

# The Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia

## ensuring health, safety... and usability

**BACKGROUND** The Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia (WCB) is an independent government agency that promotes workplace health and safety. They consult with and educate both employers and workers, while monitoring compliance with Occupational Health and Safety Regulations. In the event of work-related injuries or diseases, the WCB helps provide return-to-work rehabilitation, compensation, health care benefits, and a range of other services.

**THE NEED TO INSTITUTIONALIZE USABILITY** WCB insures 179,000 employers and nearly 2 million workers (half the population of British Columbia). They receive 15,500 pages of documentation, 23,000 phone calls, and scan 12,000 pages of claim-related information *every day*. Even a small reduction in the time needed to complete frequent tasks would result in huge savings. However, in order to create usable Web sites and applications that streamline these functions, user-centered design needs to be a routine part of development. To achieve this goal, the Information Services Division took tremendous strides towards institutionalizing usability, largely spearheaded by Tony Gullaci with support from his executive champion, CIO Brian Cooper.

**WCB'S APPROACH AND OUTCOMES** The first usability technique WCB applied was prototype testing, where users got to evaluate wireframes during an iterative design process. By spending a little more time getting sign-off from users before any coding had even been done, WCB encountered far less problems later on during development and release.



"Usability is part of the maturation of the development process. Originally, most IT shops focused on functionality, budgets and deadlines. Next they concentrated on quality, architecture and integration. All of these objectives are necessary for a "good" system.

However, even with all those pieces in place, a good systems solution can fail if it has poor usability. Poor usability hides great design and architecture. Designing for usability from the very beginning of the project life cycle not only gives you better user acceptance but improves requirements gathering and overall quality as well."

— Brian Cooper  
Chief Information Officer  
WCB

WCB quickly added to their repertoire of usability techniques, conducting expert reviews and performance tests (e.g. task completion, brand perception) on projects such as a new intranet roll-out and the redesign of their primary Web site [worksafebc.com](http://worksafebc.com). These early showcase projects produced immediate results.

This success got the attention of WCB executives, who now request that usability methods be an integral part of the development cycle. This has created a cultural shift that WCB is working to inculcate in every division.

"When you first introduce usability to an organization, decision-makers may not always understand the value of what you're doing," said Gullaci. "But once people see the impact, usability creates its own momentum. It's important to highlight the return on investment to show how usability can save 'x' amount of dollars, keep people on our site longer, decrease the number of support calls, and lower ongoing maintenance costs."

WCB has followed the roadmap presented by Dr. Eric Schaffer in *Institutionalization of Usability: A Step-by-Step Guide*, particularly the advice about setting up a new usability operation.

To keep up with their growing demand for more knowledge and tools, WCB purchased HFI's Usability Central product. Usability Central is a Web-based repository of design templates, standards, and a user-centered methodology. WCB has customized Usability Central by adding links, references, and extra code, so that it serves as a one-stop usability portal that will continue to evolve over time.

**NEXT STEPS** For usability to endure within an organization, it must become a systematic part of the development process. To this end, WCB is integrating user-centered design into Prism<sup>®</sup>, their existing software development methodology. By enhancing the methodology with usability activities they will achieve a powerful synergy. WCB also plans to introduce a mentoring system and conduct peer reviews to help propagate usability practices.

"Ultimately, you have to be passionate about helping people if you want to succeed at usability," said Gullaci. "We're not perfect by any means, but we're delivering Web sites and applications that really work and that people enjoy using. It leaves them with a good feeling about us and our organization."

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