Kujala, Sari (2003)

User involvement: a review of the benefits and challenges

Behavior and Information Technology, Vol. 22, No. 1, January-February, pp. 1–16

Sari Kujala is a cognitive psychologist who has examined the effects of user involvement in design processes for many years. In this publication she reviews literature on the benefits and challenges of user involvement and proposes a research agenda for the subject.

The title of this publication is slightly misleading. Kujala does not address the benefits and challenges of user involvement, but rather the benefits and challenges of different design approaches that focus on user involvement. Involving users in the design process is a commonly accepted principle and is not questioned by this publication.

Users can be involved in the design process in several ways. The author focuses on user-centred design, participatory design, ethnography, and contextual design. She briefly describes each approach and cites the corresponding literature. The expected benefits of these approaches highly overlap. Methods based on early user involvement promise to avoid the implementation of costly features that users do not want or cannot use. Participatory methods promise to improve the user satisfaction and the acceptance of a system. Nearly all approaches intend to improve the overall usability of the system and by this means increase the productivity and decrease the training costs and the need of user support.

Of course, user involvement also implies challenges. It is difficult to gain access to end-users, users are reluctant to let researches watch them work, and the large amount of raw data collected cannot impact design directly. In addition, methods involving users are generally expensive since testing, communicating with the users, and analysing the collected data is time-consuming. Therefore Kujala proposes to focus future research on cost-effective methods. Heuristic usability techniques already exist. Low-cost participatory design approaches are still
The major benefit of the article is the comprehensive list of obstacles and benefits of design approaches that involve users. It is a helpful introduction to user-centred design methods. Unfortunately, the proposed research agenda lacks any new or creative research question.