

IBM Joins User Experience Race

May 22 2007

Don't count IBM out of the race to deliver optimum user experience in products, says an IBM exec.

As the race to deliver the right user experience in products and services heats up, with the likes of Adobe, Microsoft and even Sun Microsystems backing entries, don't count IBM out.

IBM is equally focused on delivering an attractive user experience for its products and has been working on it for some time, said Mike Rhodin, general manager of IBM's Lotus business unit.

"It's not just the user interface, but the overall experience of using the system," Rhodin said. IBM wants users to identify with and enjoy their interaction with the company's software "from the minute they open the box," he said.

Indeed, Rhodin said the emphasis on user experience has evolved at Lotus to the point where he has commissioned two groups to focus on it: one in Raleigh, N.C., and another in Cambridge, Mass.

"And they design all the stuff from the outside in," Rhodin said. "They're putting an emphasis on improving the consumability of our products."

The Nielsen Norman Group, a Fremont, Calif., company that focuses on user experience and helping companies design human-centered products, defines user experience as encompassing "all aspects of the end user's

interaction with the company, its services and its products. The first requirement for an exemplary user experience is to meet the exact needs of the customer, without fuss or bother. Next comes simplicity and elegance that produce products that are a joy to own, a joy to use. True user experience goes far beyond giving customers what they say they want, or providing checklist features."

So while IBM may not be delivering a new platform for building a cross-browser, cross-platform environment for building RIAs (rich Internet applications) like Adobe, Microsoft and Sun, the company is ensuring that its products deliver a quality user experience, Rhodin said.

"We're reacting to market realities," he said. "It's a need." Rhodin noted that with the changing work force, the user experience of a product can mean the difference between a company having to invest heavily in training or not.

Indeed in IBM Workplace's Portlet Palette, "you could select an icon and drag it onto your page, and we have to create a similar set of tooling that makes it easy to build mashups," Rhodin said, noting that IBM has recently announced technology for doing this, along with QEDwiki technology coming out of IBM's emerging technologies team.

However, the primary interest of IBM when it comes to user experiences is "we're trying to make our software much more consumable," Rhodin said. "In the [IBM] Software Group we call this the year of consumability. We want to make it easier for our customers to consume software and get value out of it much faster."

The social concepts of new Web 2.0 software also have value in the context of an enterprise, he said.

"IBM has had a Facebook internally—inside the company—for years,

we call it BluePages," Rhodin said. "We're expanding on that in [Lotus] Connections."

Rhodin's role in IBM's SOA (service-oriented architecture) strategy is to deliver the interaction services for the strategy, he said.

Meanwhile, IBM is working on delivering Lotus Notes 8.0. The company plans to drop a second public beta of the technology later this week, Rhodin said. The second beta is based on user feedback from the first beta, which was released in March. "We're on tap to ship in midsummer," Rhodin said of Notes 8.0.

"I switched over [to Notes 8] a few months ago, and I can't go back because my productivity is so much improved," he said.

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Citation: IBM Joins User Experience Race (2007, May 22) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-05-ibm-user.html>

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