



Case study



Integrating complex tools to promote community and collect detailed information and feedback helped bring about substantial improvements in the perception of the London Borough of Islington website

London borough of Islington council already had a very effective website but they were committed to improving it and in particular they wanted residents to see it as the first point of call for information about services in Islington. Councillor George Allan London Borough of Islington's executive member for customer focus said " we are steadily increasing the number of services people can access online, but we need to check that they are what our customers actually want. E-lab is another way in which residents can help us shape a service to their needs. It is important they have a voice and we are listening and responding to their needs".

The service was designed to provide a unique blend of purpose built software and traditional consulting services harnessing human centred design techniques to communicate directly with real end users from a balanced cross section of users and potential users and provide recommendations for improvements, changes and new services. Panel members were very positive about being asked to get involved and seeing evidence of the influence they were able to have on the future of services within their own borough.

.After extensive testing and consultation, the website was redesigned and re-launched to considerable acclaim. The site was put forward for a number of prestigious awards and improvements continue. The E-lab software provides the power to manage a panel of users within a community environment where a blend of optional tools and services can be offered to promote discussion and collaboration and to promote the community atmosphere. Services include chat-rooms, forums, private profiles, a document library and polling. As well as the community it supports sophisticated usability testing online by orchestrating tasks and recording the user's progress and reactions remotely. Other services include black box testing and focus groups. Combined with an understanding of research techniques and or User Centred Design the E Lab tool provides a very powerful and cost-effective way of improving the returns from online investments. Ed Taaffe designed the system and put together the methodology using his own knowledge and experience of User centred design combined with the vast experience of a team of consultation experts at BMG.

"Perhaps it is because of the ease with which a few simple web pages can be created or the continued growth in demand for web development skills, but it is an unfortunate fact the web development arena has never really taken it's work seriously in the same way that the software industry has been forced to do Object oriented design, Use case methods, RUP all these and more methodologies of the software world provide reliable ways to design software for a precise need and focus on supporting the end user in carrying out their tasks. The web however still pays scant regard to any of these methods for the most part. Few websites are designed for a well known audience, rarely is the audience engaged at any point and in many cases little is really known about who the users are, why they visit or what they really want. Many public sector websites across the US and Europe are now improving dramatically as a result of shifting the emphasis from investing in systems to engaging with users, learning their needs and investing in marketing to build new habits, online habits."