

Interview with Irene Au Director of User Experience Google



Irene Au is dedicated to raising the strategic value of design and user research within software companies through better methods and practices, processes, leadership, and quality. Her team is responsible for design and user research for Google's products worldwide. Prior to Google, she spent eight years at Yahoo! where she was Vice President of User Experience and Design. At Yahoo!, Irene established the interaction design and user research practice, and led product and platform design efforts worldwide. Irene also headed up the Product Practices team, which coached teams on agile development practices and developed product operations programs to help business units deliver on corporate strategy.

Prior to Yahoo!, Irene was at Netscape Communications, where she was an interaction designer and led cross-product design efforts on Netscape's browser, mail/news client, and page editor. Irene holds an M.S. in Human-Computer Interaction through the Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, birthplace of the first popular graphical Web browser, NCSA Mosaic. Irene can be reached at ireneau@google.com

Irene will be speaking at the [PDMA / IIR Front-End of Innovation Conference, May 2008](#).

Interview conducted by Doug Berger, Managing Partner, INNOVATE doug@innovate1st.com

Doug: Please describe what User Experience is at Google.

Irene: Our mission is to lead a human centered approach to making Google technology that satisfies and delights people around the world. We support the mission of Google, which is to organize the world's information. Our aim is to create products that are delightful, usable, useful, and beautiful. My team is comprised of interaction designers, visual designers, writers, and user researchers, including anthropologists and behavioral psychologists, as well as front-end web developers.

Doug: Google is a different world than Yahoo, and has its own brand of uniqueness that forms the core of a Google user experience. What is the heart and soul that makes Google unique?

Irene: Google is very special in many ways. What makes us stand apart is how technology oriented we are and the extent to which this is operationalized in everything. For example, Google actively manages the ratio of engineers to everybody else in design, product management, etc. In the non-engineering functions, there is a requirement for people to be very technical and have computer science or engineering degrees. There is incredible technology infrastructure to support daily tasks. Google is incredibly innovative and creative in its approach to everything, from internal operations to product development.

There is a great sense of empowerment within the company that is very bottom up. When people see a problem, they are encouraged to present it and then build a solution. There is a

lot of emphasis and value placed on what gets built. It is very much about writing code and building the solution rather than just talk or politics.

Doug: How do you incorporate that uniqueness into your user experience initiatives?

Irene: Many of the product development teams feel as though designers are a scarce resource. That is one of our biggest challenges right now. Remember, the ratio of engineers to other functions is actively managed, so scaling a design organization is one of our greatest challenges. We have many, many projects to support. Managing design at Google is a lot like managing design for an open source project. There are thousands of engineers from all over the world who come up with fantastic feature and product ideas and not nearly enough designers. A key to that is developing a style guide so that even if a designer isn't working actively with a product development team on a project, the end result will still be something that looks and feels like a Google product.

Many companies will have a style guide. An interesting fact about Google is that Google's look and feel grew organically over time. There was never a style guide that was authored from the top-down. It's a very bottom-up company and everything evolved as products were developed. We are trying to codify the best practices and figure out from our design standpoint the right way to design an experience, whether we're designing a widget or a user interface framework.

This issue in and of itself is not unique to Google. However, in the context of Google, it is one thing to have a style guide but it's very difficult to propagate. It is not as though you can require the engineers to do a visual overhaul of the product. We are building it into our code libraries so that as products are developed, these products will automatically inherit the Google look and feel. This approach is quite challenging for such a bottom up organization, but it is one that supports the culture at Google.

Another initiative relates to the shifting role of design. Some companies might adopt a waterfall approach to product development. Product marketing might figure out the market opportunity, and then the designer works out the design requirements, and then the engineers build from the specks. Google, being very technology oriented and very engineering driven, defies the whole notion that you can just design and specify a product which engineers can then just build.

At Google, the engineers work on what they work on and they build what they build. It requires a design organization to rethink how we approach our work and the skills relevant to the company. It becomes much more about facilitation ... facilitating brainstorming, running workshops, and looking at how we package the insights from our user research so that it can be a part of the act of creating products, rather than validating designs. We're taking a look at the skills that user experience design really needs in order to be successful. At the end of the day, what's going to have greatest impact in terms of what gets built will be how we integrate, how we engage engineering in this act of creating, and how we bring in user insights from our brainstorming process.

Earlier, I mentioned that our mission is to lead a human centered approach to making Google technology that satisfies and delights people all over the world. I would like to emphasize human-centeredness. Google has always had this mantra of "focus on the user and all else will follow." Google does consider itself a very user focused company. However, focusing on the user is something that's easy to say and hard to do. We are trying to systematically bring insights from users into the product development process. To do that by going beyond lab usability studies, we are taking engineers, product managers and business development folks into the field to really watch and understand people's behaviors, their emotions, and their

attitudes. This is much more important now than it has been in the past at Google. We are growing much more rapidly, internationally. It is easy to build for users when the users are like yourself, but increasingly, the rate of growth is in countries where the users are not like us.

For example, we are doing field studies in India where we might follow a Dabbawalla around and look to his information needs throughout the day. In India, they really value hot lunches. Dabawallahs are people hired to run freshly cooked lunches to workers. These Dabawallahs have an amazing operation. They have to figure out, "Okay, where are all of my lunch pickup points from people's homes? Then, where do I have to drop off these lunches?" It is an amazing coordination of logistics and operations. They have very high information needs. That could be an example of the type of user whom we might follow around for a day.

Another example might be a Russian military officer or a young student in Beijing. By looking at these people in the context of different cultures and different scenarios, we get much richer insight into how Google might build an offering to really satisfy and delight people. This is something that is increasingly important for Google and helps Google truly deliver on its promise of focusing on the user.

Doug: What insights about the global context can you share with people?

Irene: I can give you quite an interesting example from China. If you think about the character set for Chinese, you can imagine how hard it is to type in Chinese. People may not be as inclined to search as much. In response to this insight, we built "Google Suggest." As you start typing in characters, we pop up search suggestions so that you don't have to finish typing the whole query. That was a direct outcome of user insights gleaned from the research.

Another good example comes from watching people formulate queries. Query formulation is very hard for people. We have video footage showing the difficulty people had in formulating queries that gave them satisfactory results. We, therefore, developed things like spell correction and "Did you mean?"

Doug: In our preliminary conversation, you mentioned the idea of immersing new Google staff in the life a user.

Irene: This is another key point. In order for a company to be successful with user experience, it is not enough to have a small design organization saying, "focus on the user ...here's the user research." It really has to be part of the company's DNA. Everybody in the company has to care about our users. It is only when everybody's thinking in that way that you can truly deliver great user experiences. Going beyond the Google look and feel, the style guide and user research, we have taken a very close look at the company culture and how we might help Googlers be empathetic with user needs.

We built a module into the new hire orientation called "Life of the User." This is how we indoctrinate people and help build empathetic thinking into all of the Google employees starting from day one. We talk about who our users are and what it means to focus on them. Regardless of somebody's role at Google, whether they are a chef at one of our cafes or a customer care person or a business development person, everybody thinks about who their customer is. One of the goals in this brief orientation is to equip people with a kind of empathetic thinking and the tools to discover both the questions and the answers.

Doug: What other initiatives would you like to touch on?

Irene: Something truly unique about Google's culture is our "inter-grouplets." When you have a critical mass of people who are interested in a particular topic, you can form a special interest group around that topic. For example, we have one on accessibility, one on agile product development and we are creating one on design. We are trying to raise people's design literacy and their understanding.

There are many synergies between a design culture and an engineering culture. Things that are very well designed are very well engineered. The designers and engineers are kindred souls. There is great opportunity for us to raise the awareness of that within Google, and through that, find more synergies between design and engineering.

Doug: I suspect that many readers would consider the look and feel of Google to be minimalist. How would you describe the way in which the look and feel is evolving?

Irene: First and foremost, it has to be fast. It's all about the speed and the responsiveness of the interface. This is one of things that's made Google's interface such a celebrated interface. This really becomes a top design requirement. People may have a misconception that in order to make the interface fast, it has to be ugly. The design challenge for us is to create an experience that is first and foremost, lightning fast, as well as beautiful. I don't think that they are at odds with each other at all. You can absolutely create an aesthetic that feels fast and looks beautiful.

We want our interfaces to be universally accessible. Regardless of what kind of device you're using to access Google, it's going to be the best experience possible. We want to delight the eye without distracting the mind.

Doug: In trying to implement these concepts with different cultures, do you find differing impressions of aesthetically beautiful?

Irene: Yes, we find that people around the world do have different sensibilities for what is considered beautiful. We also know that the importance of speed and responsiveness of the interface is of utmost importance regardless of where people are around the world.

Doug: What else is Google doing that is noteworthy and relevant to a broader community of innovation professionals?

Irene: For a company to be truly innovative, innovation has to be part of the DNA of the company. It has to be reflected in the company's philosophies, the operations, and the policies to the extent that they support the innovation within the company. Google is a great example of how that's done ... how to build it into the DNA of a company, so that you can really deliver on the mission statement and the values of the company.

