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## Ideas for Searchers/Developers

Working on the Web can sometimes be overwhelming. Donald Rumsfeld is famous for his quote: “Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.” In many ways that hardest part of working on the Web are the “unknown unknowns.” However, there are a number of things we can do to make the web more inviting and useful.<sup>1</sup>

In Web use/development knowing what your goals are is important. In UX knowing what the outcome is supposed to be is important. What is the software supposed to do? What do you want the user to discover? Are they writing a term paper, dissertation or just want to know some information? When the user finishes will the software/application provide them with the “unknown unknowns”? Vendors are famous for their “vapor wear.” If you have a goal in mind of course their software can do it. But if they don’t understand your goals then just buying a piece of software from a vendor or developer and hoping for the best will not help. If your goals are not clear, then stop and ask the hard questions.

Realize that using the web/developing applications is a process not a destination. The Web changes every moment. New information becomes available, old information is now out of date. Application goals change. What you thought the software would do, might also serve other users in a different role. At the end of the day it’s nice to say “I’ve got this,” but you really haven’t you have just finished the known knowns. What did you learn about the Web, the software, the UX? Learning from your mistakes can be hard, but testing, re-developing, and exploring options are all part of the process. It’s the process, not the destination that makes you a better web searcher or developer.

Speak up if you don’t like something, or don’t know something. If the application or Web site does not work on your iPhone, but only works on Android devices, speak up. If you are not familiar with how to search a database, speak up. Tell

the patron this is the first time you are searching in this resource, but you believe it might answer their question. If an application sucks, then say so. Don’t just grumble, say “there are too many choices on this page” or “light green text on dark purple background does not work.” Try to find the unknown unknowns. Understanding how the application works is as important as knowing what it provides. Haven’t used AGRICOLA in five years? Don’t be afraid to ask someone, or play around with it again. Tell the folks at AGRICOLA what you like and what you don’t like about their database. Improve and provide a positive outcome for something that you have a concern about.

Tech has its limitations, be honest about them. If it is going to take time to search the database, let the patron know. Often users expect ten relevant articles to come up on the screen on the first go. You are standing at the counter trying to locate the relevant materials and today it’s just not coming up. You may need to suggest to the patron that the topic is one that will require more study and that you are willing to contact them when you have found more information. If the software or webpage is not working out, say so and see if a compromise can be worked out to make the UX a better one. Don’t settle for something that does not meet the user’s needs. Know what the application can do as well as what it can’t and explain that to the user. If the hardware just won’t do the trick, be honest and tell people. Maybe more that the software needs upgrading?

Study and grow new ideas and applications. Work with colleagues in other areas and see how they solve similar or different problems. Explore course offerings at Library Schools and other online learning venues. FutureLearn (<https://www.futurelearn.com/>) is an example of this low-cost idea generator. The North Carolina Library Association is a great place to network and get input to your library. Exhibits at the NLCA Conference expose you to new technology and vendors. Is there a better mousetrap? Well that depends on the unknown unknowns. Being creative and full of ideas for building the next better mousetrap are found when librarians get together and network.

1. Donald Rumsfeld, as quoted in U.S. Department of Defense news briefing, 12 February 2002, <https://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>