

Making it Easy - Seeking to Improve Usability in Manatron Products

The first annual World Usability Day was held this past November 3. Modeled after Earth Day, the celebration featured events around the world designed to help people find ways to create a better "user experience" of their world.

Usability is the measure of the ease with which particular people can employ a particular tool or other human-made object in order to achieve a particular



World Usability Day
2005 • Making It Easy!

goal [Wikipedia - en.wikipedia.org]. Usable items are effective, efficient, and satisfying to use. Good usability is found when some sort of technology makes it easy and enjoyable for people to perform the tasks they need to do. The study of usability has become an increasingly important aspect of developing technology of all forms—from washing machines and remote controls to computer programs and web sites. Even directional signs and forms can be judged for usability.

Usability can also refer to the methods of measuring usability and the study of the principles that may predict whether an object is found usable in practice. Usability testing involves observing actual or potential users of a product attempting to perform certain prescribed tasks. A test is facilitated by one or more usability specialists, who introduce the tasks the test participant must accomplish and take notes on the user's comments and actions, but who otherwise do not prompt the tester or influence their decisions.

Often a usability test is also video-recorded

to capture the monitor screen and the test participant's facial expressions. Technology exists to gather data from the computer the tester is using, for example, tracking interactions like mouse clicks and keyboard use.

Manatron began incorporating usability testing in its development processes about three years ago when it hired a usability consulting firm to help plan and facilitate the first test on ProVal

Plus. Subsequently Manatron's internal usability team has conducted three major tests on various features of our solution, from Records to Tax.

Manatron's tests are somewhat unusual because they are most often conducted at customer sites, rather than in a testing lab. Unlike many retail products or web sites which are used by a broad range of individuals, our products are so specialized that the most accurate information is obtained by observing software users in their own work environment.

Tests typically involve six to ten participants in individual one-hour sessions. This may seem like a small test group, but it is generally easy even with very few people to identify common trouble spots where most people might have difficulty completing a certain step. The goal is not to identify new features or customize the software according to certain users needs, but to improve the overall behavior, navigation, and communication supplied by the existing technology so that a program is easier to use for everyone.

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Manatron Updates:

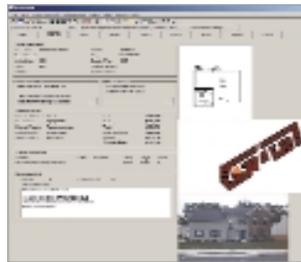
The Latest In Product Solutions

Manatron CAMA

Manatron CAMA is a comprehensive Government Revenue Management™ (GRM™) property appraisal software product. It features a highly productive, integrated sketch package and an extremely accurate valuation engine for calculating property values. It is the most widely deployed and, nationally recognized CAMA software product available today.

With its powerful valuation engine, Manatron CAMA offers all the traditional approaches to value, including the cost, market and income approaches, while conforming to strict national and international standards. It encapsulates advanced CAMA technology, provides integrated Assessment Administration, Mapping (GIS), and supports real and personal property valuation. It also features hearing scheduling and certified roll processing and maintenance, while adhering to the CAMA business rules that have been developed and refined over the past 30 years.

Manatron understands that with never-ending budget pressures at all levels of government, property taxes are an increasing



fiscal lifeline for counties. Because of the importance of this vital revenue source it is imperative

that jurisdictions completely, accurately and fairly apply the property tax burden to their taxpayers. Manatron CAMA was developed to meet this need.

Features and Benefits of Manatron CAMA

- Up-to-date technology built on Microsoft platform
- Integration with nationally recognized GIS vendors
- Database independence
- Integration with third party software products, like SPSS, NCSS, Feedback, and Microsoft Office Products
- Utilize current CAMA technologies to increase office productivity at a reduced cost per parcel
- Easy-to-use sketch routine
- Maintains unlimited years via effective dating
- Tracks property splits, combinations and transfers
- Allows comprehensive searches and inquiries
- No destructive updates ever occur when data is entered
- Integration with hand-held and laser measuring devices
- Mass appraisal of income producing properties through income modeling
- Analysis of sales and statistical data on neighborhood and/or user defined subsets
- Allows application of land valuation models by neighborhood
- Provides extensive security
- "On-line" and "What's This?" help features
- Easy-to-use "Wizards" to guide the user through multi-step or infrequently used processes

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When the test is complete, the usability team analyzes the notes and tapes from all testers, compiles the results, and makes recommendations to product management and development teams of potential improvements for future releases.

Past tests have identified various areas for improvement, as well as features which already promote good usability, such as menus, navigational shortcuts, and cash balancing in Manatron Tax. Improvements that resulted from usability tests include identifying places to reduce the number of clicks required to complete a task in GRM, providing more keyboard

shortcuts, and providing better messages, screen labels, and other helpful information.

In addition to conducting usability tests, Manatron established a user-centered design team and user interface standards to promote usability and consistency in developing the web-based GRM suite of products. In 2006 more tests will be performed on GRM products, especially as the Manatron iFramework rolls out new user interface changes.

A crucial aspect of successful usability testing are the volunteer testers, who put up with strange requests, such as thinking

out loud (which gives the observers valuable information that they would not get by merely observing the participants' actions) and sometimes feel like guinea pigs while observers scribble notes and film them as they work.

The following counties and their employees have given invaluable assistance in improving the usability of Manatron software: Wells County, Indiana, Roanoke County, Virginia, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Sarasota and Escambia counties in Florida, and Gwinnett County, Georgia. Manatron is grateful for their contributions to its efforts to make its products easy for all users.