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# 7 Ways to Ignite User-Centered Design at Your Agency

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So you've done a couple of usability studies, and a few people are starting to "see the light." Now you'd like to take it to the next level and help your organization embrace user-centered design (UCD) as the philosophy that drives all your digital projects.

But what is best way to do this? How can you change your organizational culture so the UCD seed you're planting will take root and flourish?

That's the boat we found ourselves in five years ago at the Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy. So we embarked on a project to raise awareness of UCD and embed UCD processes into our culture. Of course, as with all experiments, not everything went as planned—but many things did, and we certainly learned a lot in the process. Based on our experience, here are some tips for success when introducing UCD to your organization.

## Tip 1: Know your organization

First, decide if your organization is a good fit for institutionalizing UCD. Start by asking yourself:

- How willing is the organization to recognize problems and fix them?
- How open is the organization to embracing change?
- How is funding allocated for Web-related activities?

If you work for an organization with leadership that embraces change and wants to fix problems, you'll likely be more successful at introducing UCD. In addition, think about how Web funding is allocated—if it is centrally funded and managed, it can be easier to start a long-term and systemic change such as this.

## Tip 2: Find a champion (or better yet, several champions)

The champion is basically the face of this effort, so look for a champion who:

- Can help the organization understand the value of UCD.
- Understands the current development process and how UCD could fit in.
- Can identify pockets of resistance and bring them on board.
- Has the authority to direct human and financial resources.
- Can keep the initiative moving over the long term.

## Tip 3: Find the right wake-up call

Once you have a champion on board, it's time to wake up the rest of the organization to the need for UCD. Wake-up calls can take many forms; the ones you choose will depend on your organization. Effective wake-up calls can include:

- Capitalizing on a new product that launches and bombs.
- Sharing case studies from other organizations as they go through a UCD process.
- Having your site reviewed by an external user experience (UX) consultant.
- Using inexpensive [click tracking tools](#) to show customer click patterns.
- Conducting a small pilot usability study of your own site.

At DOE, we used a combination of wake-up calls at different times, and for different parts of the organization, which proved to be an effective strategy for us.

## Tip 4: Partner with a UX consultant

At some point, consider hiring an external UX consultant—the right consultant will help you move down the UCD road more quickly than you can on your own.

Consultants can help you decide on your strategy, train staff on UX processes, provide templates and examples, and assist with overflow UX work as the demand grows.

Look for UX consultants who:

- Are leaders in their field.
- Are a good cultural fit.
- Enjoy mentoring.
- Are easy to work with.
- Are experienced helping organizations with UCD.

If you don't have the budget to hire a consultant, look for some free resources. For example:

- Programs like GSA's [DigitalGov User Experience program](#).
- Free templates and other resources available on sites like [usability.gov](#).
- Training and mentoring available through the [User Experience Professionals Association](#) (UXPA).

## Tip 5: Grow UCD from the top-down AND from the bottom-up

For UCD to really take root and grow, it needs to be embraced by people at all levels of the organization—from the strategic decision-makers to the designers and writers. So information and training at all levels of the organization is key.

## Tip 6: Raise awareness first—then introduce the rules

Whenever you are introducing a change, some people will resist it—so start by simply raising people's awareness of the value of UCD. At DOE, we did this by:

1. Giving talks on what UCD was and why it was valuable.
2. Demonstrating UX tools to spark curiosity.
3. Promoting our pilot project so people could see what we were doing and learning.

Once you have some support for UCD, you can introduce governance processes to help standardize how you practice UCD as an organization.

## Tip 7: Put an infrastructure in place

Once you have people excited about UCD, it's time to build an infrastructure to ensure lasting success. Some things you'll want to plan for are:

- Ongoing knowledge and skills trainings
- Rules, standards, and processes
- Templates and examples
- Analysis and design tools
- Testing facilities

For some additional information on introducing UCD to your organization, here is a presentation I gave at the 2014 DC User Focus conference—[Igniting User-Centered Design Thinking at the Department of Energy](#) (PowerPoint presentation, 5.7 MB, 14 slides).

*Wendy Littman is a UX researcher who contracted to DOE's Office Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy for 13 years.*

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