Business Objectives vs. User Goals

In an ideal world, where we find ourselves in the highest levels of UX maturity within our organization, where we have reached the level of Integrated User-Centered Design, the disciplines of user experience are fully integrated with the everyday workings of the business. User goals are considered just as important as the business objectives, simply because they are one and the same. User research is best used to determine the direction of the business, to define its strategy, its products, and even have an influence beyond the digital aspects of the organization.

However, as we have already discussed in the previous chapter, very few of us indeed will work for an organization that functions at these higher levels of UX maturity. So what challenges arise for the rest of us who are striving to enrich the products we are working to deliver by bringing the various disciplines of user experience design to the table?

As much as I'd love to think that the goals of the user should come out on top every time – after all, it is they who we are designing and building our digital products for – this is simply not the case in the vast majority of organizations in the real world.

Being a champion for the user, to be the one who echoes their voice internally, is an everyday struggle with the ultimate aim being to get that voice heard above all of the other competing needs and constraints within any given project that you work on. Every aspect of a project is fighting to be heard over the others: user research, technical constraints, usability testing results, personal opinions, resource, budgets, et cetera. But one thing is always heard above all others and inevitably wins out: business objectives.

Part of being the voice of the user within an organization is to engage in these struggles, to identify the challenges and conflicts, and to look to resolve them by aligning user goals with the business objectives. But before we look into how we go about this, there's something that seems counterintuitive to the overarching theme of this book that we need to understand first.

Business Goals Transcend User Needs

As much as it pains me to put it down in writing, business goals are more important than the needs of the user. I know, this is a book championing UX and how other disciplines can embrace user-centered approaches, and here I am with a whole section saying that business goals are more important than user needs. It sounds like I'm not really fully invested in this user-centered design stuff, doesn't it? So, let's correct that now.

In order to create a successful digital user experience and a sustainable product, it must fulfill the objectives of the business. It needs to provide, not only a return on investment, but continuing profit for it to be seen as a sustainable part of the business. If the product does not fulfill this most basic of requirements, the product will cease to exist, meaning there will be nothing to design a user experience for.

Ultimately, meeting business objectives is the key to a successful product in the eyes of the organization we are designing and building this product for. What this means for the majority of us working internally is that the requirements of our projects are predominantly set by the business. C-level executives in the higher echelons of the organization will make strategic decisions to take the company forward to fulfill their long-term goals. These decisions then filter down through the chain of command, spawning ideas for projects and products that aim to fulfill these strategic goals in order to push the company forward.

One of the most prominent examples of such a strategic decision that springs to my mind is the story of Fab. In February of 2010, Fabulis – to give Fab its original full name – began life as a social network with a target audience of gay men. Unfortunately, the platform was less than successful, so in June of 2011 the co-founders decided to take the company in a completely different direction, selling handpicked clothes, accessories, and home goods. Five months following the relaunch, Fab had garnered 1 million members, reaching this number faster than Facebook and Twitter.

Although this is a particularly extreme example where an organization completely pivoted on their offering, it illustrates how and why these kinds of decisions are made for the strategic good of the company.

At this point of inception – where a new product is about to be conceived – user-centered design can have the biggest impact. If utilized correctly at this stage, it can dramatically reduce risk to the business, allowing early failure and valuable lessons to be learned without heavy investment in design and development. This essentially avoids time and effort being ploughed into something that could quite easily turn out to

be an expensive mistake. It is here that user-centered design, and consideration of the user experience, can influence the direction that a product will take with the benefits of involving users in the design process.

However, a lack of maturity in terms of UX within an organization means that user-centered teams face the challenge of not being involved early enough in the process. That said, whenever the user-centered approach is adopted during the life cycle of a project, it would certainly have a positive impact going forward.

This almost retroactive, use of user-centered design is a symptom of the primary importance attached to business goals; other goals become secondary to them, almost becoming an afterthought. While meeting business objectives is key to a successful product, creating a better experience for its users will see it flourish.

Measuring Success

In order to measure the success of a product, the business world has many metrics against which performance can be measured that come in the form of things like Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) or Objectives and Key Results (OKRs).

Let's say that your product is an informational website. It could be measured by the number of unique visitors, number of returning visitors, time spent on the site, and a large variety of other pertinent metrics that can be pulled from tools like Google Analytics. In the case of an e-commerce site, you will likely have specific goals set around conversion rates, average order value, cart abandonment, et cetera.

Every single one of these metrics, regardless of the type of digital product under scrutiny, have one main characteristic in common: they can all be empirically measured. We can gather the data to see *exactly* how well any specific aspect of a product is performing, and the resulting figures can easily be communicated back to the business. The reason for this relative ease of communication is due to their similarity with metrics that are utilized in other areas of the business. The only difference is really the source from which these metrics originate; they come from a digital platform rather than from internal, offline teams such as sales or customer support.

The ability to define metrics against which the user experience can be is one of the biggest challenges arising from the adoption of a user-centered design approach. It is not enough for us simply to be concerned with the user experience, we have to push to implement our ideas and to try to influence proceedings to create a better resulting product, regardless of our position within the hierarchy of the project, or the wider organization. This is not something that only those with the UX acronym in their job

title should be striving to do; anyone and everyone who is involved in creating a product that will be used by other human beings should be completely invested in the resulting product and the experience that it delivers to those people.

As we stated at the end of the previous chapter, developers are in a position to directly affect the resulting experience through their own decisions on their implementation of any given solution. As well as this, it is useful to bear in mind that in this era of digital technology, the experience of a user while using your product now holds much greater significance as to whether the product becomes successful or not than it did a decade ago.

Although you may not consider yourself, or your role, to be able to influence the user experience of your product for the better, then you are, quite simply, selling yourself short. The knowledge, skills, and tools that you utilize on a daily basis are the channel through which all the strategic decisions, designs, and requirements must flow to bring a digital product to life. As a developer, you aren't expected to handle any of the aspects of a user-centered design process, and neither should you be, especially when you may already have a UX designer within your team. But your expertise, your knowledge of the existing frameworks and platforms, of new advances in technology, of how to turn ideas and designs and requirements into usable, functional products; that is what separates you from the other roles in your team, that is your value, that is what you bring to the table.

Everyone in the team must have to be able to effectively communicate the value that a user-centered design approach can provide to the business, and this has to be done on an equivalent level of scale and clarity to those metrics that are so well utilized from other areas of the business.

In order to evaluate a user-centered approach to design, we need to show the business what value it will deliver; what will be the return on investment?

Defining Business Objectives

Let's start by taking a look at how we set and measure business objectives. One of the most common ways to define business objectives is to use SMART goals. The origins of this method are most commonly attributed to the "Management by Objectives" approach that was published by Peter Drucker in his 1954 book, *The Practice of Management* (HarperCollins). SMART is an acronym for the five key elements required to set clear and attainable business goals:

1. Specific - target a specific area for improvement.

2. Measurable - quantify an indicator of progress.

3. Achievable - the goal must be attainable.

4. Relevant - the goal must be important to the business.

5. Time-related - a deadline by which to reach the goal.

Let's take a look at an example of a SMART business goal, and how this may work for a hypothetical business.

Bella's Vintage is a fictional e-commerce site that specializes in selling vintage clothing. During the month of June, the business is aiming to sell 20% more evening dresses than last year as this one of the most popular months for weddings in the UK.

This statement holds everything that is required for it to qualify as a SMART goal. Here's how parts of that statement align to each of the SMART criteria:

1. Specific - Increase sales of evening dresses.

2. Measurable - By number of sales.

3. Achievable - A 20% rise is not out of the question.

4. Relevant - Sales are always important to business!

5. Time-related - Specified as the month of June.

This business goal ticks all of the boxes, and as a result gives everyone involved a clear understanding and direction needed to achieve the goal.

Defining User Goals

User goals are defined rather differently to business objectives. One of the most common ways to define user goals is by utilizing User Stories. These are short sentences – which tend to be shorter than a SMART business goal statement – that describe what type of user someone is, the goal they want to achieve, and why they want to achieve it. They generally follow this structure:

As an [actor], I want [action] so that [achievement].

We can flesh this out into a possible user story in the context of the Bella's Vintage example we used to create our business objective:

As a wedding guest, I want to buy a beautiful evening dress so that I can look and feel amazing.

In order to convince the business that these user stories can contribute toward the more strategic business goals, that they can have a positive effect on the numbers they care about, we need to look at ways in which we can measure user stories so that they can be considered to be of equal importance as the existing business goals.

Many businesses utilize user stories as part of an Agile software development approach, which can provide us with a framework that provides us with additional aspects to a user story when compared to the comparatively basic version when simply defining a user's goal.

The first of these additions is acceptance criteria. Acceptance criteria define the boundaries of a user story and are used as the yardstick against which we measure if a story has completed. For example, some of the acceptance criteria for our Bella's Vintage user story could be:

- *User must be able to find an item in their desired category.*

- *User must be able to add a selected item to their basket.*

- *User must be able to review their basket.*

- *User must be able complete the payment/checkout process.*

- *User must receive confirmation of purchase.*

These acceptance criteria now provide us with elements of a user story that both provide the developer with everything they need to successfully deliver against a user story, with the added benefit to the business that the outcome of the delivery is measurable.

By following through on the initial user story – fleshing out the requirements through acceptance criteria and delivering within the time constraint of a predefined sprint in an Agile development process – developers are able to deliver real, measurable value to the business from what started out as a user story, rather than an internally focused business goal. All of this helps the wider business become more user centered in their approach to design and development.

Making Business and User Goals Work Together

In the majority of cases, you will find that user goals and business objectives complement each other, which is also an indicator that the organization is focused on its customers and delivering products that work for them and that will benefit the business.

There are, however, some occasions where user goals will conflict with the business objectives. For example, in financial institutions that are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) in the United Kingdom, there are a number of legally required documents that must be presented to a user when in the process of applying for a credit card. One of these documents is the Standard European Consumer Credit Information (SECCI), which allows the prospective customer to compare one card against another in terms of the key features, borrowing costs, rates of interest, and many more aspects.

Essentially, it's one of those really long, legal-sounding documents that you know you should read as the person applying for a credit card, but ultimately, as a user, you just want to click the button to finish your application.

This is a typical case of business objectives conflicting with user goals. Once a user has made a decision on the product they want, in order to help that user complete the process that results in them attaining their goal – in this case, applying for a credit card – we should remove every possible obstacle to help them get to that goal in a timely and efficient manner. The SECCI feels like an obstacle to the user. It's a large and complicated hoop that they must jump through in order to reach their goal.

This is actually a fantastic example of why business objectives trump user goals. An improved user experience – one that purely focuses on the user and their aims to complete their goal in this case – would look to avoid the user hitting this perceived hurdle in favor of a slicker path to completion. This approach could lead to a lack of information provided to the user that would help them make an informed choice about the product they wish to apply for. It could also lead to costly repercussions for the user down the line if they were not presented with alternative choices that may be better suited to their situation.

From a business perspective, the legal and financial repercussions can also be huge if the institution fails to follow the legal guidance and requirements.

There are many more examples where some business objectives are not necessarily absolute must-have items, but the benefits they can give to the business could possibly outweigh the negative impact on the user experience.

A simple example of this would be marketing questions contained within a registration form. They may not be mandatory fields but can provide a great deal of insight into the user who registers, but on the other hand it's another field that the user has to fill in to complete the registration process. This is where you have to strike a balance between a slicker user experience in a form that contains less fields for the user to complete, and the value gained by the business when users do fill out the additional details.

Striking the Balance

The best way of truly achieving alignment between user goals and business objectives is to grow the level of UX maturity in your organization to the point that they achieve parity in terms of their strategic value. However, this period of transition can take many years, but there is a lot of work to be done in the meantime.

For those organizations that are starting to embrace UX, the best way to begin aligning user goals and business objectives is for us to start treating them with the same level of gravitas, to consider the goals of the user to be on equal terms with the goals of the business. It's a "fake it 'til you make it" approach. The more we can do to reduce the disparity between user goals and business objectives – in terms of both importance and understanding – the more the business will allow the project teams to spend the more time, effort, and resources on creating a better user experience while still aiming to fulfill the business objectives.

Summary

In this chapter, we have looked at the challenges we face when trying to bring user goals to the same level of importance as the business goals within an organization. Although the goals of the business will always be top priority, we looked at how we could measure the success of our work, both in terms of value to the business and to the user, and how we can look to place them on a more equal footing by utilizing similar techniques to communicate value. Finally, we walked through a real-world example to show how we can make business goals and user goals complement each other, leading to successful implementations that benefit both the business and the user.