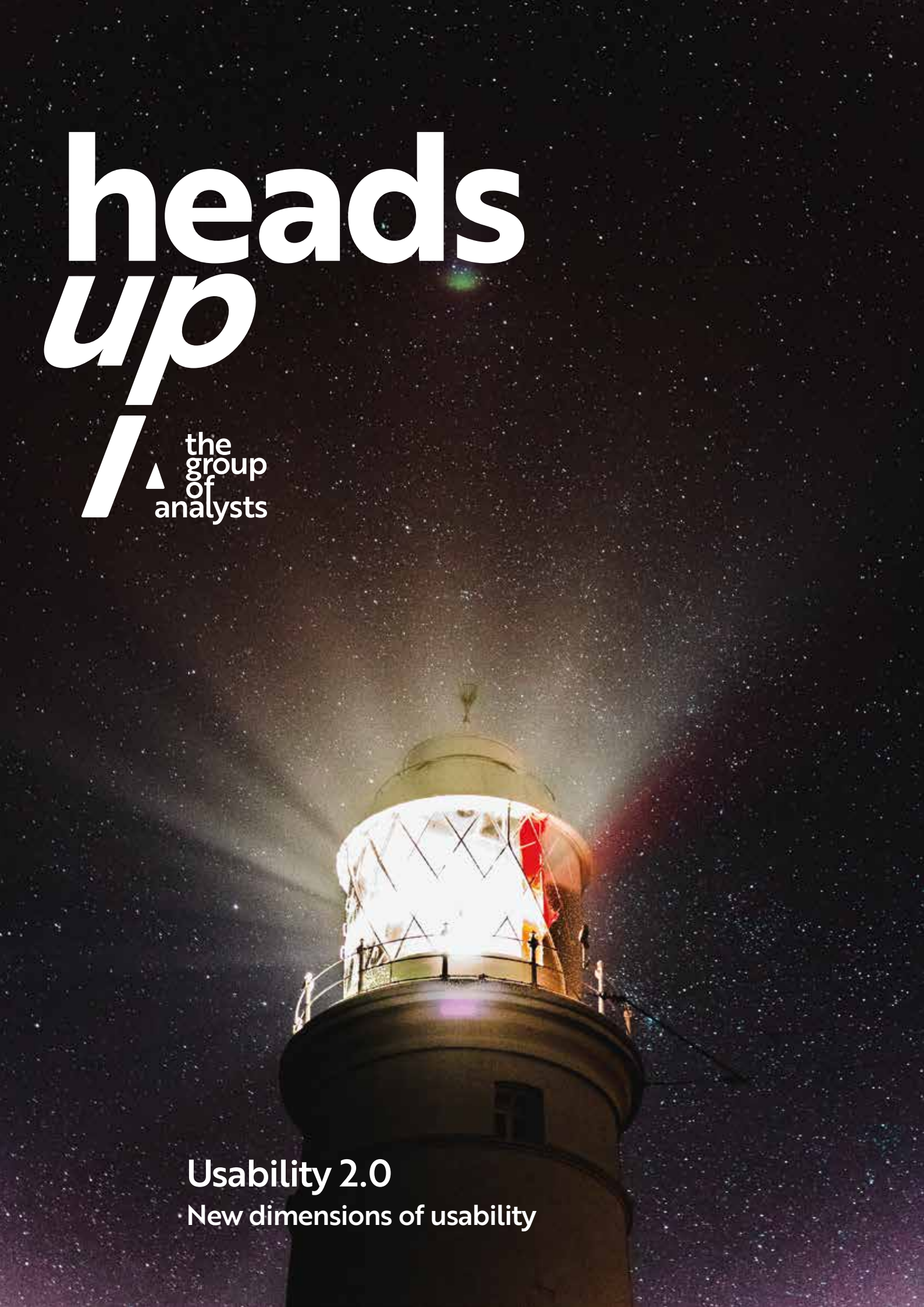
heads up

the group of analysts



Usability 2.0

New dimensions of usability

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Together on new paths towards a brighter digital future. Heads up and eyes wide open!

EDITORIAL

We are living in exciting, innovative times, in which profound digital change and innovation density will increasingly accelerate. Each of these hugely powerful revolutions harbour both risks and opportunities. We are convinced that the inherent benefits for individuals and society have to be exploited in order to create a future that corresponds to our needs. Who – if not you, as a decision-maker, and us, as analysts intensively focusing on this development – has the ability to steer the thought processes behind the greatest transition to take place since the beginning of the information age?

With a new publication form – the Whitepapers, the first edition of which you currently hold in your hands – The Group of Analysts will be focusing on exciting topics relating to the digital revolution at irregular intervals, always in collaboration with a partner that has managed to convince us through its extraordinary performance.

With usability, we have taken on a topic that is eminently important for implementing digital change, of which the full ramifications only become evident at second glance, however.

Although we all have our own idea of what we believe usability is, let us first explain the term: usability describes "the extent to which a product can be used by certain users within a certain utilisation context in order to effectively and satisfactorily achieve certain objectives"; in other words, user satisfaction is – in addition to task fulfilment – a central focus.

This Whitepaper will showcase how the usability topic fits into the ISCM concept, what it has to do with the most important current trends, how important it will be in the future and how it can be implemented particularly well, especially in ISCM data procurement.

The willingness to enter into dialogue has been one of the most important values of The Group of Analysts from the very start.

Acting in a partnership-like manner is an essential part of our DNA. This also applies to publications such as the newly-developed Whitepaper format. The objective of this series is to present examples of special achievements and performances that have – against the backdrop of digital change – come to our attention within the context of our assessment activities. Together with our discussion partners, we develop an informative dialogue that provides food for thought.
It was for this reason that we did not draft this Whitepaper on our own – it is a collaboration with Akeneo.

Digital trends and their influence on usability

We evaluated a huge number of publications focusing on digital trends with regards to the topic of usability. Our first discovery: the praised trends have a tremendous bandwidth. Our second discovery: there are overlaps, i.e. topics, that are seen as developments with disruptive potential by numerous institutes and large consultancies. Our third discovery: usability does not feature as a standalone topic. Upon closer inspection, we did however ascertain that the most important trends have a major influence on how usability can be designed and further developed. The innovations of digital development offer completely unexpected perspectives and opportunities to shape man-machine interaction for the benefit of the user.

With this in mind, the following showcases in detail the most relevant trends in terms of usability.

Artificial intelligence

Rarely are soothsayers in as much agreement as when it comes to the importance of a topic: almost all well-known studies regard artificial intelligence (AI) as an important digital trend with huge potential for change. According to an Accenture study conducted among 5,400 IT and business decision-makers, 85 percent of those surveyed are planning to invest massively in AI-related technology over the next three years.
79 percent of those surveyed are convinced that AI will help promote the spread of technology in their organisations.[2]

KI becomes UI

AI has the potential to redefine the man-machine interface. In line with the generally-accepted concept of design thinking, which places the primary focus on human needs, technology will have to adapt to humans. The objective is to communicate with machines in the most natural way possible.
Far beyond what we know from Siri, intelligent voice recognition systems will ensure that technology can be controlled and sensibly deployed. Would it not be nice if we were simply able to tell an Excel spreadsheet what we want to know? A great example of this comes from software manufacturer Tableau and its Eviza[3] tool, which enables the execution of exploratory analyses and drill-down views using standard voice dialogue with a visual display. If, for example, data from earthquakes were evaluated, one could simply ask the question where the most severe damage occurred in 2016 and receive a corresponding display. Then, one could ring-fence these to certain regions and display them as a graph. Here, AI is structured so that natural dialogue is actually possible and the user is not limited to a small number of defined commands.
AI can be used to make interaction with technology simpler, more natural, smarter, faster and more efficient, meaning that usability is considerably improved when the design possibilities are used correspondingly!

Customer and employee journey

The most far-reaching impact of AI is predicted for the relationship between companies and customers. AI opens up new possibilities for supporting the customer journey with intelligent systems across many channels in order to guarantee satisfaction even without contact with human company representatives. In the future, the user experience (UX) will be intelligently digitalised to such a major extent that the brand experience itself is predominantly dependent on it.
Amazon's Alexa is merely the tip of the iceberg; but her ability to learn from previous actions, to interact with other systems and to trigger actions relating to the user here (i.e. ordering a cab), mean she is on the right path in contrast to other systems.

However, the professional utilisation of technology also offers an ocean of possibilities to considerably improve both employee satisfaction during use and also the efficiency when processing tasks, as evidenced by Eviza.

The complexity of technology is becoming invisible

As the complexity of technology is hidden behind the natural interaction, new user communities without IT backgrounds can be won over; complex problems that actually require the interaction of several systems in the background can be solved with simply-formulated task descriptions, for example using voice.

[2] Accenture Technology Vision 2017

[3] Eviza: A Natural Language Interface for Visual Analysis, Tableau Software, ACM Press 2016

Big Data and analyses

In the year 2025, around 163 zettabytes (163 with 21 zeros) of data will be generated worldwide – more than ten times the amount of data generated in 2016 (16 zettabytes). To put this into perspective: that corresponds to all series and films currently stored by Netflix – just under 500 million times over. Here, the annual growth rate of all data between 2015 and 2025 is expected to be 30 percent[4]. While current data volumes are predominantly private in nature, company-generated data is expected to double its share from 30 to 60 percent by 2025.

One obvious application is the optimisation of customer-related activities. Great effort is being made to make the tidal wave of information usable for this.

The volume and diversity of the data enables us to develop analysis systems that provide a new level of insight and truly understand how people behave and what their objectives for the future are.

Many of the results acquired in this way can of course be used for business-to-business and professional users. Big Data can therefore also provide the fuel for real usability if research and development targets are correspondingly set.

[4] Seagate: Data Age 2025

Internet of Things

The fact that a vision can develop into an essential trend is demonstrated by the Internet of Things (IoT). Back in 1991, Mark Weiser mentioned in his essay 'The Computer for the 21st Century' the idea of a global infrastructure that would be able to network physical and virtual objects and make them work together. The term and the foundation stone for the Internet of Things was born eight years later. Since then, this trend has constantly further developed itself, albeit initially away from the limelight, until the associated changes in society gradually started to become visible. Portable devices such as smart phones and tablets – but also everyday items equipped with embedded processors, sensors and network technologies – are increasingly moving into areas where computers were to date considered indispensable. The sky's the limit when it comes to the possibilities of such smart devices. The stated objective is nevertheless often the same: make our everyday lives simpler and more structured. The battle for first place has been raging ever since companies discovered the potential of intelligent household appliances, wearable technology, etc. for themselves. In addition to publicity-effective applications for private use, a world of sheer endless possibilities for professional utilisation of data procurement systems is of course opening up, which is however inseparable from AI if the objective is intelligent networking.

To this end, the IoT is helping to allow the creation of the visions of Usability 2.0, but is here dependent on the quality of the AI components.

Cloud

Clouds have meanwhile become a perennial among trends. They are on the verge of replacing forgotten, dusty basement-based servers. But why has this trend become so dominant? The exploding volumes of data (see Big Data) accompanying digitalisation demand capacities and flexibility – with the cloud being the appropriate solution for these. The development of the relationship between cloud-based and local data sources among medium-sized and major companies can be viewed as an indicator of the level of penetration: At the end of 2014, these were 55 and 45 percent respectively. In the subsequent 15 months, there was an increase of 28 percent in favour of the cloud, with the cloud being the appropriate solution for these[5].

Two circumstances make this technology interesting for the development of usability: firstly, it increases fast availability of software and helps accelerate launches on the basis of models such as software as a Service (SaaS) – to accelerate launches. On the other hand, it provides the basis for handling future data volumes sensibly, hence supporting the Big Data trend with its mentioned influence on usability.

[5] cf. Henrik Jörgensen (May 16, 2017)

Summarising, we can state the following:

The developments of the digital world, how they reflect the observed trends, provide the infrastructure and the tools with whose help a new, more powerful vision of usability can be shaped. The possibilities for Usability 2.0 are available or soon will be – we just need to want it.

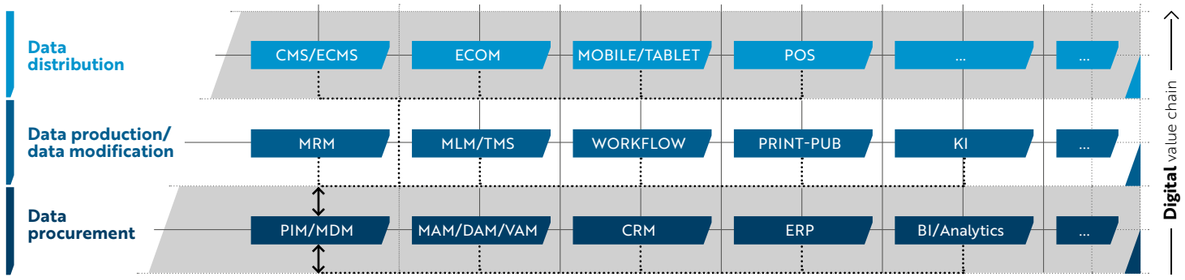
ISCM and the categorisation of usability

Information Supply Chain Management

The information supply chain comprises not only the classical supply chain, but also the chain of networked software solutions. Here, all relevant data on products, services, associated sub-services and target group-oriented information are procured, recorded, supplemented, processed and distributed.

The term was coined by the head analyst at TGOA GmbH, Temel Kahyaoglu, in 2008 and has been firmly anchored in the digital world ever since. This is not only down to the concept behind ISCM, but also down to the fact that the digital information supply chain is not a phenomenon within certain sectors. Each company is confronted by the necessity to procure, manage and modify its digital data. This data is refined into a tool for the successful sales of products. Smaller companies with a more limited product range also have to consider the entire ISCM landscape.

Existing software markets are subdivided in ISCM. As the following figure shows, it makes sense to attribute the software markets relevant to ISCM is the same way as in the case of the three cornerstones of supply chain management (SCM): namely the procurement, the production and the distribution of data.



While the digital value chain is linear from procurement to production/modification to distribution, the underlying digital information flows are networked between all systems. »

Data procurement

Here, those systems that offer special functional scope for maintenance, storage, onboarding, processing, export and mutation of the data are allocated. Specifically, one assumes the following systems: product information management (PIM), media or digital or video asset management (MAM/DAM/VAM), customer relationship management (CRM), enterprise resource planning (ERP), business intelligence (BI) and analytics.

Data production/data modification

This is the area in which content is produced in all complexities, forms, languages and dimensions. Workflows and cooperation are deciding factors. Examples of this are the topics of marketing resource management (MRM), translation management with multi-language management (MLM) or translation memory systems (TMS), workflow management and print publishing (Print Pub).

Data distribution

Data distribution comprises all information outputs from ISCM data procurement to the various channels to the customer. Data distribution predominantly includes (enterprise) content management systems (ECMS/CMS), e-commerce systems (ECOM) and mobile, tablet and point-of-sale (POS) solutions. The output competence is decisive. Here, it is important to plan the data procurement system outputs, i.e. PIM, to provide the associated processes and possibilities for collaboration and to subsequently supply the channels.

Organisational integration as a major success factor

Networking the individual software solutions to create an overall ISCM system landscape requires technical know-how to link the required software solutions, forms of cooperation accepted within the company and solutions for steering the corresponding processes.

Therefore, two points are decisive for managing the entire information supply chain: establishing its organisation at the top to ensure assertiveness and networking and coordinating across all levels, because only good interaction between employees in all areas of the company will result in the success of holistic information organisation. Here, it is all about superlative acceptance of solutions and the committed involvement of employees.

Each of the systems in ISCM has to be controlled and utilised by people. And it is here that the age-old problem of technology and man rears its ugly head: man-system communication has to be redesigned. Usability is accordingly a universal topic and also relates to all systems within the ISCM context. While in the past the focus when evaluating ISCM systems was more on functionalities and interfaces, the importance attributed to the topic of usability has exploded recently, developing into a real 'game changer'. This applies above all to data procurement systems.

We have selected the product information management (PIM) category as a sample ISCM landscape system. On the one hand, PIM is a cornerstone of all ISCM strategies and hence widespread. On the other hand, we have found a successful example of thinking ahead in this category in the form of the development of usability with regards to 'Ability to use', as described in Chapter 8 by Tobias Schlotter, General Manager at Akeneo.

ISCM

Usability is becoming the decisive criterion in the battle between the ISCM providers.

If users do not like using software, then they will ultimately not use it at all. For suppliers of data procurement systems this also means: those unable to deliver outstanding usability will fall victim to digital Darwinism.

In view of constantly rising requirements and increasing complexities, features remain the most im-portant selecti-on criterion for ISCM systems.

ISCM systems have a mission. They have to fulfil defined tasks, while the features must correspond to the requirements. Customer-oriented providers regularly communicate with their customers and know what features are still required.

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If users do not like using software, then they will ultimately not use it at all. For suppliers of back-end systems this also means: those unable to deliver outstanding usability will fall victim to digital Darwinism.

Good usability provides benefits to people, while poor usability is just annoying. Good usability gives people the positive feeling of mastering technology, while poor usability slows digitalisation down. Nobody will seriously deny the importance of usability for the acceptance of technology or software.

In fact, there is no denying the advances being made with regards to usability, at least in the front-end area – think of such companies as Apple and Amazon, which have earned their success not least by providing positive customer experiences.

This, however, increases the pressure on back-end systems providers, because professional users being presented with clumsy solutions for many years are also consumers on the web, where they have become accustomed to customer-friendly, comfortable operating concepts. So, it is understandable that they also demand these in their vocational lives. Design thinking – where man no longer has to adapt to technology, but where technology adapts to man – is currently still nowhere nearly established enough in the real-life working environment.

From the perspective of a company that requires a new ISCM system, the introduction of this new system represents a considerable economic risk. Systems such as PIM solutions are however indispensable. The greatest danger here emanates from the lack of acceptance among users – and even the very best change management concepts do not help with this problem. Interfaces and other technical difficulties can usually be repaired and alleviated, but if the system is not being used or is only being used reluctantly, the result is both a commercial write-off and lengthy replacement procurement. In addition to this, the number of users of data procurement systems is constantly rising, as the systems are continuing to spread within companies and hence encounter users who have so far either not used any software or who have used different software.

Fundamentally, providers have understood this and are therefore working on usability or on what is generally considered to be usability. User interfaces are becoming tidier and looking more modern. The to date widespread UI-centric understanding of usability has undoubtedly led to improvements, but seems a little myopic from the perspective of the analyst. And paradigm shift is also required for usability – a new philosophy of usability, a kind of Usability 2.0.

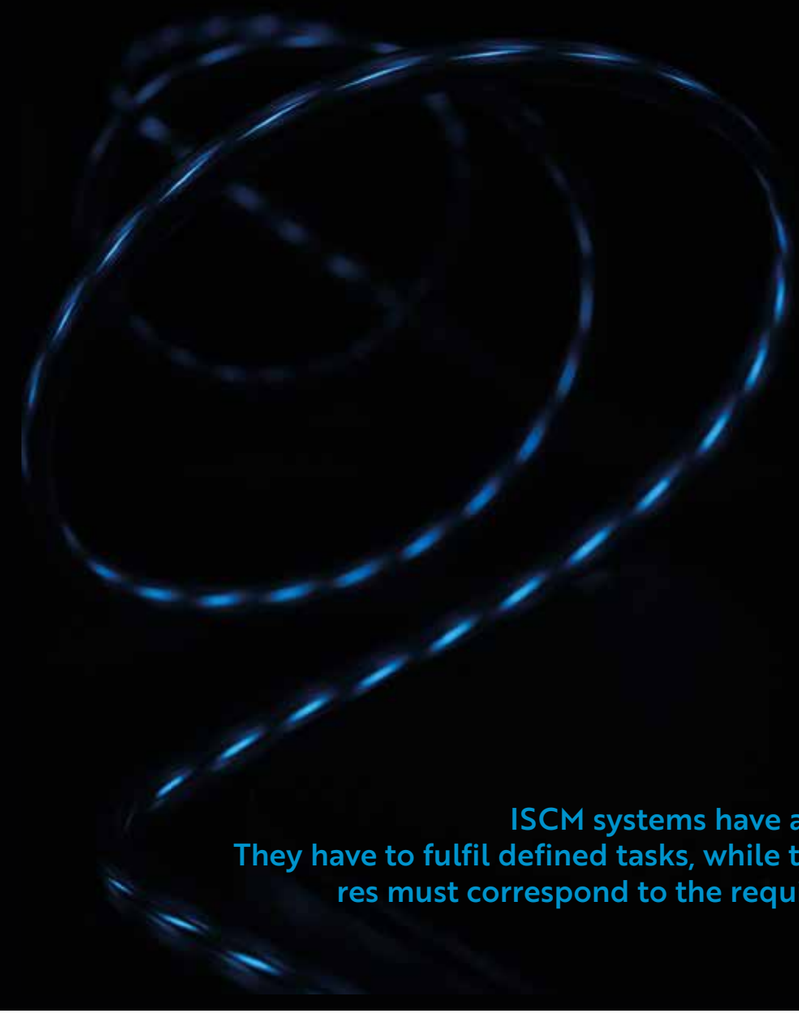
Of course, the journey starts with an interface that ensures a simple, easy and intuitive user experience. Like a recurring theme, the concept of optimum utilisation however runs through all other relevant areas: integration, data modelling, functions, performance, availability. This has an impact on what benefits the system provides overall. Usability 2.0 relates to the entire supply chain, so also to internal and external vendors who have to enter their data, for example, and product managers, advertising agencies and – in the case of retail – manufacturers. Some want minimum effort with data maintenance, others have to be able to rely on the accuracy and completeness. Ultimately, the economic dimension also plays an important role: on the one hand, through transparent pricing and, on the other hand, through savings in terms of time and expenditure resulting from fast installation and commissioning.

The systematic application of this philosophy enables a new lightness of the entire operation, used to break down the generally-assumed discordance between work and fun in favour of fun. But having fun at work with ISCM software is not a means to an end, but the silver bullet to acceptance – and hence the actual deployment of the systems. For this reason, Usability 2.0 will assert itself and replace views to date.

Needless to say, we must not forget that the software has to have the relevant functionalities in order to be able to carry out the required tasks. But that goes without saying – because Usability 2.0 would otherwise simply not exist.

ANTITHESIS

In view of constantly rising requirements and increasing complexities, features remain the most import-ant selection criterion for ISCM systems.



ISCM systems have a mission. They have to fulfil defined tasks, while the featu-res must correspond to the requirements.

Customer-oriented providers regularly communicate with their customers and know what features are still required.

In the quest for USPs that help a company stand out from its competitors, features are developed that are not offered, or are not offered so quickly, by other providers. Technically-sophisticated solutions are indications of great innovative energy and the ability to also convert this into functioning applications.

Here, manufacturers follow the imperatives of the market, for example when looking at tenders. The required features are described in epic detail, accompanied by an immense number of further technical specifications. The scope of such tender documents at times is the equivalent of multi-volume series of novels.

Of course, usability is an essential issue for the companies requesting quotations, although the operationalisation necessary for a formal procurement process is difficult.

So, rational decision-makers will have to continue to focus above all on features that can be ticked off a checklist. Usability will only be considered in as far as references are obtained from the existing customers of providers to rule out bigger problems regarding acceptance among users. The crux here: only rarely are dissatisfied customers used as references. Of course, usability also plays an important role when one is being presented with systems that have been short-listed. It is particularly during 'live demonstrations' that one one gets an impression of how an operation is designed.. But that is just a quick snapshot in a laboratory setting and not comparable with deployment under real conditions. Furthermore, we must assume professional users capable of learning in the case of data procurement systems, users who are additionally and effectively backed by training and support. For this reason, demanding that such a system is self-explanatory is exaggerated. What really counts are the features.

Customers on the importance of usability

We asked expert users to give us their views on the topic of usability by asking them three questions:

What significance do you believe usability has when selecting data procurement systems, such as PIM solutions, to be deployed at your company?

In your experience, how has usability developed over the last three to five years? Do you believe this development is sufficient, among other things in comparison to the development of data distribution systems?

What situations have you already witnessed where a lack of usability has hampered the acceptance of new data procurement systems?

Here are the answers from our experts:

Sebastian Jurth, Remmers GmbH, Löningen

"This is really important to us. In contrast to many other back-end systems, PIM is particularly relevant in many areas of the company. Only one content manager works on the website back-end, for example – and they are generally skilled on the topic, or training can be provided. But the following are all involved in PIM at our company: content managers, marketing managers, product security officers, technical secretariats, product managers, regulatory affairs officers and others beside. A lot of content is entered into the system directly by those responsible. Here, it is important that the system is simple to use and practical. Otherwise, the costs for training would be high in view of the large number of people. Furthermore, the systems are a fundamental component of digitalisation. However, if working with these is not fun, or worse, if it is frustrating, then we have a major problem. We have plenty of other obstacles and acceptance inhibitors within the context of digitalisation. So, the systems should be fun to work with."

"Manufacturers will be unable to avoid investing more here. We have been spoiled in many other areas. So, we also want to be spoiled when using the systems in our everyday work. This is a major criterion when selecting solutions. Otherwise, I am looking at high training costs and longer induction periods. Furthermore, a system that is fun is also used more effectively, with employees not only maintaining data because they have to. Systems that are not absolutely vital in particular, such as CRM systems, are only fully integrated into everyday life and have their data maintained if they are fun to work with and the back-end is also correspondingly simple to use. I have meanwhile witnessed this development in many different areas. Even SAP is trying to catch up with regards to the back-end of ERP. And the SAP CRM system is also considerably more user-friendly in structure."

"Vast experience. Introducing new systems generally always causes resistance. The fear is that there is even more work, something new to learn, this is all too complicated, I am being monitored, etc., etc., etc. Here, mistakes and poor usability are frequently the trigger for rejecting the system. However, if the system is well set up and works, we will be able to convince our colleagues and specialist departments sooner."

Markus Gaggl, Rubble Master HMH GmbH, Linz

"Today, usability is more than mere user-friendliness. It describes a holistic and exclusively customer-centric view and development of systems.""

""The developments of the past few years have been very strongly driven by start-ups that virtually all exclusively offer SaaS solutions, and for this reason necessitate a major focus on the customer.""

"Independent of the B2B and B2C industries, communication is always P2P (person-to-person). This means that usability experiences regarding technologies and systems for private use need to be converted into requirements for vocational use virtually 1:1. Usability is one of the biggest acceptance factors."

Alexandra Wackernagel, Elektro-Material AG, Zurich

"In addition to overall functionality, usability is one of the most important factors when selecting systems. Our employees have varying digital skill levels and each of them has to be able to adequately operate our business-critical systems."

"In the area of enterprise, I am noticing a negative development that is affecting usability. The systems are becoming increasingly complex, are stuffed full of all sorts of features with somewhat contentious benefits and require correspondingly intensive training."

"I have seen an entire team being severely hampered in its work because the back-end system was virtually inoperable. Following repeated training sessions and detailed instruction that provided no relief, the only choice was to replace the system."

Usability 2.0

How to whet employees' and business units' appetite for PIM systems

What use is the best strategy if one's own units and individual employees do not understand what it's all about? A frequent reaction to this is: „Oh, now there's something new being added! I know I won't be able to cope with that as well!" This response is understandable, as all staff are aware of the status quo so prevalent in marketing and sales divisions: the pressure to deliver fast response times is rising. Regardless of what you do – online business above all means unconditional speed, 24-7 availability, chaos and stress during product, market and shop launches, because there is always a lack of product information, information that is collated by many contact partners has been processed to varying degrees and, in part, still requires further processing.

This is where a kind of unavoidable war begins, one which is continued in countless other downstream work processes. The overall processes are elaborate, impractical and nerve-wracking, with high risks of error. Those who have had this epiphany – such as the manager in charge – generally look for new solutions. A product information management (PIM) system would be one solution to end the chaos and stress and to delve into the calmer waters of systematic and creative thought and action in the form of successful multichannel management.

That would be absolutely fantastic. However, software solutions are unfortunately developed by software programmers. Usually by those who have never seen or spoken to their counterpart – the client. In turn, these solutions are sold by IT engineers, who speak with IT departments about the benefits and capabilities of the solutions. However, paying attention to what they do not talk about is what is important within this context.

Frequently, there is virtually no mention of the topic of usability, or more accurately, Ability to Use. This also relates to the countless PIM solutions that are already in operation and which have failed to keep up with the developments of the past few years. These are either rigid PIM solutions with outmoded restrictions, or they are formerly successful – but now outdated and inflexible – in-house solutions. Here, Ability to Use is the decisive quality that distinguishes a good software product from a very good software product – in this case, a PIM system. Why would an employee be enthusiastic about certain software if the software does not inspire them?

Ability to Use on the user interface

The world's current most valuable company is as successful as it is because it systematically focuses on users by asking itself, or moreover its boss having asked himself, this question: how can we inspire our customers? And they did everything in their power to make using their devices as pleasurable for their customers, the end users, as humanly possible. Today, they no longer have customers. Today, they have followers. Or opponents, some of which are actually enemies. Apple built computers that were more intuitive to use than those of their competitors, with operating systems that were more secure. They only approved programmes that were very, very practical, while nevertheless also being highly professional. Initially, and for many years thereafter, they were the favourite of the graphics industry. Today, they cater to those with a love of devices and platforms for music, movies, apps and much more besides. The brand has managed to become an essential part of the lives of millions of people across the globe.

The French Akeneo PIM system offers PIM that promises similar user-friendliness when dealing with product data management. Customers and users rave about the user interface, which is a joy to work with from day one, because it is very intuitive in its handling and can therefore be mastered within just a few hours. The product helps users avoid making mistakes, for example by displaying the product information processing status very clearly and reminding users of what still needs to be done. Employees no longer fear making mistakes, their motivation relating to their daily work increases, generating a tangible rise in productivity. Old systems make mass processing of data very laborious, often holding up the downstream work. The Akeneo PIM system carries out mass processing in the background, for example, and notifies users when the work has been completed. Users can rely on this and focus on other projects and tasks in the meantime. Although users rejoicing instead of fending off new things must be deemed an important step towards acceptance within the company, it is however by far not the whole journey.

Ability to Use for the entire supply chain

Ring-fencing is also not conducive to growth and success in business. Cooperation with networks and partners should actually be increased to create joint synergies and grow successfully together. Modern PIM, such as that supplied by Akeneo, offers solutions for a company's entire supply chain because it is not held back by user licences. Vendors such as advertising agencies, photographers and product designers should be able to easily incorporate their data in their allocated space. But, depending on the requirements, the manufacturing suppliers should be able to input, edit and update their part of the information – for example, variants of the products with all the associated parameters. The in-house online team must be able to rely on the information being complete, something that also needs to be checked by the system. That means Ability to Use from both sides: vendors should enjoy inputting data, while marketing departments should have the certainty that they can adopt – in other words, use – the information without hesitation.

Internal 'vendors', or colleagues from other departments and divisions such as marketing, production, purchasing and sales, also have access to part of the PIM system by means of centrally depositing and allocating their information. There is nothing worse than when a sales campaign developed by marketing and sales is transferred with an incorrect decimal point as a result of the processing of various Excel spreadsheets. This prevents both marketing and sales from working properly. Good PIM should also make the Ability to Use factor the core of internal communication to ensure that chaos and stress do not occur in the first place.

The requirements in terms of the PIM system operation and functions should be oriented on the fact that some users utilise the software rarely or very rarely. And there are also users that work with it every day, some of them all day long. To this end, there is a very high benchmark for simple, intuitive utilisation. Those providers failing to take on this challenge can create as many beautiful features as they like, they will however be unable to cope with the pressure of everyday work as users will develop an inner hostility towards the PIM solution.

But it is not just e-commerce applications that are better off for having PIM systems for structured, centralised data collation. The Akeneo PIM is having a positive impact in the case of numerous companies because it favours classic communication. Catalogue production is just one of the examples where Ability to Use reveals its strengths. Instead of exporting Excel spreadsheets from old PIM systems and handing them over to the graphics department for layout, the graphics department assumes a finished in-design document with all the product data and in all language variants from the Akeneo PIM system and immediately commences with the layout. If, during production, data such as prices or product placement change, the graphics staff receive a message informing them that the changes have been automatically carried out within the document. Staff can then check this, but do not have to. Akeneo promises to dramatically shorten catalogue production times. Clients previously working on catalogues completely manually for up to six months require just six weeks when using 'PIM2Catalog', for example. Here, Akeneo's Ability to Use is the result of the existing cooperations with all major providers of database publishing applications. For this reason, the French solution is also being deployed in companies that are currently not even considering e-commerce, but exploit the tremendous benefits in all other channels, while simultaneously equipping themselves for the future of multichannel management.

Speed is a fabulous Ability to Use

It is quite understandable that decision-makers within companies listen up when two providers of PIM systems offer widely disparate integration times. If the time is too long, they see motivation within the team ebb away, because day-to-day business has to continue at the same time – amidst the already described chaos. But decision-makers also see potential lost sales if integration takes longer than six months. Each month without a PIM system means lost revenue, according to one of the hard-hitting sales arguments in favour of PIM systems. Less than six months are often required for the initial integration of Akeneo PIM systems. Here, the Ability to Use factor therefore not only plays a role in terms of time – after all, speed is not everything. But motivated employees encountering considerably simpler, more intuitive interfaces will – as soon as they possibly can – do everything in their power to not have to work with the only old obstacles. Given the alter- »

native of embarking on a laborious journey lasting for up to three years or discovering the lightness of being on a fun boat ride for five months, the team will not find it difficult to choose.

And there are also other potential benefits: the easy handling of product management has an immediate impact on customers. Returns – a very unpopular issue in sales – are instantly reduced thanks to precise, comprehensive product information. And there is a commensurate increase in customer loyalty, as a positive experience leads to follow up purchases, often over many years. Purchasers who know that the product is right learn to appreciate easy, problem-free shopping. They share their experience with friends and make recommendations that lead to further purchases. Companies do not have to have the benefits of and the potential sales associated with this explained to them in detail. Ability to Use is a powerful, major-impact solution for the customer experience as well.

In-house IT departments also benefit tremendously from this: they know that long project terms mean long and frequent meetings. Schedules are frequently simply ditched, while colleagues from marketing give you the evil eye in the corridors. It is simply not nice being stuck in long-winded processes. How much better will IT departments encountering flexible integrators fulfilling client wishes by quickly and efficiently expanding or adapting open source software be? When integrators do not reject requests, pointing out the limitations of extensively rigid, encoded software? And if integrators then also revise project schedules – by cutting the time required rather than always extending it? Most IT departments undoubtedly love hearing praise for delivering good, reliable work, because who would not prefer to be an enabler rather than an obstacle?

Managers frequently demand a time-to-market approach from operating units such as R&D, marketing and sales. And all this is not merely about product availability. One of the important components of global launches is the topic of language, for example. Those wishing to simultaneously launch commercial products across a broad network of branches are reliant on having the translations available online in all languages and – for the online shop – having them identical to the product descriptions in branch flyers and at the point-of-sale (POS). An intelligent PIM system provides the solutions for this by integrating high-performance and tried-and-tested translation and content services. In this case, Ability to Use means the ability to offer the market a synchronised shopping experience across all channels. From the website and the daily newspaper ad, all the way through to the POS. The company, the branch – they all augment their offerings to include the usability service component for their customers – and for those employees who deal with customers.

Ability to Use for a growing partner network

The Akeneo PIM partner network grows globally with every passing day. Important, internationally-active integration partners recognise the expertise of Akeneo PIM, actively helping to shape the success story of this French open-source solution. It has long ceased to be solely about the mere technical assessment of the benefits of open source software. Partners acquire positive, first-hand customer feedback directly, and from all types and sizes of companies. The system's scalability is convincing: in the case of Akeneo PIM, it is irrelevant how many products it is dealing with or what the volume of information is. Arguments such as 'the system is not suitable for this as it is too small or too big' are unheard of. Consultants have a noticeably positive impact on customer representatives because they do not have to sell something they do not believe in. They know that the project will be a success and that it will generate customer satisfaction. Those IT services providers that are able to integrate solutions quickly and seamlessly and impress their clients' employees with their solutions will be long-term market players. And if excellent, problem solution-insistent support is available for both partners and customers alike and is deployed in a committed manner, Ability to Use makes a direct and convincingly tangible impact.

Afford-Ability to Use is fun for decision-makers

Many decision-makers already know that they require a PIM system for their marketing and sales strategy. The only question is which one corresponds to their requirements? Numerous aspects have to be considered when deciding for or against a PIM solution, some of which are described in the above. As soon as they relate to the time factor, many of the above-mentioned considerations closely correlate to the topic of finance. The longer a service provider focuses on the topic, the more expensive things become. The longer the market launch takes, the greater the lost sales will be. The higher the number of returns, the lower earnings will be. We can come up with numerous such correlations. However, most only make themselves felt after the solutions have been purchased and installed – in other words, after money has been spent. Here, an important indicator can be opportune: those who ask themselves „what can I afford to do?" must also ask themselves „what must I do?" when investing in PIM. The Akeneo consultants have a very clear answer to this: the licensing model of the French provider focuses on 'Afford-Ability to Use'. It is all about transparency and efficiency. Akeneo dispenses with user licences that – in the case of so many other providers – increase costs and simultaneously hinder cooperation within the supply chain. Purchasing a full licence – including technical operating costs (PAAS & SAAS version) – comes in at considerably less than 50,000 Euros p.a, without any further hidden costs for the numerous features already covered by the annual licence fee. These include functions such as expanded rights management, versioning, publishing components, workflow functions, teamwork assistant, smart attributes, rules engine and product asset manager. They are all contributing towards globally establishing Afford-Ability to Use as a successful business model with a certain 'je ne sais quoi'. PIM for all!

Akeneo – the next generation PIM for all!

The four Akeneo founders stepped up to the plate in 2013 to develop the best, user-friendliest, most intuitive and most flexible PIM available on the market. They wanted next-generation PIM for all customers, regardless of their size. They knew from former jobs at Smile, one of Europe's largest open source agencies, mystore.ch, one of the largest traders in Switzerland, and Magento, the most successful open source e-commerce shop system, what was – and remains – the most significant obstacle when establishing multichannel solutions: existing PIM solutions. Complicated, inflexible, non-scalable, user-unfriendly, expensive. And although these solutions have always claimed to be flexible, even today PIM integration can often take several years. Unacceptable, thought Frédéric de Gombert (CEO), Nicolas Dupont (Head of Product Development), Benoit Jacquemont (CTO) and Yoav Kutner, Magento co-founder and former member of the Magento Board. They developed a solution as an open source software, because this would ensure the fastest circulation and the most powerful support from a growing community. Also, of course, because it provided a USP that it still has, with a few exceptions – it still has. They formed a team that developed PIM in line with their vision – in other words, next-generation PIM. Today, more than 80 people work at the Akeneo sites in Nantes (F), Düsseldorf (Germany) and Boston (USA), all highly motivated to further develop their Akeneo PIM and to win customers over with the solutions.

Since 2013, more than 40,000 active instances of the community edition have been established, a version that can be downloaded for free. The community findings also flow into the fee-based enterprise edition. Before long, the company had convinced medium-sized, well-known brand name clients to purchase the intuitive solution. In early 2017, Akeneo received 13 million Euros of capital from investors, required to be able to respond to the overwhelming market demand for the product and to further internationally expand the development team, support and sales. In addition to Partech Ventures and Alven Capital, investors in the company include Nestadio Capital and Kima Ventures. Partech Ventures was the majority investor in the last investment round and believes that PIM strategically offers companies a considerable competitive edge. "Akeneo's outstanding product, the huge international relevance, the ambitious business vision and the extraordinary performance of the entire team have convinced us that it is time to launch a new standard within the PIM market, and Akeneo has everything it takes to achieve this!", states General Partner of Partech, Reza Malekzadeh.

Currently, it appears that the faith investors have in Akeneo is paying dividends. By mid-year, Akeneo had already considerably exceeded its sales targets and added numerous brand name customers from the most diverse sectors within the German-speaking region to its client portfolio. New customers include companies with individual, albeit highly-complex e-commerce platforms or ones with numerous country-specific adjustments. Or simply companies that use Akeneo to give huge product diversity structures and, for example, greater productivity to their marketing activities, such as catalogue production. Tobias Schlotter, General Manager Akeneo Deutschland GmbH, has responded to the roaring demand for and acceptance of his PIM solution by adding five members of staff to his team. Bring on the future.

Conclusion

What is better is the enemy of what is good. A well-known proverb, but still apt: better systems are prevailing, often at breath-taking speed within the context of the current digital revolution. But this kind of development is anything but new. Companies that researched their target groups more carefully, always drew the right conclusions and then offered the right products and/or services became those enterprises that developed into market leaders while others went under. This is the very essence of marketing – not colourful pictures, snazzy claims and trendy content. They all help, although only if the foundations – the market offerings – are right.

Here, we have been able to identify an extremely important component of ISCM data procurement system provider foundations: the virtuoso mastering of usability. It gives providers in the ISCM sector (and others) the ability to offer products that are useful in every aspect. This benefits both pioneers and companies that deploy these products.

Companies are being confronted with rising demands from their staff in terms of the usability of their tools. And rightly so! As a professional, one should also have professional tools to work with. If those front-end systems used in our leisure time have considerably better usability than our business systems, the result is a lack of understanding and dissatisfaction. Furthermore, global roll-outs or new application possibilities, for example, increase the community of data procurement systems users. Here, minimising training costs is a hugely important topic. The ideal system is therefore intuitive in its use and self-explanatory. After all, a new generation of employees is making ever higher demands on their working environment. So, those who want to be on the winning side of the 'war for talents' are advised to choose software with superlative usability for their staff, be cause work should be both about completing tasks and fun – which is why it should not be made unnecessarily difficult as a result of complicated systems. The reward: improved efficiency and satisfied employees. This in turn leads to better work results, lower staff turnover and positive employer branding.

Below are the results once more in bullet points:
› Usability is only seemingly state-of-the-art.
› Usability 2.0 is much more than just a pretty user interface, as it also comprises further aspects such as performance, continuity without media disruptions, fast introduction/integration and task management efficiency. This harbours huge potential for user companies to increase efficiency.
› Usability 2.0 must also be developed with an employee journey focus. The sole orientation has been on the customer journey for too long.
› For this reason, Usability 2.0 is in the process of developing into a decisive competitive factor for providers.
› Usability 2.0 offers economic benefits for user companies (availability, task efficiency, fast and simple introduction, employee satisfaction, lower fluctuation, employer branding, recruiting).

Data procurement systems usability is – as we have already seen – far more important than is evident to most people. There is a lot of catching up to do, while the new possibilities provided by the digital revolution offer every opportunity for major further developments. Nevertheless, only very few are taking on this topic with any degree of earnestness.

For this reason, we are appealing to you as a decision-maker within the demand market: Offensively demand Usability 2.0 solutions! Use your market power! Assert pressure on providers! Your success benefits the entire company: both management and employees.

„I would rather catch up with minds than fries.“

Temel Kahyaoglu is a Member of the The Group of Analysts AG Board and Chief Analyst for Information Supply Chain Management (ISCM). As the inventor of ISCM, he has been publishing specialist articles on the topic since 2010 and – for almost two decades now – been an agenda-setting evangelist at the neuralgic interface between supply and demand within the German-speaking region, and as of 2016 in the NORDICS and BENELUX regions and the UK. He is publisher and editor-in-chief of the bilingual ‘Produktkulturmagazin’, publisher of Europe’s largest supplier overview ‘The Book of Analysts’ (edition: 24,000) and has personally significantly and sustainably helped shape digital transformation within the demand market with more than 200 evaluations.

Temel Kahyaoglu
Member of The Group of Analysts AG Board

“I contribute to something bigger than myself - I create - I learn - I grow - I do - I am an entrepreneur!“

Before joining Akeneo, Tobias Schlotter headed up national sales for a medium-sized IT systems integrator. He has been working at Akeneo since 2015, convincing numerous partners of the benefits of collaborating with Akeneo within a very short period of time. In cooperation with the partners, he has succeeded in initiating ambitious projects for the likes of Puky, Siroop, Sanicare and ZEG, wowing customers with the Akeneo PIM solution. In addition to this, he has successfully expanded the team for the German-speaking region at the Akeneo site in Düsseldorf. Next to his family, his greatest passion is diving is his greatest passion, a hobby that he unfortunately pursues too infrequently.

Tobias Schlotter
General Manager Akeneo GmbH

Feedback

So, what are your thoughts?

We would love to engage with you as a reader and critic, because communication that is one-directional is simply monotonous.

For this reason, we can be personally contacted for feedback – preferably by sending an e-mail to:

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