The User Experience: Creating a Culture of Self-Evaluation through Usability Testing

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Background
In the summer of 2012, the University Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library launched a new website. The Archives wanted a well-designed website that would make it easy for users to complete tasks quickly and efficiently, but found that the new design tended to hinder the user experience. In an effort to improve the website and create a culture of self-evaluation, the University Archives conducted a series of usability tests. Archival staff members with reference service duties comprised the internal user group and researchers, visiting scholars, university faculty and students comprised the external user group. In the first phase of usability testing, the Archives sought to gain immediate feedback by focusing on the internal user group.

Findings & Next Steps
Findings
The internal user group should always be included in user studies. The interactive nature of archival reference services requires a greater focus on staff usability issues, because archival reference services often become a collaborative effort between the researcher and the staff member. Reference staff will interact with the website in many of the same ways and with the same goals as researchers. By following the usability cycle, you are constantly adapting your website to your users’ most relevant needs and encouraging an environment that expects and welcomes constant evaluation.

Next Steps
This informal phase of usability testing identified six concrete areas of the website for proposed changes. The second phase of usability testing will address those six areas, and include members from both the external and internal user groups.