

Patron for a Day (PFAD): A Space Assessment

A basic premise of User Experience (UX) is to empathize with your users. This assessment exercise encourages your staff to understand what users experience in your spaces and, as a bonus, identifies some immediate space usability issues as well.

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

Technically speaking, PFAD is a collection of different tests taken by staff volunteers at various locations. Practically speaking, it is an opportunity for staff to empathize with users by performing a series of tasks users regularly perform in a library's physical spaces.

This series of tests, which was designed to promote empathy, had the unintended benefit of challenging the usability of our physical spaces. Some tasks required interaction with technology, such as scanners and computers, while others just required interaction with the physical space and collections. Some tasks were easy ("find the restroom"); others were harder ("scan pages from book X and send to your email").

When we implemented PFAD, staff members generally visited libraries where they were less familiar to complete their "test." (Because the MIT Libraries have four locations, this was possible. In a smaller library, differentiating public service spaces from each other may be an appropriate approach.) Participants were asked to take notes about their experience (good and bad) and after completion were asked to rate each task from easy to hard, then enter their comments into an established web

form. We had twenty volunteers complete one of three different tests at one of four locations.

Both prep time and cooking time vary depending on the complexity of the ingredients used.

PFAD results serve all library staff.

DIETARY STANDARDS

ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education (2011) Principle 6, Indicators 6.1, 6.3, 6.6, 6.7; Principle 7, Indicator 7.8; Principle 8, Indicators 8.3, 8.5

COOKING TIME

Prep time, 1 week–1 month; cooking time, 10–60 minutes

COOKING TECHNIQUE

Observation (usability testing), survey

INGREDIENTS

- Staff volunteers
- Tests
- Physical library spaces and equipment
- Whatever extras may be needed for volunteers to perform tests (copy cards, note/picture taking device, etc.)

PREPARATION

Develop the test by identifying a variety of common tasks that users complete in your physical space. Complexity can and should vary. The number of items depends on the complexity of the questions and the time allotted for the activity. For example, our tests ranged from seven to nine questions, with thirty minutes or less allotted.

Remember to pre-test the test!

Example tasks: Look for a particular journal volume, then locate and use a scanner to scan and email several pages from this volume. Use the computer to print pages. Find a particular DVD, then use self-checkout to check out DVD.

ASSESSMENT STEPS

With each tester

- Ensure they have all materials needed: note/picture-taking device, if needed, survey, any other extras they may need (copy card, etc.).
- Review instructions for test with them.
- Remind them to time themselves.
- Ask them to note anything they would like to share about these exercises.

- If they take photos or video, ask them to think aloud as they go and record what they are thinking.
- Remind them to think about themselves as the user: What's hard? What doesn't make sense?
- Remind them to complete the post-survey when they are done.

After the test

- Follow up with volunteers to ensure there are no outstanding questions and to get any further feedback.
- Determine which tasks were most difficult, summarizing the success rate for each task.
- Review and code the comments and photos or video, if available.
- Present your findings and act on them.

ALLERGY WARNINGS

Make sure you have buy-in and a plan on what to do with the information you gather. Empathy-building is the easy part; dealing with the usability issues you uncover takes time and effort across departments.

CHEF'S NOTES

This assessment can reveal basic inconsistencies or stumbling blocks in your spaces that can be fixed by simple adjustments and signage. Putting our staff in our users' shoes really developed empathy. Staff enjoyed the activity and shared comments such as, "Great test! ... I have more empathy for users now!"