



ENTERPRISE UX

Why it Matters and What to Do About It

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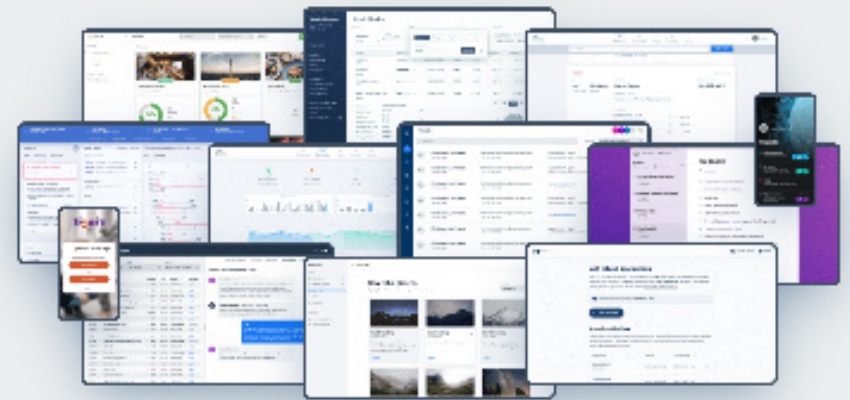
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Executive summary

We've become accustomed to the consumer software on our phones and laptops running smoothly without too many hiccups. Yet, enterprise software has been slow to keep up, leaving end users confused, frustrated, and inefficient at work, trying to navigate through these complex, outdated, and clunky systems to do their job.

By improving the user experience of enterprise applications, a company can reap numerous benefits, not only for their bottom line but also for the success of their business as a whole.

Why? A well-designed enterprise application is a delight to use; it simplifies workflows and lets employees focus on their work without being distracted. Happier employees leads to greater efficiency, better talent retention, and quicker onboarding processes. For companies, this means increased productivity, fewer costly mistakes, and possibly a larger market share. Read on to learn more about enterprise UX and its importance in business applications.



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Enterprise UX: Why It Matters and What to Do About It

Today's global digital transformation has given rise to a new breed of consumer: digital natives, who are flooded with choices, accustomed to self-onboarding on intuitively designed apps, and take excellent UX as a given. And so, the enterprise app has also become "consumerized", with many organizations striving to cater to these users through well-designed, UX-first applications that provide new features fast. After all, an improved employee experience will lead to an improved customer experience.

But what happens to the companies that are slow to keep up or disregard the importance of good enterprise UX?

In this article, we take a deep dive into what enterprise UX is, how it differs from the traditional consumer experience, the costs bad design can inflict on your business, and what goes into building a delightful experience for your application's end users.

Demystifying user experience

User experience (UX) encompasses every interaction a person has when using your company's website, applications and any other digital services you offer – whether on mobile or desktop. That is a lot of touch points to consider, while making sure they don't cause unnecessary friction for the user.

Enterprise UX is all about finding easier paths for users to accomplish objectives and simultaneously advance business goals. This involves using business applications and other digital tools to get their job done. Think of a knowledge worker using PowerPoint or a customer service agent using an agent desktop. In a way we could say that every interactive object always has an user experience. The difference comes from whether it has been carefully crafted or something that just happened. Enterprise UX considers the interaction between users, the software, and the processes around them.

Unfortunately, a massive set of digital tools have been poorly designed or are based on outdated legacy systems that leave end users frustrated, stressed, and inefficient. In other cases the tooling may have not been designed for a specific task, but rather to be an off-the-shelf or one-size-fits-all solution. One of the main reasons for companies to develop their own applications is that they can tailor th workflows to match employees' exact needs.



What do we mean by “good UX”?

Good UX is about more than “being nice to users”. Its main goal is to help users do what they want to do with your application with as little friction as possible. End users might not be aware of most fancy design features or elements that are included in the design of an application, but what they do care about is the overall experience. Each interaction adds to the overall feeling a user has when using your app, and whether the user can reach their goal without the application getting in the way.

At best, UX should delight end users when they interact with an application; not to mention, [it's good for business](#). Good UX lets employees be more productive and reduces the risk of errors. For instance, [Citibank's recent \\$500 million UI blunder](#) is a classic example of how poor design can impact business, but more on that later.

The industry standard for evaluating the usability of applications is defined by the [ten usability heuristics](#) that have remained unchanged since the mid-90s. Most often our team at Vaadin encounters issues regarding low consistency, error prevention and unfit visuals.



Consumer UX vs Enterprise UX: What is the difference?

For many employees, going to work is like stepping back in time: clunky user interfaces, complex sign-ons, and a lack of interoperability with modern technologies. Often, workplace apps are so complicated that employees need separate training and onboarding to be able to use them. Yet, these are the same people that are used to the simple, intuitive, and pleasant user experiences offered by the mobile apps found in their back pockets; think Instagram, Netflix, and PayPal.

What are the contributing factors that uphold the so-called design gap found between enterprise and consumer apps? Usually, it boils down to the application's level of complexity, budget availability, and the purpose of the end user. Consumer apps are typically user-centric and all the development revolves around serving the user better. On the other hand, enterprise apps tend to be feature-centric: there is a list of features that need to be fulfilled and that drives all the development work.

Level of complexity

Consumer applications don't need to be all things to all people. They are usually designed to serve a single function or have a limited scope, such as paying for purchases, editing and sharing photos, or streaming videos. Consumer apps may also link users together; however, the complexity of interactions is much lower and less demanding than those in the enterprise. In addition, these apps are designed to be ad-hoc and free-flowing instead of focusing on doing repetitive critical tasks.

In consumer apps, simplicity involves hiding unnecessary elements and components from the UI or guiding the user through a clear, short onboarding through the app. The case is different for enterprise applications. Here, we have complex business processes, huge data volumes, and a user base that is often counted in hundreds or thousands, rather than millions.

Designing enterprise applications requires a deep understanding of the intricate workflows and processes of each specific user role. Data-heavy applications may require capabilities for data entry, visualization, reporting, and support of multiplayer workflows. Moreover, users need to be able to filter down and manipulate the presentation of large datasets. The application must be designed in such a way that users can flow effortlessly and efficiently from task to task, as well as between different user roles.

In enterprise apps, you want to present all the relevant information right away on the application view, so users can be productive. Think of accountants who are entering data into accounting software all day. They don't want to click through multiple views to get their task done. Ideally, they want to see the entire view right in front of them with all the relevant information and text fields. This way, they can focus on entering data without unnecessary interruptions, to ensure efficiency and productivity.



Budget availability

Consumer applications tend to be directly linked to revenue and therefore have larger budgets for design activities. Because the applications generate profit, companies spend more money fine-tuning the experience of each view. Companies such as Google or Meta have millions to spend on optimizing app performance to load pages quickly, improving performance scoring, and polishing each view to perfection.

Business applications, although often larger and more complex, have limited budgets. Due to their complexity, business applications often have hundreds of views, which makes the problem even greater. When it comes to the design of these applications, it is often difficult to justify large investments for each UI view, because the app isn't directly generating profit. However, compared to consumers, users of business apps don't have the option to use another application. If the experience is poor, they have to face it on a daily basis. Even small investments in improving user experience can make a huge difference for the end users.





The role of the end users

The goal of developing consumer applications is to meet user expectations and solve their pain points. If the product does not meet the user's needs and wants, it won't become popular, leading to fewer downloads and a drop in sales. Therefore, it is in the company's interest to create a product that is loved by its users.

Traditionally, in an enterprise setting, the people who choose which business apps to purchase are not the same people who use them every day. Most likely it is the IT department or top-level management that decides on the software, based on a pre-selected features list or top-level project management requirements. Hence, usability and the overall user experience of the software are often overlooked.

Employees, who are the end users of these apps, are rarely given a choice in the software that is given to them or included in the product development process of new software. That is why, too often, enterprise software perform the necessary functions but end up being clunky, ugly, and overly complex to use. However, here lies a hidden risk that we see becoming reality more and more often. Employees may start bringing in their own products to work if the provided software is bad. This leads to important data and business processes getting split over multiple third-party systems, which can be a big challenge for regulatory compliance and overall work efficiency in the long run.

Developing software that takes the end user's needs into account is not difficult, but sometimes requires adjusting the mindset in the development project. Shaping the user interface needs to become user- and workflow-centric instead of feature-centric. This can be achieved by involving the end-users in defining the requirements and understanding their workflows to allow them do their best at work. Any team can take steps into more user-centric direction on their own, while involving a seasoned UX designer, can take the application's user experience to whole new level.

Rules and regulations

Most organizations have a strict set of policies, rules, and governmental regulations they must abide by in their software. Legal and privacy requirements such as [GDPR](#) and [HIPAA](#), and the [WCAG](#) or [ADA](#) for accessibility standards and legislation, are a few common examples.

In the EU, the European Accessibility Act, also known as EAA or [\(EU\) 2019/882](#), expands accessibility requirements to consumer-facing websites and applications in many private sectors, including

- E-commerce
- Banking
- Transportation
- Private healthcare providers

Download our white paper on digital accessibility to learn how to ensure that your applications comply with the latest accessibility standards.

Consumer applications are also becoming increasingly more regulated. However, the monetary value of the sensitive data that many companies hold calls for strict regulatory scrutiny. The heavy regulatory criteria may act as blockers for certain design decisions and [traditionally has resulted in some dull application UIs](#).



The cost of bad UX design for your business

Web apps run all modern enterprises. They are used to solve complex and mission-critical problems to enable employees and businesses to succeed. However, developing and maintaining enterprise-grade apps can be a daunting task and requires you to find the intricate balance between the company's interests and what is better for the users.

It may be tempting to rush through the design process in order to reach the final product faster, but skipping over the design phase could end up costing your business a fortune. Here are just a few of the many ways bad design can rack up unwanted costs for your business.

Expensive mistakes

One of the highest and most visible costs that bad design of business applications can have for a business is costly mistakes. For example, a [bad user interface cost Citibank \\$500M](#) when three employees accidentally sent \$900 million to a client's creditor, instead of \$7.8 million. What was behind this expensive blunder? Poorly designed software.

Another classic example is when residents and tourists in the [Hawaiian islands received a frightening emergency alert](#) on their mobile devices on January 13th, 2018. The alert from Hawaii's emergency alert command center read, "BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL."

Thankfully, this was, in fact, just a drill. However, the message was sent live to all mobile phones across the islands, instead of the intended test network. In this case, the poor design had led the user to make two errors:

Too often, human error is blamed for such mistakes, when in fact the underlying cause is bad UI design. When designed poorly, the interface is difficult to understand and causes users to make mistakes more easily. A well-designed UI is intuitive and less prone to errors, but also allows for easier recovery from any errors that may have been made.

Poor employee experience

Technology plays a significant role in how employees engage at work. According to Forrester, employees who scored [in the top 20% of their EX index](#) – used to measure employee engagement – were more likely to be satisfied with their technology environment. Employees need to feel confident and knowledgeable about the work they do but, if their tools don't help them, the opposite is achieved.

LOSS OF PRODUCTIVITY

If business apps are overly complex, it is very likely that employees won't remember how to use them or they may try to find a workaround to avoid them altogether. They may consult more experienced colleagues to help out with the system, and ask coworkers to help out. All of these slow down work processes, reduce efficiency, and take out time from employees' days that they could be using to focus on their daily tasks and be productive.

HIGH TRAINING AND SUPPORT COSTS

Poorly designed apps are difficult to learn and use. Employees often require extensive training to learn how to use the software, which takes away from the time they could be using to provide value towards achieving business goals. Moreover, poor usability tends to lead to employees contacting support services for guidance on how to use the software.

LOW EMPLOYEE MORALE AND LOSS OF TALENT

When employees feel they cannot do their job well, it quickly becomes demoralizing. Having to use confusing and clunky tools for hours at work is very frustrating. In the long run, this can lead to costs for your business, such as loss of talent, as well as reduced productivity.



Investments in employee experience bring about a multitude of benefits for your business. Engaged employees put more physical, cognitive, and emotional energy into the work that they do, leading to improved work performance and employee retention.

Disrupt or become disrupted

Today, design is seen as a key strategic differentiator for businesses. Companies that embed design thinking into their digital CX strategy achieve considerable business benefits. In a study by Forrester, [70% of design-led companies](#) reported having a stronger or best-in-class digital experience compared with competitors.

Companies must create exceptional digital experiences and innovate continuously in order to stand out in an ever-expanding competitive landscape or risk being disrupted by competitors.

A prime case study is that of the UX prototyping tool, Figma. When it was launched in 2016, Figma entered a fierce market with players like Adobe XD, InVision, and Sketch.

What was Figma's edge that led to it becoming the largest player in the market? The web app was optimized to be “multiplayer”, enabling multiple users to work on projects simultaneously. The features it offered, such as collaboration, auto-saving, and link-sharing, quickly became valuable innovations in modern UX workflows. It goes without saying that these features further proved their importance during the COVID-19 pandemic, as teams and entire companies switched to remote-only or hybrid ways of working.

What goes into building good enterprise UX

So far, we have discussed what distinguishes enterprise UX from consumer UX and the costs that poor design can impose on your business. Next, we'll take a look at some practical steps and tools that can help you build a more user-friendly business application that delights its end users, i.e. your employees.

Understand the end user

Designing a good UX requires a holistic approach. It is not enough to know what the application or system will be used for, but also how must be made clear. For the user to do what they want to do, there must be a clear understanding of the exact needs of the end user:

- What is the real purpose of the application and in what context will it be used?
- Who are the users of the application?
- What are some challenges the app will be used to solve?
- What challenges does the app solve?
- What makes the users successful in their work?
- What does a typical user journey look like?
- Are there any constraints and why?

The answers to these questions will help determine the appropriate features, interactions, and design layout the app should have in order to make the human-app interaction as smooth as possible. When enterprises involve their employees in the decisions on what tools they use at work, digital transformations enjoy a higher success rate. On the flip side, companies risk losing millions in buying software that isn't adopted by the end users due to poor usability.

For example, three hospital districts in Finland were jointly working to implement the same healthcare system from Cerner. Each district [spent 10M euros before the project was stranded](#) because doctors and other key workers opposed the new software due to usability concerns. Companies can spend all the money they want on digital transformations but, in the end, user adoption is key.

Focus on design consistency

Maintaining consistency and coherency in application user interfaces (UIs) can be challenging, especially as businesses strive to be more agile. Consistency issues in UIs manifest in different ways.

Consistency Issues

- Graphical details, like the colors used for actions and links, or the icons used to represent recurring actions;
- Layout and structure, such as the placement and order of buttons in a form;
- Behavior and interactions, e.g. the way search fields work, or how form validation errors are presented;
- Workflows, e.g. the way multi-step tasks, such as bulk actions on a set of selected items, are performed;
- Information architecture and navigation;
- Terminology and tone of voice, like the way in which buttons are labeled, or how error messages are phrased.

It might be tempting to dismiss these as minor nitpicks or quirks that have limited or no tangible impact on your organization's bottom line and ROI. However, design inconsistencies can have far-reaching consequences throughout an organization.

From the perspective of your end users, inconsistencies in the final product inevitably lead to a deterioration of the overall user experience, which will likely result in an increase in user error rates.

If your end users are employees, this means degraded productivity and efficiency, along with more costly onboarding and training costs. If the end users are customers, it results in increased support requests, more high-touch sales cycles, and more complex upsell paths.

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“Consistency is one of the most powerful usability principles: when things always behave the same, users don’t have to worry about what will happen. Instead, they know what will happen based on earlier experience.”

Jakob Nielsen, Nielsen Norman Group



Use a design system

A [design system](#) is a set of standardized UI building blocks and patterns, such as components, layouts, visual styles, and icons, together with clear and comprehensive guidelines for their usage, both in terms of UI design and UI implementation.

In practical terms, this means providing components and stylesheets for developers and corresponding graphical assets for designers for use in their toolchains. In addition to the code, design assets, and associated documentation, a design system also encourages a systematic, team-wide methodology for UI design and implementation work.

Ultimately, this system results in the entire team having a shared understanding of the foundations on top of which all UI work is done, in order to facilitate collaboration within the team, promote code reuse, streamline UI development, and eliminate consistency issues. All of these improve the UX of your business app. Learn more about the [business case for adopting design systems](#).

Take your user experience to the next level

The bottom line is that UX does not only concern your employees, but it has direct implications on the entire business performance and success. When your business application's UX quality is higher, employees make less errors, try harder and feel more invested in their jobs. As a result, hiring, onboarding, and retaining talent will become easier. In addition, better UX can increase market share and lead to successful digital transformations, because employees adopt the required tools and processes more quickly.

With over 20 years of experience in designing and building web applications from multiple business verticals, we know what modern user experiences need. [Our design team's insights, expertise and practices](#) carry your product safely from concept to completion. [Contact our sales team](#) and find out how Vaadin can help you get the best-possible experience for your users and level up your business.

