

Cognitive walkthrough

An inspection method in which a team goes through a task action by action and, at each one, asks whether a person using the system for the first time would know what to do.

In Spanish

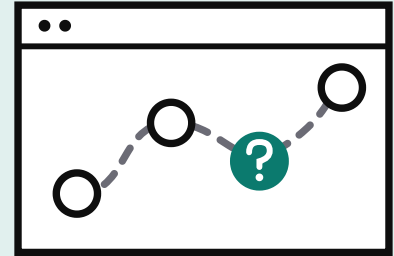
Recorrido cognitivo

Origin

Lewis, Polson, Wharton and Rieman (1990)

Output

The list of steps where a newcomer would get stuck, and why



What it's for

It helps you find the points where an interface isn't understood the first time, especially when no people are available to test it.

Key elements

Through a beginner's eyes

It assesses whether people learn by using it, not whether it's fast for someone who already knows it.

One concrete task

You first define what the person wants to achieve and the correct sequence of actions.

Four questions at each step

Will they try to do the right thing? Will they see the action? Will they link it to what they want? Will they notice they're making progress?

How it's done

1



Choose a task and write down the correct sequence of actions to complete it.

2



The team goes through each action and answers the four questions with a newcomer in mind.

3



Each "no" is noted with its reason and an idea to fix it.

Applications in design

 **When to use it**
When it matters that someone understands the product the first time they use it, or before testing it with people.

 **Avoid**
Walking through the task thinking of how you would do it, since you already know the interface.

 **Don't fall for it**
It doesn't replace testing with people: use it to reach those tests with the obvious errors already fixed.

Connections

Builds on

 Nielsen's usability heuristics

Related to

 Usability testing

Authors and works

1990	Clayton Lewis, Peter Polson, Cathleen Wharton and John Rieman	Proposed the method to review walk-up-and-use interfaces, such as an ATM or a kiosk.
1994	Cathleen Wharton, John Rieman, Clayton Lewis and Peter Polson	Simplified it into a practical guide for teams, with the four questions asked at each action.

Sources

Original sources

- Lewis, C., Polson, P., Wharton, C., & Rieman, J. (1990). Testing a walkthrough methodology for theory-based design of walk-up-and-use interfaces. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '90) (pp. 235–242). ACM. [View source \(https://doi.org/10.1145/97243.97279\)](https://doi.org/10.1145/97243.97279)
- Wharton, C., Rieman, J., Lewis, C., & Polson, P. (1994). The cognitive walkthrough method: A practitioner's guide. In J. Nielsen & R. L. Mack (Eds.), Usability inspection methods (pp. 105–140). Wiley.

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