

EXPLORING the USEFULNESS of AWARENESS WIDGETS in ONLINE SHARED WORKSPACES: A PRELIMINARY CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Users of different online shared workspaces have different activity awareness needs that should be supported by the application. This support could be provided through the use of widgets, which should be easily understandable, easy to use, and provide information expected by users. We conducted a preliminary investigation of the use of awareness widgets in uCern, a shared online workspace in the healthcare industry. Data collected through interviews and surveys showed that users chose widgets for general, team, and group awareness; content management; supporting connection among collaborators; and use of utilitarian features.

Introduction

In recent years, a lot of attention has been drawn to the potential application of shared online spaces for knowledge and information management in fields such as business, learning, and leisure (Paroutis & Al Saleh, 2009; Williams, Karousou & Mackness, 2011). These spaces involve multiple users who may generate huge amounts of information during their interactions and activities, which might be challenging to manage and process. Availability of these amounts of information creates the necessity to organize and manage it according to individual needs.

One way that shared online spaces can support awareness is through the use of widgets. These are software components that can be embedded in an application to allow users to collect and have easier access to information needed. Widgets need to be usable if they are to be useful in raising awareness among people who collaborate and interact on a shared online space. According to Gutwin, Roseman and Greenberg (1996), awareness widgets should be easily understandable, easy to use, provide information expected by users, and present no distraction of users from their tasks.

References

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Purpose of study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the usefulness and meaningfulness of awareness widgets on uCern .

In particular, the research questions were:

RQ1: Which awareness widget options do uCern users choose?

RQ2: Why do uCern users choose certain awareness widget options?

RQ3: What are the perceptions of uCern users on the meaningfulness and usefulness of the awareness widget options they choose?

uCern

- a powerful social-networking, collaborative platform, where over 30,000 Cerner Corporation associates, Cerner clients, and industry partners share their thoughts and ideas, make connections with peers across the healthcare industry (Cerner Corporation, 2011).



Figure 1. Awareness widgets available on uCern

Results

Participants' demographics:

Sample: solution designers N=2, strategist N=1, project manager N=1, software engineer N=1

Age: 20-29 N=2, 30-39 N=3.

Experience with uCern: more than a year N=5

RQ1: Choice of awareness widgets

13 out of the available 41 (see Figure 1)

RQ2: Reasons for Choosing Widgets

- General awareness
- Team and group awareness
- Content management
- Supporting connection between collaborators
- Utilitarian features matching users' interest

RQ3: Usefulness of awareness widgets

- Overall satisfaction with the usefulness of widgets for general awareness and efficient access to information on uCern
- Concern about some functionality features inherent to the application
 - strict security setting,
 - complexity and frequent changes of the application
 - big number of users who generated large amounts of content that was not organized in a structured way

Conclusion

For uCern users, the most important type of awareness was general awareness, which allowed for information sharing and provided users with the information about the context for their activities and motivated interactions among them.

Study implications:

1. uCern users prefer to have more control over widget customization to allow for finer filtering of content.
2. System administrators should take into account user opinion before making adjustments to awareness widgets or system functionality features.
3. Opportunities for future research on uCern usability issues that could affect use of awareness widgets on the application.

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