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### Thumbnail: Ginny Redish

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Ginny Redish has been called the “mother” of usability. With 25-plus years of experience, honors from the ACM, IEEE and STC, and two groundbreaking books to her credit, she certainly deserves the title.

Ginny’s career in usability started, not with software or the web, but with government documents. It was the 1970s, and a movement called Plain Language was underway. The idea behind Plain Language was to cut through the gobbledygook that made up much public-sector information.

As part of that effort, Ginny started and ran the Document Design Center at the American Institutes for Research (AIR), a think tank in Washington, DC. The group’s goal was to study how readers processed documents, using the fruits of their research to help design better ones.

One thing that impressed Ginny about the effort was its interdisciplinary nature. Her staff included PhDs in psychology, English, anthropology, philosophy, education, and other fields. “They had to be able to write well, think about the user, not be afraid of technology, and be really interested in learning from other people,” says Ginny. “It really helped me to see how the many fields contribute. It’s all relevant.”

Ginny’s own academic background is in linguistics. “Linguistics is very much about language” says Ginny, “and everything’s a conversation. The web is a conversation, a document is a conversation, a piece of software is a conversation. It’s all about communication, and there are always two sides to any conversation, so you always have the user. It really prepared me for thinking about the user. It’s so audience-focused.”

One field that made a particular impression on Ginny was Instructional Systems Design (ISD). ISD is a methodology, developed at AIR in the 1950s, to allow trainers to plan, develop, and execute classroom instruction. Ginny relates, “I took one look at the ISD model, and said, ‘That’s exactly what we need.’ So, I put in what we called the process model of document design, which you would look at today and call user-centered design.”

One of the particular features of ISD that appealed to Ginny was the testing of material that took place. Called “formative evaluation” and “summative evaluation” in ISD, this method, Ginny saw, could be easily applied to documents.

With the PC revolution taking off in the early 1980s, Ginny’s life took a different turn. After being approached by IBM, she found it was a short leap to move from government documents to computer manuals.

And from there, it was just as easy to move into testing software. “We were working with an IBM group, and we were working with the documentation people,” says Ginny. “We couldn’t not tell them about the interface. The manuals don’t stand alone. No matter what you’re going in to test, you’re really testing the user experience.”

Though she originally made use of IBM’s labs, Ginny soon started her own, one of the first independent labs in North America. There, she did work for IBM, SAP, Sony, and others. “We were doing usability testing.”

One of Ginny’s favorite projects dates from this era. Hewlett-Packard had just rolled out its first PC, the Vectra. The huge, single-volume manual that they shipped with the product simply wasn’t working, swamping their call center with confused customers. Ginny and her team broke up the manual, included a getting started guide, made the manual more task-oriented, and included plenty of graphics. A review of the PC cited the new set of manuals as “documentation that’s actually fun to work with.”

In 1992, Ginny decided to venture out on her own. Though she was a VP at AIR, managing 45 people and a multimillion-dollar budget, she missed “doing the nitty-gritty work.” Her consultancy, Redish & Associates, has allowed her to work on documents, software, and websites, and with clients such as Intel, Boeing, Capital One, GTE, DuPont, and NASA.

One of her favorite projects was one she recently completed for the National Cancer Institute. “We got to do it right,” says Ginny. “We did basic research, we did card sorting, we did testing ... We got 13 groups to come together to produce a website with a common look and feel and with content aimed at their audience.”

Perhaps Ginny’s favorite part of “doing the work” has been training and mentoring. In particular, she enjoys “helping people think through their user-centered design process and getting the process into their organization.”

In fact, the idea that usability is more than just testing is a particular concern of Ginny’s. “Usability isn’t only about usability testing,” says Ginny. “It’s about the entire user-centered design process. We really are all about the user experience.”

My definition of usability is identical to my definition of Plain Language, my definition of reader-focused writing, my definition of document design ... We're here to make the product work for people."

During her years as a consultant, Ginny has worked on two groundbreaking books. The first, *A Practical Guide to Usability Testing*, came out of her own work and that of her co-author, Joe Dumas. Ginny and Joe were "being asked a lot of questions," and wanted to share what they had learned. The book was also an excellent vehicle for thinking through their own ideas about what they were doing and why.

Ginny sees her second book, *User and Task Analysis for Interface Design*, written with JoAnn Hackos, as a bookend to her first one, outlining "the front-end of the user-centered design process." She is currently working on a third book, *Letting Go of the Words*, on writing for the web. This book, in fact, returns Ginny full circle, to her original interest in language, something that "has never gone away."

Another recent interest for Ginny has been accessibility, something she sees as "terribly important." She ties in her work with the visually impaired with work she has done on older adults, noting that vision degrades with age. She sees efforts for both populations as "good business," with companies and institutions that do not participate in such efforts "cutting out a huge market."

Ginny is particularly proud of some recent work she did with AARP. Faced with 50 websites to review, she and her colleagues, Dana Chisnell and Amy Lee, came up with a "whole new model" for heuristic analysis, based on specific personas and tasks. She looks forward to sharing the results of her work at this year's UPA conference in Montreal in June.