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Methods: Focus Groups

Using focus groups to evaluate a system is a very efficient way to get user feedback and gauge initial reactions to a design. Focus groups are also good at discovering how the system being tested differs from the user's current expectations. As we see it, focus groups provide two major benefits. First, they are less expensive than conducting interviews with the same number of people. Second, they rely on group interaction to trigger memories that may not come up during interviews.

Where task analysis often discovers the standard way people interact with information systems, focus groups can bring out exceptions to the rules. These exceptions are often very important interactions that users simply do not think of in one-on-one sessions.

Conducting only a single focus group can be misleading, however, as some groups are affected by "group-think" or may simply have irregular views. For this reason, at least two groups should be evaluated for any one project.

The focus group leader writes up the impressions and comments of the groups and recommends areas for improvement.

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