



Training, Certification, and Career Outcomes

Usability professionals speak out

White Paper



“In the ten years since the CUA program was founded, the CUA designation has become an industry-standard recognition of professional accomplishment in the user experience field. Practitioners have reported that CUA-track training has strengthened their skills and enhanced their careers, while organizations have received measurable ROI from CUA training and hiring, leading to the achievement of significant business objectives.”

Jay More
Global President of HFI

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Introduction

The most common questions from people who are considering HFI's Certified Usability Analyst (CUA) training and certification programs are “How will it impact my career?” and “Will it help me get a job?”

We recently asked CUAs from around the world to help us answer these questions.

We spoke with a variety of CUAs and found that each individual found unique value in obtaining the certification. From recent college graduates with no previous knowledge of User Experience (UX) to senior-level project managers, professionals are able to apply the skills they learn to do their jobs more effectively.

We found that UX professionals stay up-to-date and expand their expertise not only to remain competitive, but out of genuine interest and love of their field. For many usability experts, learning a new skill or diving deeper into a set of knowledge is intrinsically valuable.

For others, advancing their education is a means of expanding their career opportunities. One of the most concrete results of advanced training and certification is a change within a person's career. This could mean landing a new job or promotion, or being able to accomplish more within the same workspace.

Here are examples of CUA feedback that highlight the kinds of responses we received.

Just starting out



Take Charlie Ellman, for example, who completed his certification during his final year of college. Charlie is an Associate Experience Architect at MISI Company in Manhattan, NY.

“I knew I was going somewhere within the software development field. I remember reading about usability analysis and thinking it might be something I would be good at. It seemed like I was already spending my spare time looking for ways to make things easier for people to do on computers. It seemed like a natural place to go.

“When I interviewed for my current job, the hiring manager knew about the CUA certification. Although I didn’t have that much experience in usability analysis, they were confident that I would fit into their team and pick up things quickly. They thought that the certification showed my dedication to UX as a career, and that I didn’t end up here by accident. During the onboarding process, I was familiar with much of the concepts and techniques that I was expected to learn. I feel like I had an advantage over the other Associate Experience Architects, especially first starting out.”

Change of career

Because usability analysis is a relatively new field in terms of acceptance by the business community, many people don’t hear about it until later in their careers. If they are looking for a career change, UX can be a promising field. Sven-Eric Buschgens, Web Interaction Designer at TamTam in Delft, The Netherlands, explains:



“I was originally schooled in hotel management. I enjoyed IT work, and eventually found out how much I enjoyed web design. Working both back and front end, I wanted to improve my design skills. A co-worker introduced me to some books and materials, and I became more and more interested.

“Eventually, I decided it was time for some formal training. I learned many things that the books couldn’t cover, and I met people who I am still in contact with today. I feel like the training helped me become involved in the UX community.”

Still, the big question remains—did Sven’s CUA help him find work?

“I switched jobs after earning the Certification. It really helped me get the fresh start I needed, and I gained a lot of confidence. The company I’m working for now knew about HFI and their certifications. I’ve noticed that more and more companies are recognizing the value of usability and are becoming more serious about integrating UX principles into their designs.”

Helping the company's bottom line

Today, companies are looking for ways to remain competitive, cut costs, and create better products. With the help of strong executive championship, Ravi Singh was hired to create a UX team for Waste Management in Houston, TX.

“I was considering a career move in 2009 and decided to earn my certification after 10 years of experience in UX. I had a graduate degree in Fine Arts (MFA), but not in Human Factors. I felt that usability certification gave me additional credibility that would help me get my foot in the door and immediately be influential within a new organization.



“When I started this new position, there were no UX professionals in the organization, but now I manage seven people who do research, information architecture, visual design, content strategy, and analytics. Four of them are on track to earn their HFI certification right now. Having a team where everyone understands the fundamentals of usability allows us to work more effectively within the organization.

“Our in-house team has been extremely beneficial to the organization. We have prioritized usability on a broad range of internal applications and ecommerce sites. It's good to be part of an organization that understands the value of marrying great experiences with great technological solutions.”

Solving problems in many areas

Due to its interdisciplinary nature, many people find out about usability analysis while working in another field. Professionals from fields such as information technology, software engineering, project management, psychology, and web design often run into problems which require new ways of thinking. For some people, a co-worker might have heard about UX and point them in that direction. Others bump into it all on their own.

Morena Beaulieu, former Education Technology Coordinator at ICBC in North Vancouver, Canada, and now a User Experience Analyst, explains how she finally “realized” that she was working in usability analysis.



“We were building computer-based training modules. Before we launched them we would have subject matter experts and potential users review them. Then, we would incorporate their feedback before release. We saw it as due diligence and didn’t realize ‘usability’ was a discipline of its own. We had instituted it before we completely understood it.

“We became known as the ‘training avoidance department’ because we tried to solve the issues at the root source, so users would never have to deal with them at all.

“I remember a project where staff had to use a very large manual to address questions from customers. We were asked to implement speed-reading courses. We recognized that the real issue was that the staff needed to be able to find information quickly. We saw the solution as putting the manual online and ensuring a robust search facility. This saved everybody a lot of time because we addressed the root of the problem.”

Achieving a holistic understanding of UX

If Morena possessed such natural ability and was already practicing usability effectively, why did she seek out certification?

“We worked with some UX consultants from another company who had taken courses with HFI. I was impressed with their work and decided to see what was being offered. The classes really opened the floodgates and allowed me to learn more.

“Although UX is innate and natural for me, I wanted a holistic understanding of the field early on. HFI’s training gave me the perspective I was looking for.

“I took courses as they came out, as my schedule allowed. Working full time and being a mother, I couldn’t take a full year off to go to school. At the same time, I needed to be the best I could be. HFI gave me tools that were immediately practical in my work, and allowed me to train during times that worked for me.

“I’ve been in usability for fifteen years now and finished my certification in 2002. There were only a handful of courses I needed to finish off once the CUA certifi-

cation was announced, because I've been studying with HFI for most of my career. (I am also certified to teach the 'Essentials of Usability' seminar series and have taught the series to more than sixty individuals here at ICBC.)"

And, it wasn't just Morena who felt the need for training and certification.

"My boss felt that certification would legitimize our practice within our corporation. We now have four CUAs, and a UX department with a half dozen people. We have a dedicated manager who stays up-to-date and finds projects for us to be involved in early on—it's fantastic."

Improved job performance, communication, and credibility

Established professionals find great value in attaining certification. Crilly Butler Jr. explains how his certification has impacted his work, despite his established reputation of success as Senior Information Systems Analyst and Intranet Webmaster with the Department of Fish and Game in the state of California.



"Before I earned my CUA, I was already top ranked here. There was no higher level for me to be promoted to, and no way for me to earn any more money. The main impact, for me, has to do with the performance of my job. Two specific things come to mind.

"First, I have an improved ability to structure and articulate the concepts I learned in my training to my team. Knowing something—intuitively or through experience—doesn't necessarily enable one to communicate that knowledge effectively. Now, I can say in 10 words what I used to say in 100.

"Second, the certification has improved my credibility with the organization and on my own team. Having the CUA after my name shows that I am dedicated to my practice and have put effort into becoming skilled.

"In addition, the training itself has plugged me into a community of usability experts. I speak with experts on the forums, and receive emails from HFI with

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relevant news. There are even people from my HFI courses who I am now friends with, whom I would not have met otherwise. I receive updates, editorials, and other publications which keep me up-to-date on the latest developments in the field.

“Overall, the training made the knowledge clear, simple, and immediately practical. My team is now in the process of re-implementing our intranet. Since leading the development of the version we are replacing, I completed the training and certification with HFI. It’s very easy to see real improvements and how our new knowledge helps us create them.”



Shalaka Barwe, usability team leader at SunGard, in Pune, India, explains how HFI’s courses improved her skills.

“After becoming an HFI-certified CUA, I have seen my approach towards design change a lot. I am able to take usability to the next level in my career only because of the education and guidance provided during the training. Each and every day of my work life makes me realize the ‘value’ added to my professional abilities and I am sure that the new courses will continue to enrich us in the world of usability. I thank HFI for opening the new horizon; I really keep asking myself why I didn’t think of it earlier than I did.

“There are many critical aspects of user interface design which are easy to overlook. After the certification, my design skills improved significantly. In addition, I have found that all of the CUAs on my team use similar approaches. This helps projects move smoothly and quickly, in a large variety of applications.”

As a UI/web designer, becoming a CUA gave her a unique set of skills, and added a new level of expertise.

“Now, I’m known as both a UI/web designer *and* a UX professional. I really get upset now if I don’t see the standards/practices being followed in the designs we do. People are confident about my designs and proposals for UI and usability. Thank you HFI!”

Conclusion

Usability analysis presents both great opportunity and challenge. CUA's have a reputation of professionalism and dedication to their field. This helps them gain trust from their co-workers and communicate the value of user experience research to their companies.

Teams of usability analysts—small and large—find that CUA training and certification creates coherence within their practice, allowing them to work more effectively in diverse situations. In addition, the education CUA's receive builds a strong, clear foundation of knowledge which can be drawn upon and developed in countless areas of application.

The CUA certification also has a pronounced impact on the careers of UX professionals. CUA's find that they are not only more capable of doing their jobs, but that they have more jobs to do.

For those already established in a company, new work opportunities appear in the form of promotions (often to management positions), expansion of UX departments, and more widespread integration of usability research across entire organizations. For new professionals, the CUA title brings a competitive advantage in the job market.



In closing, we direct you to the CUA of the Month story on Art Zippel. He is a UX contractor who says that most of the work he gets now is a “direct result of my CUA”.

You can read his story at:

www.humanfactors.com/certification/art_zippel.asp



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