



## Interview with Caroline Jarrett

This interview was held by Gali Melnik, a usability professional specializing in information architecture and interaction design, with Caroline Jarrett, a usability consultant, founder and principal at Effortmark.

The interview was held on Oct 30, 2006.

- Gali First, let me thank you again for allocating time for this interview. I really appreciate it. Do you want me to give you a brief explanation of why we are having these interviews or do you know?
- Caroline No, not really. I mean, a bit of background will be great.
- Gali Excellent. Well you know the UPA event is coming. In Israel what we have decided to do is to interview different experts from the field all around the world, such as yourself, Don Norman, Steve Krug and other experts. The whole goal of the interview is basically to share some of your knowledge and expertise with the UPA Israel members. So each interview will be posted on our website, an audio version as well as a transcript of the interview itself, translated to Hebrew for people who find it more difficult in English. People would be able either to use the information or get insight into your area of expertise.
- Caroline Great
- Gali So basically what I thought I'll do is begin with warm-up questions to break the ice, and then move to some more specific questions regarding your specialty area and then a few general questions about usability and what we see happening with it.
- Caroline OK
- Gali Fantastic. So, how did you get involved in usability in the first place?
- Caroline I was doing work for the UK tax authorities; we call them the Inland Revenue. At the time I was particularly focusing on data capture and dealing with forms, which is my background. We had to implement a major change to the way tax is done in the UK; there was a change in the law, and one of the consequences was that the jobs of people who are typing in the tax return was going to change. I was working with them on the design of that computer system to type in the tax returns. I started to try and find out what sort of method of measuring whether that tax system was going to be easy to use or not. That's how I came across usability
- Gali Did you manage to change it, the tax system?
- Caroline It was changing anyway but we did manage to create the system of typing in the tax return. We reduced the training time from one day to half a day. Now, that doesn't sound very impressive but there were 25,000 staff that needed training; a lot of man days saved. But



# World Usability Day 2006

14 November 2006 • Making life easy!

we also showed that the time taken to type in a form is completely dominated by the number of errors made when filling in the forms so we also showed that it was important to design the forms to be as easy to fill in as possible.

Gali Brilliant. And what are you currently working on?

Caroline Forms

Gali Focusing on government forms or not necessarily?

Caroline I would say about 1/3 to 1/2 of my work has to do with forms, various types of forms: web, paper, teaching people form-design classes, those type of things.

About 2/3 of my work is now focused on helping clients to improve the content of their website. Content improvement which might be anything from sorting out the information architecture so people can get to the content or training them in editing or looking at search logs to find out which content is actually important for the users; as well as all the usability testing to find out whether users can actually find the content and when they find it whether it is any use to them.

Gali So, moving on to forms, since it is your specialty, what would you say are the key challenges when designing forms according your experience?

Caroline I think that getting people to understand that it is about more than the appearance of the form. People often open negotiations with me about the design of the form with issues like whether they should use a serif or san-serif font. Just to explain the difference, a serif font would be something like Times New Roman, it's got the little tweaky bits on the edges of the letters and a san-serif font would be something like Verdana or Ariel and it doesn't have the little pointy bits on the ends of the letters.

I think that this is a question that is quite interesting but I'll try and get people to think about "should you have a form there in the first place?", "why are you putting a form in front of people?", "what questions are you asking?". You need to have what I describe as a good relationship, which is about why you are publishing the form and why the user has to fill it in. Once you've got that sorted out then we can proceed to say "well, now you know why you are publishing it, why you got the questions on there, what does the user want to tell you on the form" (which I would describe as the conversation of the form) then I'd look at the appearance.

Try and persuade people not to focus just on appearance but to look a bit deeper at the conversation and the relationship. That's where I find I get the best value from forms design.

Gali So most of the challenge is to convince people that the appearance is not the number one thing that is important in forms?

Caroline That's one of the challenges, definitely. Depending on the client as well. Sometimes the biggest challenge is persuading them to make any changes at all.



- Gali           What did you find are the most common mistakes other than focusing on appearance?
- Caroline       The most common mistake is forcing people to choose between categories which are inappropriate for their circumstances.
- Let's say you are in Israel and I'm in the UK, you go on to an American website and it forces you to put in a zipcode for an American address. Well, I don't have a zipcode, you don't have a zipcode. I can assure you that UK sites do just the same thing to my American friends and colleagues and I suspect that Israeli sites have got the same rigid view of address format as well. So, that's one example of forcing people to try and put in something that is inappropriate.
- Another example is that many times you'll see a drop-down list and the thing you want to choose isn't there – what do I do?
- Gali           I agree. And now that forms are becoming more digital (i.e. on the internet), do you find that there are, or should be, big differences compared to the written forms?
- Caroline       Well, you know in some ways yes and in some ways no.
- For example: the very first electronic form I've done usability testing for was actually implemented in Word. The technical guys had been told: "this form has to be an exact replica of the paper form". So, my user opens up the form in the usability test and the first thing they see is a piece of text that says: "Please write carefully in black ink". OK, where is the black ink? There is a point where saying that they've got to be exactly the same gets ludicrous.
- But, even when you move to electronic forms there are some forms that are only electronic and they have no replica in the real world. For example a login form for your computer has no simple paper analogy; you're always going to do that on a computer.
- Another issue relates to complex forms. I would define a complex form as being a form that is one page or longer and that has got one or more pages of explanations with it, and that you have to look at one or more pieces of paper materials to find the answers (some of the answers aren't really in your mind). Once you get to a complex form you find that the distinction between paper and electronic becomes blurred and user behavior becomes very much blurred. So people will say to me, "OK, yeah I did it completely online" so I ask "well, what did you do with the paper?", "Oh, I filled it out on paper first and then I've faxed it in" or "Oh no, I used it online but it is much more convenient to read the book of instructions as paper" or "Oh no, I filled it in online but then I don't trust it so I've printed it out and signed it".
- So you get all of these mixtures and often we have quite a clear distinction as designers: "oh well we have a paper version and an electronic version". But the users don't necessarily have the same distinction in their mind; they may expect to have quite a seamless experience across the two media.



# World Usability Day 2006

14 November 2006 • Making life easy!

- Gali Do you find that users are still afraid of submitting forms online?
- Caroline Some of them. It depends on how important it is. If it is something which has got an important legal consequence they might not want to do it online.
- Gali And how would you go about convincing them or persuading them that it is safe and OK? I mean, from the design point of view
- Caroline I think you can't really. I think you can do some things that will help improve the overall trustworthiness of your website. There is a set of guidelines that is published by Stanford University which I think is quite good (Stanford guidelines on credibility: <http://www.webcredibility.org/guidelines/>). B. J. Fogg also written a book about persuasive computers (" Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do") which goes into these issues in various sorts of ways.
- You can try and make your website seem more trustworthy but there is always going to be, I think, a proportion of people (probably declining but at the moment we still have to design for them) that just don't want to do it on the web and you have to accept that and move on.
- Gali Do you think any form should have an option to print-friendly once the form is complete?
- Caroline I think you have to decide what you want to achieve with it. One option is to make it very easy to submit on paper. Another option is to make it a little bit difficult, to say that maybe you have to telephone first before you do it or that you have to apply online for a paper form to be sent to you. And so you can put barriers in the way of people filling it on paper if you wanted but that's going to alienate some of the users and customers.
- Or if you are a business, you can make a decision "I no longer want to deal with people on paper", that's fine. If you are government, that's not a decision you can make.
- Gali Of course, because you'll have to comply with accessibility laws
- Caroline Right. You simply have to accept that some things will never be done electronically for whatever reasons. And sometimes it is greatly to your advantage to do so.
- For example, I worked on a compliance system. Compliance is the whole process of checking that individuals and organizations have complied with the law. And there is a certain system in the UK where organizations were required by law to send in a particular piece of information. Now, 99.9% of this stuff came in electronically but there had to be a paper option for certain rare and unusual cases. Well, it turned out that the people who've actually looked at the material that came in, were much more interested in the paper because it was the rare and unusual cases. So, you can get some unexpected things happening where the paper can still be interesting.
- Another mistake people make is being too obsessive about letting everything happen online.
- At the moment I'm doing a little piece of work for a professional organization in the UK. This is the type of society where you must have an accreditation in order to practice in that



arena. Now, they are moving from personal accreditations to business accreditations so for most of their members who are one person businesses it won't make a lot of difference. But they have 20 members who have 400 people business. OK, now, there is two ways to do that. One way is to say alright we'll make sure that our online forms will accept up to 400 entries. Another way is to say, hang on, there are only 20 of these organizations, why don't we just write them a special letter? Why don't we just deal with them differently and work out what is best for those organizations and then the vast majority of our members, for whom one set of entries or possibly two is enough, will not have to see a form that could cater for 400 or 500.

Gali This makes sense; like anything we do with design you have to segment the audience and decide who you are focusing on.

Caroline Right.

Gali And what do you think are the biggest or newest trends in the forms field? What do you see happening?

Caroline Well, what I see happening mostly with forms is people aren't very interested in them. I don't really see that changing, I find it quite strange for two reasons: one is that I am quite interested in them personally but I still find that although forms are inescapable in many parts of business life and personal life, they just don't get a lot of attention.

When did you ever see a form win a web design award?

So, from the point of forms I think they'll just carry on being an inescapable but rather dull part of everyday life. I sometimes say it is a bit like working on sewage.

Gali It is just something you have to do.

Caroline Right

Gali Do you find that Web 2.0 is changing how you design forms at all?

Caroline Yeah, I think that web forms in general are getting a bit better. What happened in the beginning was, people tried to be very fancy with their forms and make them complicated but now I'm finding that there is some settling down into a fairly familiar design. You see the same type of things being done everywhere, and generally done adequately well.

Gali How do you test forms usability?

Caroline Just like anything else, find a user, get them to sit down in front of the form and fill it in for you.

Gali OK. So no special things? Just normal usability testing?

Caroline There are a couple of complications such as that you have to think of where the user is going to get the answers from. Now if the form that you are testing is basically just asking for the type of information that a user might reasonably have in their head (name and address, that type of thing) then you don't need to do anything special.

But, if you're testing something like a tax form where users are going to have to look up a



whole pile of different records and information then you'll have to think "OK, what information am I going to expect the user to draw on?", "Am I going to expect them to bring their entire personal financial filing system with them to the test or am I going to give them an example/scenario?".

Gali I see your point.

And how much of your work on forms relies on academic research? And if it does, what type of research do you use to backup your work?

Caroline Well, I'm glad you ask that question because there is very little available in forms; very little academic research at all.

Recently I've been doing some work for non-UK tax authorities where we've been trying to find best practices in how to design instructions to tax forms, not the forms themselves but the booklet of material that comes with them. There is virtually nothing that is directly in that area. So, if anyone felt like starting an academic program to research forms and forms instructions, I'll be absolutely delighted and only too keen to help them.

But meanwhile we just turn to the related fields. So, I might be looking at plain language research, web research in general, things in cognitive psychology, and to a certain extent the field of questionnaire design. Questionnaires are much more researched than forms.

Gali But they are quite similar. I mean, not identical but you can draw some conclusions from questionnaires that can impact forms. Right?

Caroline I hope so. They are quite similar; the main difference is that one of the big topics of questionnaire research, for example, is how do people create an attitude or an opinion? How can you best ask people about an attitude or an opinion? Is that stable over time? Is it affected by whether they have previously had an attitude or an opinion? There is that whole area and there are books and books on that topic, but it is not that interesting for forms because we don't usually ask people about opinions in forms very much.

Gali Because it is mostly data rather than opinions

Caroline Right

Gali So if people do want to go deeper to understanding forms design, do you have any resources you recommend? Like books or articles or web pages

Caroline Well, I have a forms advice website which is [www.formsthatwork.com](http://www.formsthatwork.com). And we put a few papers up on there. I also have an editing site which is [www.editingthatworks.com](http://www.editingthatworks.com). There is also an organization called Business Forms Management Association ([www.bfma.org](http://www.bfma.org)), which is a small professional society based in the US and it is quite US centric but it does have some non-US members, particularly from Australia. And they have a list serve called FormSpace which is free to join if you want to and is archived. And that does have some discussions about forms.

But, the discussions on there tend to be on two main topics. One is on the topic of the



details of how to make PDF forms actually work so technical issues in PDF forms. And the other topic tends to be in the management of forms. So, you might think why would you need to manage forms? Well, rule of thumb that many people in forms management would use is that typically most organizations have a lot more forms than they realize. Generally, we would say if you've got 10,000 employees, you've probably got 5,000 forms. And so, that number of forms needs managing.

For example, how do you know, if you get sued, which version of the form the person filled in? Was that the legal version? So any sizeable organization ought to have a forms management team that is purely looking after things like version control of the forms.

Gali Is it quite similar to CMS or not really?

Caroline Yeah, often people are using CMS type systems to do that. And sometimes the forms managers would be part of the IT arena, other times they are part of records management (whoever is managing the business records in general), sometimes they don't even exist in which case the forms are out of control and nobody knows what version to use

Gali Right, which is complete chaos probably

Caroline Yeah, but that's what Business Forms Management Association is mostly looking at – management of the forms rather than the design of them.

Gali I see. OK. And moving on to some more general field related questions about usability, how do you convince decision makers to invest in usability for the first time?

Caroline It so much depends on who they are. Many times I found that seeing the results of a usability test is the thing that helps to convince people. Persuading them to run that first usability test is tricky.

Gali And how would you go about doing that? Would you show them other examples?

Caroline Usually they have some sort of major point of pain and they are looking for any solution to it; so that they are quite desperate. And it helps if they are about to throw a really big budget at the whole problem and you can then just corner little bits of it to run your usability test.

Gali I find that a lot of usability practitioners find it very difficult to convince decision makers that this is a good investment.

Caroline Yes, it is a problem. It is one of these things that you don't know you need it until you've tried it. And I think that is just a problem we are going to continue to struggle with for a while.

The other thing is that personally I have never had any success whatsoever in contacting a business and saying: "I think you have a problem and I can help you to solve it". I have tried it over a number of years but I've never had any success with it.

Gali You mean being proactive rather than people approach you. I see.

Caroline Other people may have different experiences but for me that has always been a waste of



- my time.
- Gali I see. And do you find that there are many myths in our field that need to be examined or even some scared cows that need reevaluating because they are outdated and not relevant?
- Caroline Well, I am self-taught in usability. Now, I learnt to do usability by doing it and then reading and attending conferences and trying to learn as much as I could. So I think that one of the myths is that you have to have high level qualifications in psychology or something in order to be a good usability person. I don't think so.
- I think that you have to have a sense of empathy with your users and be interested in doing a good job for them. And I think you have to be open minded and willing to take in ideas from many fields and I think you have to be reflective and self-critical. You have to think "did I do the best job I could for this particular project and can I improve for next time?". And, if you have those attributes I think you can do very good work in usability.
- Gali And speaking of improvements, how do you measure your project success?
- Caroline Mainly if the client comes back for some more.
- Gali But do you follow up with them? For example, in the tax project you've mentioned before, you told me that it changed from 1 day to half a day, so do you follow up afterwards to see what happened to the form?
- Caroline I try to. I'm always keen to see what actually happened and whether it really worked and I often find that it is quite difficult to do that.
- For example, I have a case study on my website which is of paper-form and it is a few years old now but it is still a good case study. It is a form which we did usability testing and improvements to and the client was very concerned about the staff costs of typing in the forms. So, we did the work and they changed the form and the error rate just fell dramatically. So I went back and said "can I actually see what the savings were", she answered "well I didn't bother tracking them"; and I said: "Well why not?" and she replied "your fees, we've saved that in printing cost alone in the first year". So, they didn't even bother tracking the staff savings because they have already covered my cost; which was nice but I would have really liked to have had the really big numbers to play with for the case study.
- Gali Not very ambitious of them.
- Caroline Well, she was happy and I was happy because she let me publish the thing on my website as a case study which rarely happens in fact; particularly in the government arena, it is extremely complicated to get permissions to publish anything really.
- Gali Do you see any trends in usability that are changing the field? Not necessarily in forms (we have discussed trends in forms)
- Caroline Certainly in the UK and probably in America, I don't know how it is in Israel, we are finding



# World Usability Day 2006

14 November 2006 • Making life easy!

that most big organizations are quite interested in usability. They have their own usability team or they have agencies that they have been working with for a while. They are sort of getting into second generation now where they have moved beyond the “what is usability” stage and started to be more discerning really.

Gali So do you find that you need less convincing with clients because of that?

Caroline Sometimes less, sometimes more. Sometimes they’ve tried something and it has not worked tremendously well for them; perhaps it wasn’t the best match of consultant or agency that they need.

Gali They are being more critical because they are more aware of the field and what one can do.

Caroline Right.

Gali I see. And finally, what challenges do you think we’ll be facing in 10-20 years time? Do you think we’ll still be struggling with convincing people and the same forms design problems? Or do you see it shifting?

Caroline I think that the way the web has gone of making lots of things very available to people has had a tendency to raise standards in things like forms design; because people can easily switch. Now that the cost of switching from one product to another product is becoming lower, it is becoming easier to find competitive products. And so I’m seeing design improving a bit and I think that that will continue.

Gali Excellent, that is a good improvement. Anything else you’d like to add?

Caroline I’m interested to hear about how things are going in Israel. What do you think the trends will be for you?

Gali I lived a few years in the UK practicing usability and I’ve just moved back to Israel and so I’m still kind of finding out on my own what is currently going on in Israel. There has definitely been a raise of awareness but it is still in that stage of raising awareness and convincing clients why you need usability. Clients do become more and more aware of usability but it is more of a buzz world; OK, we need to do that because everyone is doing that rather than this is really good and would really help our business and this is why we need to do that.

And a part of our focus on the World Usability Day event is to raise awareness among potential clients, to help them understand what is usability behind the buzz word and what does it mean and how you can get so much more from usability; whether it is something physical like a train station or a website or a software or your mobile phone, it is everywhere whatever we do. SAP has operations in usability in Israel and obviously Microsoft; the big companies have their own usability teams and there are lots of small consulting firms within Israel who cater to the smaller size companies. Awareness is not as high as in the UK and the US. But, it is definitely getting there. So, that’s where we stand.



# World Usability Day 2006

14 November 2006 • Making life easy!

And you know, Israel is quite big on high-tech companies so the potential for clients is quite big as well.

Caroline So congratulations to you for having a World Usability Day event and I hope that it helps you to create the profile for usability that it should have.

Gali Thank you, I hope so too. Time will tell but I hope so too.

Thank you again so much for your time, this has been very interesting and insightful. I must admit that I myself am not that familiar with forms, although I am a very frustrated user.

Caroline Thanks very much for calling. Bye

Gali Bye