

User-friendly technology - it's here!

Have you ever felt dumb because you had trouble finding information on a website? And remember how hard it was to program a VCR? Well, it turns out, maybe you weren't so incompetent after all. The fault may have been the design of the VCR or the website, but that is changing.

In the past several years, many businesses, especially companies that produce technological products, have created divisions that focus on making their products and websites more user-friendly. As you can imagine, there is a great need now for qualified employees in that field. Western responded to that need when the university began offering the master of applied science in human factors and usability in the fall of 2009.

"It used to be if you created a website, that was good enough. Now it has to be user friendly," said Dr. Jeremiah Still, assistant professor of psychology and instructor in the master's program. "And, products used to be engineer-designed and they never asked the user. Now they put the user first."

But along with the consumer demanding more user-friendly products, companies realize they can save a lot of money if they create a product with the user in mind. Jeremiah explained that if a consumer can find answers on a company's website or figure out themselves how something works, they won't have to call the company for help, and that saves money.

It was the director of the User Experience Group at Sprint in Overland Park, Kan., that initially approached Western about the lack of qualified employees in the usability field, said Dr. Brian Cronk, professor of psychology and interim dean of Western's graduate school.

"Sprint was having trouble hiring for the User Experience Group, and they were sending employees to a private institution in Massachusetts for training," Brian said. He worked with Sprint to develop a curriculum for Western's master's program.

Western's program boasts a state-of-the-art research lab which includes an eye-tracker, where a participant views a website or software and the eye-tracker records where they were looking, how long their eyes stayed in one spot, and more.

"It's great for web designers," Jeremiah said. He also said the eye tracker is a great tool for those who sell advertising on websites to find out where users are looking and for how long.

The master's program, the only one of its kind in Missouri, is also unique because it contains a business component. "We're combining MBA skills with human factors skills, because companies tell me it's a great thing for people in this field to have a business background," Jeremiah said.

Sujoy Kumar Chowdhury, from Bangladesh, is enrolled in the program and is Western's first international graduate student. He earned a bachelor's degree in computer science in Bangladesh, and had

Dr. Jeremiah Still and Dr. Brian Cronk observe graduate students Sujoy Kumar Chowdhury and Joe Grgic in the Human Factors and Usability research lab.



been working in the telecommunications field when he learned about Western's program through the internet.

"It was exactly the program I was looking for," Sujoy said. He likes that he was able to see the lab being built and appreciates the diverse group of students from both professional and academic backgrounds in the program.

The two-year program requires a summer internship, and Sujoy spent last summer conducting research at Motorola's headquarters in Schaumburg, Ill. As a result of his work, he is named co-inventor on a product that will be patented and co-author on a published article. Additionally, Sujoy was recently recognized by IBM as a winner in its developerWorks contest for university students. He was among the 60 fastest students in the nation to complete a section of the competition 100 percent correctly.

Graduate student Jody Winn said her internship at Hallmark in Kansas City, Mo., last summer turned into a full-time job there, so she is grateful that the master's classes are offered in the evenings.

Jody said she has worked in the usability field for a number of years, but decided she needed to earn a degree when she was laid off in early 2009. She was surprised

when an internet search turned up only one such program in Missouri, and she was pleased to see it was only about an hour drive from her home.

The program consists of several team projects, which Jody enjoys. "Everyone works really hard and we work really well together," she said of the seven graduate students in the program.

Joe Grgic, the lab manager for the program, said he appreciates the business component of the program because of its value to potential employers. He also likes the hands-on experiences and available resources to complete projects.

"You're always going to need people who understand usability because technology is constantly changing and there is a lot of competition," Joe said.

He completed an internship at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where its Human-Computer Interaction Institute is one of the top programs in the nation. "It was fun. I got to play with the coolest technology I've ever seen."

If you've replaced your VCR with a TiVo, did you notice how much easier it is to operate than the VCR? You can thank the human factors and usability field for that. ■

Campus Kudos

- Dr. Kristen Walton, assistant professor of biology, was one of 23 nationwide selected to participate in the 2010 American Society for Microbiology/National Science Foundation Biology Scholars Program Research Residency. The yearlong virtual research residency offers scholars the opportunity to design a research project to investigate student learning, understand methods for collecting, analyzing and interpreting data on student learning, and identify appropriate venues for publishing.
- Joseph Byer, a senior accounting major, won third place in the Yellow Pages Advertising Challenge, a competition that drew more than 1,050 entries from nearly 150 two- and four-year colleges and universities in the United States and Canada.
- Campus Police Officers Dennis Johnson '73, and James Bench received the Meritorious Conduct Award in acknowledgment of their efforts that helped save the life of a man at Spratt Memorial Stadium Sept. 2. When sophomore wide receiver Kyle Knox's grandfather, Harvey, suffered a heart attack before the Griffon's first football game, James brought the automatic external defibrillator from the patrol car and Dennis used it to bring the man back to life. ■

Two alumni join Board of Governors

Gov. Jay Nixon appointed Deborah J. Smith '79, to the Board of Governors in August and Leo Blakley '62, in November.

Deborah, of Country Club Village, Mo., earned a bachelor's degree in business administration and is a private contractor for Shelter Insurance. She is a school board member for the Savannah R-III School District and a member of the board of directors of Northwest Health Services. Deborah is also on the advisory board for Cotillion for Achievement in St. Joseph, Mo. She replaces Diza Eskridge, who died June 29, 2010.

Leo, from St. Joseph, Mo., works for the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and had served as teacher, administrator and principal in the St. Joseph School District for 30 years. He has been on the district's Board of Education since 1997. Leo replaces Patt Lilly, whose term expired in October. ■

The Western Institute's Center for Community Arts once again held the annual Artscape, a weeklong hands-on arts camp for children. This year, 173 participated.

