

# Things to Consider When Designing Technology for Boards

Written by Alan Hewitt on March 12, 2019



I ended my previous blog post ([5 Steps to Better Board Meetings](#)) by saying that:

*"Large parts of meeting best practices are administrative and having a system or tool (like a board portal) that manages attendance, reminds people of their actions and provides easy access to readings, in fact, helps to manage this whole process and makes the meeting a whole lot less stressful and more valuable."*

and I'd next like to look at designing technology for boards in a little more detail.

We all use technology everyday whether its reading e-mails, surfing the web, booking a taxi, restaurant, holiday, doing our banking etc. and hence we are very familiar with the applications that we use and are comfortable with how they work, how to log into them and how to navigate to where we want to get to. However, there are some apps that we use less frequently, perhaps once every one to two months where our familiarity with the app isn't quite so ingrained, and we can stumble remembering how to log on, how things work and how quickly we can get to where we want or need to be within the app.

I believe that Board Portals fall into this category, more for the business end users (Board members/Directors) rather than for the administrators of the Board Meetings who are likely to be using the software on a more regular basis.

With the above in mind, it got me thinking about how a good Board Portal should be designed to make its use easy and straightforward for the "occasional users". Many years ago I was recommended to read an excellent book called *The Design of Everyday Things* by Don Norman (you can find a PDF copy [here](#)).

The following is a brief extract from the book which I think gives us a clue as to why we, at times, find apps baffling and frustrating in equal part.

*"Design is concerned with how things work, how they are controlled, and the nature of the interaction between people and technology. When done well, the results are brilliant, pleasurable products. When done badly, the products are unusable, leading to great frustration and irritation. Or they might be usable, but force us to behave the way the product wishes rather than as we wish."*

So when we use a piece of software often, we learn, quite quickly, how it works, its' little idiosyncrasies and how to get to where we want to be quite quickly without trawling through the whole app. However, when we don't use a piece of software very often, and it has not been designed with the occasional users in mind, it can be very frustrating and quite often be cast onto the too difficult pile.

So what do I want to see in a board portal?

- Something that is easy to sign into
- Structured in a way that makes it not just easy but intuitive to navigate and use
- Logical in the way that it works (Not just logical to the designer or engineer that created it but the actual real end user who needs to or better still wants to use it)

The last two points overlap quite a bit but the key point is that the app has been designed to be used and useful to, in this case, Board Members. I've introduced the concept that apps should be intuitive to navigate and use by ALL end users. This [blog post from CXL](#) explores further about Intuitive Design in this context. It says:

*"The main thing about intuitive design is that it's invisible. Design is intuitive when users can focus on a task at hand without stopping even for a second. Intuitive designs direct people's attention to tasks that are important. In the end, an intuitive design focuses on experience."*

Typically an occasional user who wants to do what is required and no more. They don't have the time to learn the intricacies of an app, but at the same time wants the end user experience to be painless, effective and value-adding. Correctly designed technology can achieve all of these things. But too often we see technology designed to show how clever it is with more bells and whistles rather than taking into consideration the needs and wants of end user and their ability to "intuitively" use the app. Maybe it's time for more Designer/Engineers to adopt an Intuitive Design approach with the end user dead centre of everything that they do?



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan is a Non-executive Director at Praxonomy. Alan has worked in IT Services and Consulting for nearly 40 years including 30 years at IBM, where he was an Executive Partner in IBM's Global Consulting Business responsible for the development of the Workforce Transformation Practice. Since leaving IBM in 2010, he has worked as an independent Business Consultant working for major companies across industries and the world. Alan is a Fellow of both the IET and BCS.