CROSSING THE EMPATHETIC BRIDGE: Using Evidence-based personas to improve Health Information Technology (HIT) tools for VA Clinicians, Veterans and their Caregivers

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PERSONAS AT THE VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

Personas are a great way to distill user research, into easily understandable, bite size forms. They can include a variety of information, tailored to a particular project and team's needs. This is particularly true with the unique users groups of Veterans, Clinicians and Caregivers. Without understanding the needs, goals and behavior of these user groups, development teams base design/development decisions upon their own experiences, broader population statistics and anecdotal vignettes. The personas add significant value to the VA because they provide a more accurate representation of the goals for which health information technology (HIT) tools are being developed. Incorporation of user research leads to health IT tools that better serve the needs of the Veterans, Clinicians and Caregivers, and require fewer reworks resulting from misalignment between users' needs and development assumptions.

TOUR A VA PERSONA

In the creation and deployment of these personas, the Human Factors Engineering (HFE) team drew upon published data about Veterans, data collected directly from VA clinicians, stakeholder feedback and user group validation. Direct engagement with design/development teams during the creation and iteration of the personas allowed the teams to directly influence the personas available for their use. A pool of archetypes, identified from which a directory of personas can be created as needed. Personas deliver a new and practical tool for designers and developers who must be responsive to complex requirements that can include Congressional mandates and unique interactions between atypical users groups.

A UNIQUE CONTEXT OF USE

In the continuous drive to enhance the empathetic bridge between Veterans, Clinicians and family Caregivers and the HIT design and development teams, HFE has explored some innovative ideas that we believe may be unique in the well-established area of persona development. One of these is the "Persona Interview," which consists of a fictional, yet data-backed and fact-checked, magazine style interview with the personas. The interview provides an even greater opportunity for the teams to connect and empathize with the users for which they are creating HIT tools.

THE EMPATHETIC BRIDGE

The VA HFE personas provide a level of unique information that differentiates them from the personas created for broader population of health IT product users. Developed from an exhaustive expereince of user research that included a literature review, stakeholder feedback and Veterans/Clinician validation, these personas are unique to the human factors industry in that they address the specific needs of the Veteran healthcare community. They act as an EMPATHETIC BRIDGE between the VA HIT design/development team and program offices and the Veterans, Clinicians and Caregivers they serve. They can be and are being used by various teams in the VA in a variety of ways, such as: 1) to inform user recruitment efforts for usability testing and focus groups, 2) to develop Veteran journey maps for use in Congressional testimony, 3) to act as stand-ins for users during heuristic reviews, 4) as the subject of user stories for Agile development teams, 5) and posted as hard copy "Information Radiators" in developer and team workspaces.

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