Rolta India

The User Experience Institutionalization Journey

A Conversation with Laxmidhar Gaopande
Group Director
Rolta India Limited

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Rolta India: The User Experience Institutionalization Journey — A Conversation with Laxmidhar Gaopande

Rolta India Limited is the first company in the world to be awarded the Certified Practice in Usability (CPU) Level V designation by Human Factors International.

Laxmidhar Gaopande, Group Director of Defense, Safety & Security, and UX at Rolta, was interviewed about the company's UX institutionalization journey by HFI's Satyam Patel. Mr. Gaopande describes how Rolta went all out and achieved this level of high UX maturity within a short span of 2 years and, most importantly, how UX has now percolated into the very DNA of Rolta, augmenting its culture of technical and domain expertise to also embrace holistic customer-centricity.

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What were the reasons that prompted you to consider user experience and then institutionalization of user experience at Rolta?

Rolta provides innovative solutions across high profile verticals such as defense, government, oil and gas, power, transportation, manufacturing, banking, financial services, insurance, and more. Over the years, Rolta has built a lot of intellectual property that is very complex and at the high end of the value chain.

Our offerings are very diverse, and our developers tend to focus on the latest technology. They aim at making our solutions very feature rich, and continually tweak the algorithms and workflows for optimal performance. Additionally, we cater to a very wide set of end users, ranging from the extremely sophisticated high-end users to the not-so-tech-savvy and everyone in between.

We realized that our products need a standard, consistent, and contemporary user experience. It was important that we create an experience that our customers and our end users can identify as being unique from Rolta. We did not want our products to look different and heterogeneous. Also, we wanted our users to love our products and solutions not just from the functionality, but also the usability and experience.

Given that we are not just a products company, but rather provide cutting-edge solutions to our end users, this focus on user experience could not be a one-time effort. It would need to be an ongoing journey of developing a mature in-house UX capability. We wanted to embark on this journey in a systematic, process-oriented manner that could be sustained in the long term. Obviously, this was not something we could do on our own to start with, and would require the assistance of an expert in this field. That was the beginning of our association with HFI in October of 2009.

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How does the institutionalization of UX fit within the vision of Rolta?

The Rolta brand and vision stand for Innovation, Insights, and Impact. We are already bringing in innovation with our in-depth domain expertise across different verticals, as well as high-end technology. Now there is the added innovation that comes in because of UX — because of the insights we gather from our user studies and research, from understanding the various personas. All this combines to create an impact for the customer. This aspect of UX that we have added to our development resonates with our vision and puts us at the forefront of our niche domain and technology-based solutions.

Can you tell us about the journey in implementing institutionalization of UX at Rolta?

Our journey began with an initial user experience assessment by HFI, where they evaluated our key geospatial information system products. Following the review, HFI and Rolta embarked on an institutionalization strategy exercise. HFI visited our facilities, spoke with senior and middle management, took stock of our products and solutions and development life cycle, and created a dashboard of the current state of affairs along with a UX Maturity Score.

Following the three weeks of intensive onsite visits, HFI helped us chart a roadmap to set up a mature practice. This roadmap provided us with some quick wins, along with a 6-month and a 2-year plan to set up our practice. They gave us guidance on setting up a central UX team that included job descriptions and reporting structures, and governance suited to our organization. They further assisted us with our training and certification needs with an onsite Certified Usability Analyst (CUA) training program. In order to kick-start this journey, they also engaged with us on a number of showcase projects that helped set the direction for our user interfaces. In all, we were engaged with HFI for the better part of a year.

Beyond this initial set of engagements with HFI, we have spent the last two years building our strong UX capabilities and expertise. We have hired an experienced UX leader and have built a team of about 15 HFI-certified CUAs who work very closely with various centers of excellence, building products and solutions. This core UX team is now well versed in the science of user experience and evangelizes the same company-wide. Working with HFI, we have also enhanced our methodology to include UX activities and documented a set of standards.

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Once the basics were in place, we started focusing on collaboration and sharing so that everyone across Rolta could leverage all the UX assets created by the team. We built a custom internal portal to share UX knowledge, methodologies, standards, templates, iconography, etc. We also conduct company-wide awareness sessions on using this repository to empower our developers so that the central UX team does not have to step in for the day-to-day UX needs.

Today, UX is one of the strategic horizontal centers of excellence of Rolta that brings significant value across various products, solutions, and key customer projects.

Having set the UX ball rolling, we then needed to focus on the governance of UX at Rolta. That is the key charter of the central UX team. We have put in a structured process for every tweak and change, rather than an ad hoc opinion-based approach. Instead of simply trying to rework current screens, the teams now look at a more holistic impact on the user experience and design in context of the users' needs.

This change at Rolta did not happen overnight, nor did it happen by accident. It took careful strategizing, planning and implementation. There have been many challenges along the way, but by sticking with the program and the focus, we have progressed very well.

Today, UX is one of the strategic horizontal centers of excellence of Rolta that brings significant value across various products, solutions and key customer projects. With its state-of-the-art usability lab, Rolta is now also embarking on UX as a service to its customers.

Describe the major challenges you faced in this journey and how you tackled them.

There were challenges to this program from the very onset. The first and most difficult challenge was to bring about a cultural change. The developer community is very passionate about their screen or code, but they seldom look at it from the eye of the various end users who will eventually be using these solutions. They didn't even know the term "persona" or why user involvement is so important. We had to help them through this mindset change — to be able to see the other side of the coin.

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Even though we were designing screens and menus, we had no awareness of fundamental scientific UX engineering concepts.

Lack of formal UX expertise within the organization was another challenge we had to grapple with. Even though we were designing screens and menus, we had no awareness of fundamental scientific UX engineering concepts such as information architecture, navigation design, grid-based layouts, etc. These concepts were not only learned through formal training from HFI, but also assimilated during the showcase projects done in collaboration with them.

I am positive that the UX team now understands the user-centered design process as well as it understands the software development life cycle. HFI also assisted us by conducting a few workshops to create awareness about user experience across the company – a practice that my UX team has been taking forward. Rolta also established a knowledge-sharing portal that we use to document not only our strategy, standards, processes and methodologies, but also our projects and learning.

The last major hurdle was one of governance. In order to ensure that UX was done in a systematic fashion, empowering the central UX team was essential. Even though the UX team was personally handpicked based both on their aptitude and passion for UX, we had to ensure they had the right delivery model, tools, processes and standards in place to most effectively deliver their UX mandate.

A key lesson, and something that HFI emphasized from the very beginning, was the need of a strong executive champion to overcome these challenges, and I am very proud to say that I was able to drive this initiative with my passion for UX. As the champion, I had to stand firm and know just where the organization needs to move and steer it in that direction. The role is like that of a charioteer – if the horses are not reigned in, they pull in four different directions and the chariot won't move.

Describe how the changes have been embraced and accepted across the organization.

Though the journey has been a long one, UX has slowly started to percolate across Rolta. We now have a robust user-centered development process, where we not only capture business requirements (BRDs) and functional requirements (FRS), but also user requirements from the user experience point of view. It is not just screens, dialog boxes and buttons; we now look at the bigger picture and how each requirement fits within the overall user experience.

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Internally, too, the value of UX and the user-centered design process has been felt. Different groups, some of which were unaware of the process of incorporating UX, have now started asking for the early involvement of the UX team right from the bidding stage. This is not only restricted to the development teams. The UX team has now been involved with various initiatives for marketing and even the packaging of our product — the splash screen, the CD box, the way labels are applied, out-of-box experience, etc. We are finally looking at the entire user experience, not just the user interface.

The hard work put in by our core UX team over the last 2 years has been a key factor in bringing about this cultural change within Rolta. They have been instrumental not only in delivering UX on projects, but also creating awareness internally and showcasing the value of UX. They have helped ensure that we have a holistic approach of incorporating UX in our DNA.

What are the key benefits of UX that you have experienced at Rolta?

Our customers are now of the view that Rolta not only fully meets their feature requirements, but also addresses their user experience needs, thus having a positive impact on their business. That in turn translates to good business for Rolta. At the end of the day, customer satisfaction and delight are the need for any organization as they are the key to repeat business.

In what way has the CPU certification benefited Rolta?

We are very happy to be the first HFI-certified Level V organization in the world. Our primary goal while embarking on the institutionalization journey was to set a high bar for ourselves. The certification is validation that we have achieved what we set out to do.

Of course, the certification itself has had many important benefits, both internally and externally. Being a part of the elite group of companies across the world holding this certification has created a wave of enthusiasm within the organization. It has built a lot of equity for our UX operations and credibility for the UX team. Externally, the Level V certification for UX maturity perfectly complements our other certifications for Security (ISO 27000), Processes (ISO 9001), Services (ISO 20000) and Software Development (SEI CMMi Level 5). It gives our customers the confidence that we have a robust user-centered process in place.

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What advice would you like to share with C-level executives considering building a mature internal UX practice?

> ### User-centricity is not something that any company can afford to ignore any more. It plays a vital role in any success story.

- You need to honestly accept that there is a scope to improve your products and solutions. User-centricity is not something that any company can afford to ignore any more. It plays a vital role in any success story — a good technical solution without a good experience can totally fail.

- Embark on this journey only if you are serious about it. Do it whole-heartedly with passion; otherwise it won't succeed. Do not do UX just to tick it off a list. It has to be a strategic mandate.

- Have an executive champion who is really passionate and has the authority and empowerment to drive and sustain the program.

- Work with a strategic partner like HFI to create a UX roadmap and implement the program.

- UX must be looked at as a science — that appreciation and respect must convey that this is not an ad hoc process. The C-level management must appreciate this fact and drive it down the hierarchy.

- Change management is another important message. The stakeholders must be involved; it is not the responsibility of only one department.

- Institutionalization is not only about setting up a UX team. You cannot just haphazardly put together a team. You must be aware of how it connects across your vision and empower it with the right processes, methodology, tools, etc.

- Ensure a strategic focus on the UX team; do not turn their efforts into those of a non-UX and low-end production job.

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**Message from
Eric Schaffer,
Founder and CEO of
Human Factors
International**

The Rolta onboarding of UX capabilities is a great best-practice example.

They had a clear executive intent from K.K. Singh (Founder, Chairman & CEO) and strong support from Rajesh Ramachandran (CTO and President, Global Product and Technology Solutions). Laxmidhar Gaopande (Group Director of Defense, Safety & Security, and UX) provided his passionate and sustained executive sponsorship to push through all hurdles and cultural shifts.

Rolta did not feel the need to reinvent methods and standards and practices; instead they focused on integrating them into their operations. They had HFI complete a set of showcase designs and trained internal staff as well as hired UX practitioners.

I am happy to report that they are self-sufficient in delivering reliably usable solutions, despite the complexity of their domain. I am also delighted that their culture has embraced customer-centricity.

This case demonstrates how an organization like Rolta can transform in culture and capability with the right executive support, with help from a strategic UX partner, and with a bit of patience. I am sure this capability will be a differentiator in the market and a key to winning many clients.

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Laxmidhar Gaopande

Laxmidhar Gaopande
Group Director — Defense, Safety & Security, UX
Rolta India Limited

Rolta helps organizations gain valuable business insights and provides dynamic technology solutions for various verticals, including Utilities, Transportation, Process, Power, Banking and Insurance amongst others. Rolta is a leading provider of innovative IT solutions for many vertical segments, including Federal and State Governments, Defense and Homeland Security, Utilities, Process, Power, Financial Services, Manufacturing, Retail, and Healthcare. These enterprise level solutions are built around Rolta's intellectual property and domain expertise to offer unique business intelligence for impactful insights for effective decision making.

Satyam Patel

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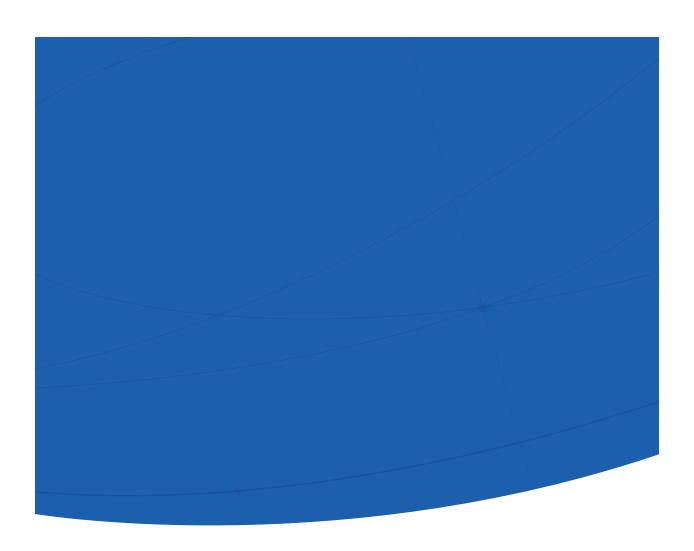Chief of Technical Staff — India
Human Factors International

Dating back to 1981, Human Factors International (HFI) is the world's largest company specializing in user-experience design. HFI provides a seamless suite of advisory, training, certification, methods, standards and tools to institutionalize user centricity. HFI has worked with more than half of global fortune 500 companies. Select clients include Aditya Birla Group, Comviva, Citi Group, Dell, FedEx, HP, Intel, Rolta, Staples.com, TCS, Times of India, WalMart, World Bank, and many more. HFI corporate headquarters are located in Fairfield, Iowa, with regional offices throughout the United States, South Africa, Europe, India, Singapore and China.

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