Designing smart call forwarding

Making something new is always different to doing something tried and tested, this is also true for designers. To find design principles for designing new types of digital online products, we tested some on a project of our own.

When designing, there is always an element of creating something new. However, when designing for a completely new type of product, the design demands more innovation than other. When designing the first iPhone, for instance, the customers does not know what to expect from your product. You cannot take anything for granted, not even the words you use for the buttons and menu options.

To try out our thesis of how to make a new online software product, we were given an example. The product was a web-application, made to administer a new functionality smart call forwarding - when calling a main number, a caller gets forwarded via their phone number. This system was meant to be configured by writing the incoming callers number and the number you want that number to be forwarded to, into a spreadsheet. Then, that spreadsheet gets imported to a telephone service app, in this case Telavox Flow. It should be usable for users which had not seen or used anything like it before and introduced to the concept before using it.

To name the product, we used a method we called “The Search Test”. It is done by taking a bunch of prospective users, placing them in front of a computer, and asking them to use their search engine of choice to find a product which solves the problem you have presented them with. What this gives you, as a designer, is what the users would feel are the “right words” for the product, the user expectations from the product, and perhaps even how to explain it to a new user.

It was very important to “Prepare the user for the unexpected”. When using a new system, everything is weird, unknown and cryptic. In our case, the transition from our web-app to a template spreadsheet caused the most problems. To make sure the user does not get confused, we looked for “unexpected” things in our system and, if they could not be changed, we warned the user by writing it and added symbols indicating the transfer to another site.

We wish to share the method’s usefulness and the principle with other designers at the forefront of technology and innovation. Hopefully, they will be able to do their work better thanks to these new tools in their toolbox.