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Methods: Cognitive Walkthrough

Cognitive walkthroughs are performed at any stage of design using a prototype, a conceptual design document, or the final product. This is a more specific version of a design walkthrough, focusing on cognitive principles.

Based on a user's goals, a group of evaluators steps through tasks, evaluating at each step how difficult it is for the user to identify and operate the interface element most relevant to their current subgoal and how clearly the system provides feedback to that action. Cognitive walkthroughs take into consideration the user's thought processes that contribute to decision making, such as memory load and ability to reason.

For example, finding the Usability First website can be broken down to several levels of tasks. At a general level, it requires opening up a browser, remembering the URL and typing it in the text box at the top of your browser. Or, if you do not remember the URL, you must choose a search engine, think of a search term, view the results, scroll through the results, and then click on the link. Each of these actions can be further decomposed.

This approach is intended especially to help understand the usability of a system for first-time or infrequent users, that is, for users in an exploratory learning mode.

