

## **Usability testing of Eurostat's statistical products: Opportunities & risk mitigation**

Julia Urhausen (Eurostat)

*julia.urhausen@ec.europa.eu*

### ***Abstract***

One possibility to find out about our users, their needs, behaviours and problems is by means of usability testing. This common and popular qualitative UX research method has been used by Eurostat staff since 2020 to carry out remote, moderated sessions with users of European statistics.

Usability testing is often described as “speaking to our users”, but the real value added and benefit comes from “listening to our users”. The basic set-up of this method can be summarised as following:

During a usability test session, a user is given a task or set of tasks by a moderator. The moderator observes the user conducting or solving these tasks. Commonly, the “think-aloud” method is applied and a user is encouraged by the moderator to share their thoughts, feelings or explain their action. This can take place in person or remotely using online communication tools with a screen sharing option.

For Eurostat, this particular UX research method offers many great opportunities:

- Direct contact with Eurostat users enables us to gain in-depth insights into their use of our European statistics and dissemination products
- Observing users interacting with our statistical dissemination products is an eye-opener as it makes their struggle real and tangible for us
- Users can validate choices taken by us in the planning and development phase of a product
- Using the think-aloud method allows for a deep understanding of users' reflections and reasoning when testing statistical products: “what works and what does not and why”?
- We obtain specific feedback and can draw up recommendations how to improve the usability of the tested products
- We experience an increased empathy with users and learning effects when creating new products
- We gain in reputation and users perceive Eurostat as a user-centred organisation

However, all these opportunities can easily turn into risks or pitfalls if usability testing is misunderstood, misused or wrongly carried out. These pitfalls can occur during every stage of the test process. Here some examples:

- Outreach to users: Fail to reach and encourage enough users
- Recruitment of users / user profiles: Fail to define and recruit desired profiles
- Planning and set-up: Fail to define research plan, objectives, goals and tasks
- Test session: Fail to respect rules of conduct for ethical and professional user research

- Outcome report: Fail to accurately report on findings

To minimise the risks and avoid the pitfalls in conducting usability testing of Eurostat's statistical dissemination products, we actively apply the following strategies:

1. Setting up a sound research plan:

It is essential to clearly define a research goal and objectives, the methodology that is suitable to reach the goal and the target audiences.

2. Writing a detailed usability testing guide:

Based on the research plan, the detailed guide should outline each step of the testing session, including an introduction to make users feel at ease and communicate what this session is about, possible pre- and post-scenario questions and clear instructions about the scenarios and tasks itself.

It is important to be precise and detailed to ensure a high-quality survey design; for example, writing down the exact wording of instructions and questions to minimise biases. Once finalised, this document should be reviewed by different project members to ensure that all relevant aspects are covered and clearly outlined. During the individual usability sessions, this test guide shall serve as a red thread.

3. Recruiting specific user profiles:

A pre-screening of the participants which we intend to invite to a usability testing ensures that we speak to the right target audiences. We set up short screening questionnaires that allow us to gain some insights into users' use of European statistics, statistical and IT literacy, Eurostat products, occupation, etc.

Key is finding the right mix of users from the main target audiences, while also including users on the 'left and right' with possible overlaps of the target audiences.

4. Conducting usability testing in a professional manner:

We know that each user is different and thus, no usability testing session is like another.

Professionalism shows in the way that we find the balance between:

- a) ensuring an empathic interaction tailored to each participant and
- b) successfully guiding them through the pre-planned scenarios from our usability testing guide which is indispensable to gain insights for our research goals.

Following these steps and guidelines helps Eurostat to take advantages of the opportunities of remote, moderated usability testing to support the strategic principles of Eurostat's communication and dissemination policy, in particular "Our communication is adapted to user needs...".