieved that goal. For Jobkabob, a web site dedicated to matching career seekers with their ideal jobs, we needed to evaluate a series of prototypes and help shape the application to be both sophisticated in its approach, and easy to use. To achieve this goal, we conducted 4 rounds of research with 4 testers in each round.

There are many online resources for conducting user test sessions. In addition, there are many agencies who specialize in user research that can help you formulate and conduct the tests.

Once the tests have been completed, report your findings to management stakeholders and to the team responsible for your site design. Note severity (importance) to completion of key processes
Make recommendations for changes - improve messaging, collapse task paths, improve interaction design

Next to each issue, assign a severity rating that indicates how much trouble the issue seems to cause, and an importance rating that indicates how critical the issue is to successful completion of the online process. Assign a rating that indicates the level of effort it will take to fix the issue, enlisting the help of someone on the development team responsible for the site if necessary. These ratings will help you establish priorities for the next redesign of the site.

Consider common trouble spots

As a result of having observed many people use career web sites, I have created the following list of issues that have come up repeatedly in user tests. These issues may not be a problem on your site, but this list will give you an idea of what to look for.

Process overview

Before the user begins entering any information, clearly state the purpose of the site and what the process will be like. Identify whether it is a resume drop, an application process, a job database search, etc. People get frustrated when they realize partially through an interactive session that they're inadequately prepared to complete it, in some cases wasting a substantial amount of time.

Indication of state

At each point in the primary interactive path of the site, clearly identify the steps of the process, what steps have been definitively completed, and what steps remain to be completed. On a career web site, users are usually thinking about a lot more than just completing this online process; they're thinking, "Why didn't I study harder," "Why did I quit that job," "Why didn't they treat me better," etc. Getting lost in a career site seems to cause much more frustration than, say, getting lost while shopping online for books. Problems with the interaction could mean that they've sent something potentially embarrassing to a company they would like to join.

Resume upload

The resume upload process has caused challenges for users in nearly all of the career web sites that we've tested. This is especially true in cases where there is a resume parsing function that takes a while to complete. Users need a definitive indication whether what they attempted to do worked or not. Many users want to know exactly what people on the other end of the line will see, for example, whether the formatting in their resume will be retained or not.

Error states related to resume upload need to be unambiguously communicated to users, with an indication of how to correct the problem. For example, some users don't seem to notice when a site specifies which file types are can be uploaded. One system we tested didn't alert users when an unacceptable file type was uploaded; it simply took them to the next step in the process with no indication of an error. Several steps later it was impossible for users to figure out what the problem was.

Shortcuts

On corporate career web sites, there is often more to the process than plugging in a few key words and seeing a list of jobs. However, not everybody needs to complete all the steps. In one career web site we were able to cut the primary path through the site from 12 steps to 5 steps for over 50% of the site's users.

Default data entry values

People always seem more baffled by too few results, or worse, no results, than they are by too many results. Therefore, all default values in data input fields should be set to retrieve the maximum number of results. For example, if a data entry field is asking for city, set the default to "Any city."

Instructions for Zero Results

Quite a few users have difficulty interpreting a search that returns 0 results. Do not assume your users understand the concept of Boolean search logic. Some people assume that there are no jobs available, when in fact they inadvertently clicked a value in some field that cut the result set down to zero. In one test we heard the phrase, "I guess there just aren't any jobs" in a variety of different cases. In none of those situations was it true. Most often it was, as stated above, the user entered a very limiting value. In other cases, the results were not visible on the first screen of information and users assumed there were none. Always provide some kind of instructions to users when there are zero results. For example, in a prominent area of the screen include the sentence "Please try your search again with fewer search criteria" and add a link back to the search form.

Clear path for return users

The needs of returning users are often overlooked by the design team, who may be focused solely on refining the data collection portion of the process. There seems to be room for improvement on many career sites for editing and re-using previously submitted resumes.

Follow-up

When users have successfully submitted their information to the career site, let them know what they can expect in terms of follow-up. Several sites we tested left users hanging, not knowing what would happen next. This is disconcerting for someone who is hoping to have a relationship with a company.

Refine the approach and iterate

User testing is most effective when it is iterative. After you've conducted a round of tests and have submitted your findings to the design team, determine what was effective in the test protocol and what was not effective. After the next release of the site, refine the protocol and conduct a new round of tests. When the major usability problems have been addressed, introduce performance metrics, such as measuring the time it takes to complete common tasks, and error rates for individual steps in the process. In the process of improving the career web site, you may at the same time be setting a precedent for improving the quality of all of the web sites for which your department is the business owner.

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About Usography

Usography is a design strategy firm located near Atlanta, Georgia (USA). Usography services include: design strategy workshops; user interface (UI) design requirements gathering; development of user scenarios and personas; information architecture (wireframes, site maps, interaction design, process maps); and usability assessments (heuristic evaluations, expert reviews, user testing) of prototypes and existing design work.