A New Destination for Offshore Usability: Russia?

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This article has been prepared by interviewing the representatives of the leading Russian companies completely specialized on the provision of usability services—Usethics and UIDesign Group (Moscow)—and also one of the offshore software developers providing a full development cycle including usability activities—eVelopers (St. Petersburg).

Russia is the third-largest market player in offshore software development coming after India and China. Recently the global *offshorization* tendency, in addition to actual software engineering, also covers other stages of the software product development cycle, including usability engineering.

Usability companies note that Western customers have a rather poor understanding of the development level of HCI and usability in Russia, and thus they underestimate their real opportunities. Sometimes they abstain from entrusting the most creative issues of usability work to the Russian offshore companies. Obviously, this is caused by a poor representation of Russia at the international HCI conferences mainly focused on the advanced achievement and the "first line of science." The distinguishing feature of the Russian HCI/usability community (which is diametrically opposed to similar communities in other Eastern European countries) is a strong displacement of the gravity center toward practical usability (in particular, only 15 percent of RusCHI members work at the universities and research institutions). Meanwhile, though Russian science cannot brag of greater achievements in the HCI area yet, Russia nevertheless has a significant number of experts who day by day perform routine usability activities under orders of the developed Russian software industry, and the quality of their work meets the commonly accepted standards.

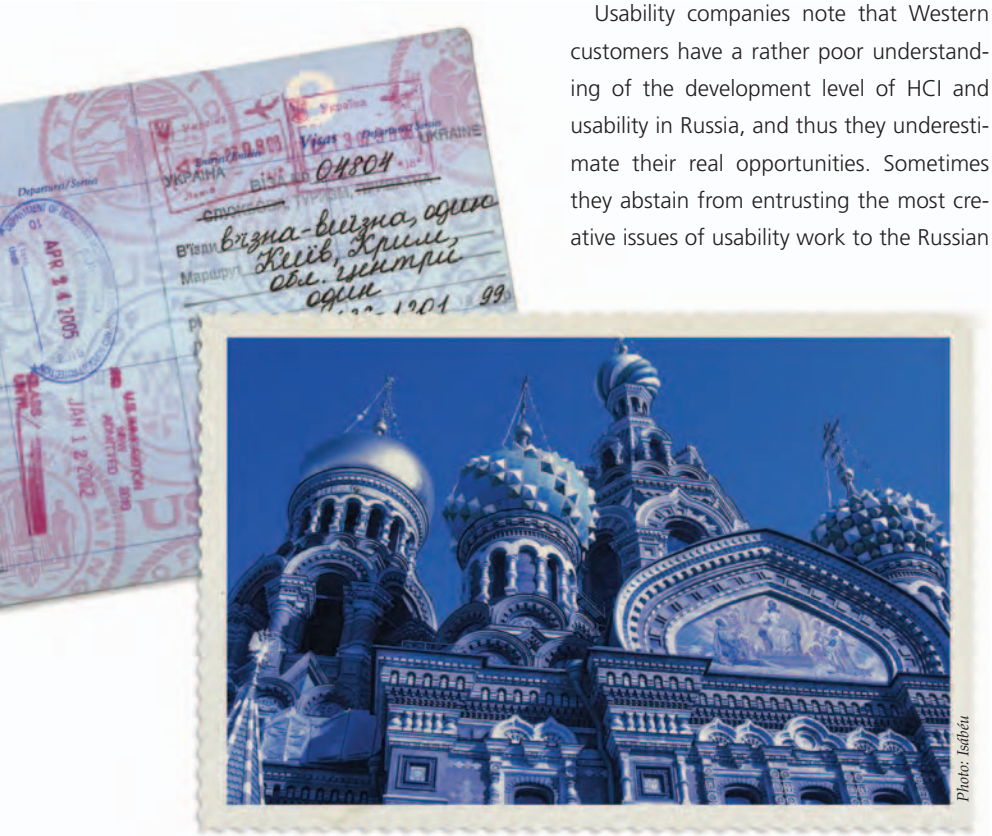

Photo: Isabeu

In Russia, the country taking the third place in the world by the number of scientists and engineers per capita, the trades of manager, bank and insurance worker, bookkeeper, lawyer, engineer, teacher, doctor are mass professions. However, here it is possible to find also consultants and participants for usability testing in such specific areas as fundamental science, aerospace industry, atomic engineering, the armaments industry, shipbuilding and other hi-tech spheres.

Russia is not just geographically close to Western Europe; the cultural proximity to the West has a basic importance. For 15 years of the existence of post-communist Russia, millions of people, who actually live a Western way of life and in many respects work according to Western standards,

existed in the large cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. (This cultural proximity sometimes becomes a reason for a developer wishing the product to be tested by the representatives of different cultures—European, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Latin American—to choose the Russians as a representative European sample by virtue of economic reasons.)

Variants of the Offshore Model Implementation. The companies describe four organizational variants of their offshore work.

The first variant: The Western customer is interested in cross-cultural usability testing of their universal product or a Web site by the Russian users alongside the representatives of other cultures. Usually in this case the Russian usability company is asked to recruit users and carry out the testing in accordance with the criteria of participants' choices already formulated, as well as a predetermined plan of testing. The results the Russian company's work are the test reports and, probably, a brief of the test results. Such formal variant of operation, the work on supporting parts sometimes bewilders the Russian usability experts who have gotten used to working with the Russian customers to carry out a full cycle of usability activities, including field research, conceptual and detailed user interface design, the author's supervision of the design implementation by programmers, usability testing, and interpretation of the results.

Nevertheless, the usability companies note that the greatest part of their offshore work now is performed within the second-interaction variant when the offshore facility is responsible for development of prototypes and detailed design of user interface. Thus, two operation schemes of usability offshore are possible. In the first case the Western customer employs an offshore company for software engineering and also independently employs a usability site offshore, which supervises the software developers regarding creation of the user interface. [The examples of such works are represented by UIDesign Group under orders of M-Tech (USA) and SATAP (Germany), and also the work of Usethics for Wildbit (USA).] In the second case the customer employs the offshore company for software engineering, and the latter in turn independently identifies a usability site offshore for development of the user interface. [Example: cooperation of Usethics with AdRevolver (Belarus).]

The third variant: development from scratch, starting from field studies of the work of users and formulating the requirements to the future system. In this case a person who will perform direct user interaction and observation of their work in situ is necessary. Though the interviewed companies are basically ready to send their employees abroad in this case, in reality the given development stage is more often carried out remotely. The most worked-out model of remote interaction with the end user apparently is demonstrated by Usethics and eVelopers. The usability site offshore prepares a list of questions for structured interviews with the users, and the Western customer finds a person who carries out these interviews, and also asks the users to tell small stories about how they perform their work. (In this connection the methodology of the user work analysis developed by Usethics and based on Activity Theory seemed interesting.) Having received these materials, the usability site offshore builds use cases and determines requirements to the system. (Of course, the requirements are specified during an iterative process.) After identification of all use cases and requirements, the usability site offshore is able to start the user interface design. Further, at a stage of testing of prototypes, the modern means that allow remote analysis of the user work both offline (for example, post hoc analysis of the reports recorded by Camtasia), and online (for example, Morae) are used. An original method is used by eVelopers: They embed into their software special tools for the user activity capture and then, based on the user activity log, they are able to judge how much the real work of users corresponds with the use scenarios that have been implemented in the user interface design.

At last, there is a variant of pure usability offshorization when the Western usability company acts as a customer for the Russian usability company. At present there is only one (but quite successful) precedent of such outsourcing variant: It is the work performed by Usethics for DialogDesign (Denmark).

Problems Arising Offshore. All companies note difficulties at communication with the foreign customer; that apparently is a common problem for any offshore work. The main channels of communication are email and-especially-instant messaging.

It is clear that these ways of communication do not always promote achievement of full mutual understanding and precise recording of the adopted decisions. Therefore UIDesign Group on the basis of its experience especially emphasizes the importance of the availability of specialized tools to all participants of the project team, and providing support for distributed development and project management.

A specific problem of the offshore model is the absence of direct "visibility" of the offshore work, which makes the customer feel the insufficiency of the offshore activity supervision. This leads to the requirement of daily reports on the work done by the offshore site with detailed elaboration literally by the hours spent for a specific kind of work. The offshore site, forced to spend significant time on preparation of reports—to the detriment of substantial practical work—such requirements are perceived as excessive, as micromanagement, and probably as a sign of mistrust of the offshore employees.

Another problem, not yet solved for the time being, is represented by the mismatch of cross-cultural stereotypes concerning coordination of the decisions being adopted, time costs of performance of particular project stages, the accepted manners of payment, organizational hierarchy, and so forth. Companies see a way out in carrying out a special preparatory phase of the work targeted at the development of the common context, revealing implicit assumptions and conventions, and also an explicit formulation of the rules of communications and decision-making.

The difference in time zones, for example, between Russia and the US may become another problem. This is usually resolved by creating late-night shifts to coincide with another time zone's day.

Prices. According to the information provided by the Russian companies, the usability expert working costs $50 to $70 per hour. The recruiting of one participant for usability testing costs $15 to $50 depending on the availability of special requirements, such as qualification and experience of the participant.

For a long time the Moscow University Laboratory of Work Psychology has been a unique institution in Russia equipped with the modern equipment for usability testing. However, today the rent of a standard usability lab with two glass-partitioned rooms is no longer a serious problem. The rent of such a laboratory is about $500 to $1500 per eight-hour working day, depending on the available equipment and provided services.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR *Ivan Burmistrov has been involved in HCI research for the past 15 years. Currently he is a researcher at the Laboratory of Work Psychology at Moscow State University. His current research is focused on the study of interruptions in human-computer interaction and he maintains a Web site on this topic, www.interruptions.net. In 2004 he was elected chair of RusCHI, Central Russia SIGCHI local chapter (www.sigchi.ru).*