

Senior User Experience Designer, Selma Zafar
OpenRoad Communications.



OpenRoad Communications is a software product and professional services firm.

Headquarters: Vancouver, BC, Canada
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Status: Operating
Company Size: 25 employees

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“Being able to listen critically to people and communicate effectively is the key to user experience design. Putting people in the center of the design process.”

Selma Zafar, Senior User Experience Designer, OpenRoad Communications

OpenRoad Communications Ltd. is a 25 person software product and professional services firm founded in 1995 that specializes in developing custom web-based applications, public websites, and intranets. OpenRoad also offers professional services for web strategy, user experience design, usability, web analytics, and development.

Q: How long have you been with OpenRoad Communications?

SZ: About a year and it has really flown by. It's a fabulous place to work and I can envision myself being here for a very long time.

Q: How do you develop a career path to become a Senior User Experience Designer?

SZ: That's a great question. There's a lot of ways that people get into the profession. I went to school for it. My degree is in human kinetics, specializing in movement science. This

was the human factors stream. I took courses in cognitive psychology, human factors etc.

There are a lot of different names for user experience design. For example information architecture, interaction design and human factors but they all mean the same thing. When I graduated I went into design of physical space and applying human factors to physical space design and product design and then designing software.

The process and fundamentals are the same whether you are designing something physical or a software piece, the standards and guidelines that you apply at the different stages is what is

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different. It's all promoting user centered design.

Q: How do you promote working together as a team in the places that you work?

SZ: I've been really lucky, because everyone that I've worked with has understood the benefit and value of teamwork. When you work together as a team your ideas, results and solutions are better. I can't imagine a world without teamwork. You end up with a better product and things go a lot smoother because everyone's on the same page. Everyone brings a different view and insight to the team.

Q: What is the most challenging aspect of your field?

SZ: I think for the field of usability and user experience design it's definitely an under-appreciated field. People just expect and they like when things just work for them. People love when it's simple and easy to use and don't understand the time and effort it takes to create a simple experience. Sometimes the simplest experiences take the most time. Just because it looks simple doesn't mean it didn't take a long time to create.

Q: What does your day look like?

SZ: We don't have a typical day at OpenRoad which is great. Some days I work on concepts and design at my computer and other days I'm meeting with clients gathering requirements or running usability testing with users.

Q: Are there any awards in your field of expertise?

SZ: There are no dedicated awards for usability; it's just not sexy enough for people (laughing).

Q: As a woman in technology do you feel like a pioneer?

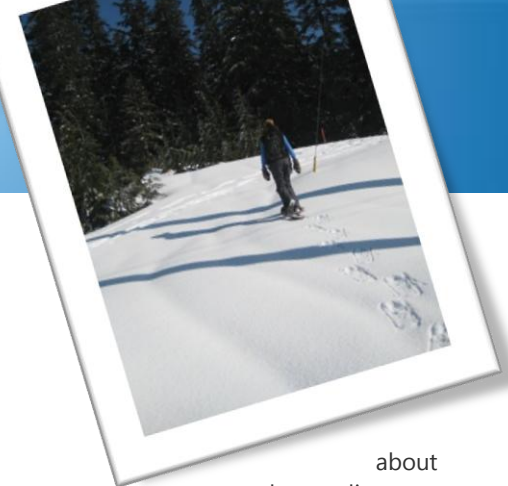
SZ: This is such an interesting question because I never thought of it in that way at all. When I was approaching my career, I didn't think about whether or not there were other women in the field, I entered the fields because I love it. I try to be known for what I do, not because I am a woman, but rather because of the skills and expertise I bring. As a teacher I hope to inspire my students by teaching them about human factors and hoping that they will apply it to their designs.

Q: Would you encourage other woman to choose your career path?

SZ: Women should select any career they want. I think this career is fun. Women should find what their passion is and then go for it.

Q: What made you choose a career in human interface design?

SZ: As far back as I can remember, I knew I always wanted to work with people. Human behavior and everything about humans has always interested me, in terms of understanding their needs and creating something that makes their lives easier and more enjoyable. When I was going through school I had to figure out how I was going to do apply that, but once I decided to focus on human factors it just seemed to click. It's all



about understanding people's needs and trying to create the best experience for them. I love talking to people and trying to understanding their needs to translate into design.

Q: What does OpenRoad offer employees that is special in the industry?

SZ: I think the big thing with OpenRoad over the past year; they really care about and respect their employees. People love working here and there is very little turn over. It's such a rare thing to find. Everyone is really smart and there is a lot of opportunity for development and continue to grow and stay on top of technology. We love working as a team to come up with the best solutions for clients. We are really proud of everything we create. It's the whole atmosphere and work environment.

There's about 25 employees that work at OpenRoad. 25 is a great size. You get to know each other and work really well together. And there's enough variety of projects to keep it interesting.

Q: What is OpenRoad known for in the industry?

SZ: OpenRoad is a web technology consultancy. We offer four different main streams of services: Strategy, User Experience Design, Development, Continuous Improvement and Analytics. We apply those services to the design of websites, intranets and web applications. We're known for getting things done on time and on target with a high quality of work.

When our clients are successful we feel like we've done a proper job. We like to ensure there is continuous improvement, and work with clients to help measure success. We work sensibly, we help clients tackle big problems we don't believe in a cookie cutter approach to tackling any problem, and we listen to their needs.

We come up with the best approach based on what their needs are. Openroad has been in business for 15 years. Our approach promotes user centered design which is unique within Vancouver. We really practice what we preach here.

Q: How do you maintain a work life balance?

SZ: Leave work at work! (laughing), I know sometimes that's hard to do especially when you can check your email at any point in the day. It's about working really hard when you are at work, when you leave work knowing you can leave things at the office. I enjoy seeing my friends and going outdoors and that helps keep me sane. It's something that I've learned over the years. It's hard to maintain a work life balance as we all know. Don't take your computer home! Or if you take the computer home don't take the power cord. You can only work for as long as it lasts. Great little trick.

Q: How do you convince people of choosing good design principles?

SZ: I really hate trying to convince people, at the end of the day, everyone wants a good design. You hope they would adopt some of those principles and use them in their own design. Once

they see the results hopefully that should convince them.

Q: What are your top 5 tips for solid design principles?

SZ: The first tip: You are not the end user. When you are designing you are never designing for yourself. It's not about you it's about your user, what are your user's needs?

The second tip: It's all about empathy. Empathy is one of the biggest principles of usability and user design. It's all about understanding your users and what their needs are and how you can translate their needs into design.

The third tip: is all about simplicity. Simplicity is key to any good design, simple design takes a really long time to make simple. Don't underestimate effort and the beauty of simplicity.

The fourth tip: is consistency, Make sure your design is consistent; it makes it easier for your audience and users to understand. They'll be spending their time enjoying your design and the experience rather than scratching their heads.

The fifth tip: is the principle of visibility. Always showing people especially when you are designing an interactive experience, you must indicate to people what is actually going. For instance, navigation is very important, "what page am I on?" Make it clear and visible for people for when they are on your website. If people get lost on your site then the result will have a negative experience.



Q: Can you recommend any authors or books you have in your own personal library?

SZ: The first book that was on my bookshelf was [The Usability Engineering Lifecycle](#) by Deborah J. Mayhew. [The Design of Everyday Things](#) by Donald A. Norman is a classic in usability circles. Another book I'm reading right now is the [Omnivore's Dilemma](#) by Michael Pollan. Omnivore's dilemma is about eating locally and sustainably which is near and dear to my heart.

Q: What are the tools of the trade?

SZ: You need to be a problem solver because it's all about solving problems. Being able to listen critically to people and communicate effectively is the key to user experience design. Putting people in the center of the design process. You really need to like to interact with people and talking with people. Have empathy and analyze all the data you have and come up with solutions. I use Visio a lot and different types of Usability evaluation software.

Q: Are there any online resources you can share with us?

SZ: There are tons. Jacob Neilson's website <http://www.useit.com> has an alert box and a bi-monthly newsletter that goes out. Jared Spool from User Interface Engineering. [Boxes and Arrows](#) is a great website. It has great tips and stays on top of the latest trends. There's also [Human Factors International Usability Professional Association's](#) website is a great resource.

Q: Can you tell us about Vancouver's World Usability Day, who should attend and why?

SZ: It took place Nov 12th. The theme this year was sustainability; we assembled a team of ten user experience professionals from the lower mainland. It was a sun up to sun down design plan and we worked with a community garden in Vancouver to understand what their needs are and what their problems are in terms of their community gardening experience by talking to their members and board members.

We started off by examining the space and see how we can better understand their experience. Looking at the experience in various ways, if it was the physical garden with signage or experience via their website or communication with their members. By the end of the day we came up with solutions that are tangible for the community garden to put into play in their space.

Q: Can you tell us more about your participation in Vancouver's World Usability day?

SZ: I'm part of the [Vancouver User Experience Group \(VanUE\)](#) since 2003 and it's all about promoting user experience within Vancouver. With two other members, we organized the event and came up with the idea. We're hoping to use this approach as a pilot (swat team guerrilla approach) and do that a couple of times a year with non-profit around the city to help them improve what they do.

Q: What is your opinion on the usability of Facebook? What would you suggest to enhance the effectiveness of the site?

SZ: I feel that Facebook has grown and it has done some really great things by setting trends in interaction design, but they need to take a step back. They should evaluate what's working and what's not working in terms of their interaction and to see how people are actually using Facebook these days. They continue to iterate and add new features and everytime they add something new lately there seems to be an outcry of people not understanding what the new features are all about and why they added it.

They are losing touch a little bit with their users. I know it's important to continually improve with UI, but I think the need to go back to their users and understand what their needs. Also they need to practice some sound user experience research principles and tools.

Their demographic has continued to evolve and change over the years and is being adopted by everyone. In the beginning it was the adoption of the younger demographic and this has changed. I'm not sure if they still think their designing for the same demographic.

Q: In what stage of a project do you get involved? Is it before, during or after the website is built?

SZ: All of them actually. The 'before' is what we call the discovery phase. This is where we define the strategy based on the requirements we have gathered. This includes defining who your users are and what their needs are. Because of this the user experience should be heavily involved. The opportunity is when you can identify ways to fill the gap between the business needs and the needs of your users.

The design phase is where we come up with concepts. We work through the functionality and flow of what the solution is and iterate it based on user's feedback.

After the website is built, OpenRoad is really big on continuous improvement and metrics. We see the benefits of marrying metrics and the user experience. After we're able to measure the performance of the site from analytics and key performance indicators, we can translate that information into improvements for the site. It's an end to end experience.

Q: Do you have any mentors or people that have inspired you throughout your career?

SZ: People who have mentored me would be my professors when I started out as a student, or I would look to the senior people on my team. I have had different mentors at different places in my career. I would look to mentors for different things, for instance, for human factors or leadership. Now my mentors help by providing guidance based on strategy regarding business development. I believe you have mentors for different stages of your life. I think everyone needs mentorship, it doesn't matter how old you are or how experienced you are.

I'm a mentor to a lot of junior people because I'm a teacher. It has made me realize that I really love what I do. I really hope that I inspire my students. People who have inspired me throughout my career who are not career related would be the Dalai Lama. He's fabulous. Everything that he has gone through, he has kindness and compassion for everyone. My parents. They've raised me really well with great values. The Vancouver community UE is small and we mentor each other.

Q: What is your favorite restaurant in Vancouver?

SZ: I love restaurants in Vancouver that really promote supporting local farmers and sustainability. [Pair Bistro](#) is great west coast style restaurant. [Nuba](#) is an authentic Lebanese restaurant which is a great everyday place.

Q: What is your favorite ninja movie?

SZ: This is such a hard question. My favorite pure Ninja movie is [Rashomon](#). It's a 50's black and white film directed by one of the most famous directors [Akira Kurosawa](#).

Q: If you were a ninja, what would your favorite weapon of choice be?

SZ: If it has to be a bad weapon, I would have to go with the ninja star. They are nice and discreet and you can whip them out and it would be over with quickly. You don't have to carry around a staff or nunchucks or something uncomfortable that gets in the way. I'm using usability even in my choice for a ninja weapon! (laughing).

Q: Do you have any pets?

SZ: I don't have any pets. A lot of my friends have pets and I'm their dog sitter or dog walker. I live vicariously through my friends and their pets. It's hard when you are renting in Vancouver to have a pet.

Q: What do you hope people take away from your speaking engagement on November 25th?

SZ: I really hope people take away that introducing the concept of fun or play into design, doesn't degrade someone's experience or make people perceive the design as being less serious. As long as it is used properly and your audience enjoys it they will have a better experience with your brand. I would like to inspire people to have a greater sense of adventure to make things more engaging and take some chances.



About OpenRoad

OpenRoad Communications Ltd. is a 24 person software product and professional services firm founded in 1995 that specializes in developing custom web-based applications, public websites, and intranets. Based in Vancouver, OpenRoad also offers professional services for web strategy, user experience design and usability, web analytics, and project management. We've worked with over 100 companies in our 14 year history and recent clients include the BC Government, BC Hydro, Electronic Arts, ICBC, Mountain Equipment Co-op, and the Vancouver Public Library.

OpenRoad is the producer of the turnkey social intranet product ThoughtFarmer used by clients around the world including IDEO, The Guardian Newspaper, Mountain Equipment Co-op, Penn State University, and WATG. ThoughtFarmer combines the best of wikis, blogs and social networking into an attractive, easy-to-use intranet solution for Microsoft Windows server environments.

OpenRoad is a Microsoft Certified Gold Partner with a Data Management Solutions and ISV/Software Solutions competency. We're long standing members of the BC technology community, having founded the Vancouver Java User's Group (VanJUG) in 1997, co-founded the Vancouver User Experience Group (VanUE) in 2003, and having organized events and special interest groups for NewMedia BC and the BC Technology Industry Association. We are active volunteers and supporters of the local BC West Coast Chapter of the Project Management Institute.

Our writing has appeared in Business in Vancouver and we've been featured in the Georgia Straight and the Vancouver Sun. We've also shared our expertise through teaching courses at SFU and Langara College on web development, project management, and information design topics. For more information about OpenRoad, go to: www.openroad.ca

About the International Internet Marketing Association

The International Internet Marketing Association started in 1998 to bring marketers, agencies and professionals together to discuss the capabilities and potential of Internet marketing. With over ten years of experience since our first event and our association remains focused on its original mandate – education. Each year, IIMA delivers a series of networking and speaking events hosted by subject matter experts, thought leaders, experts and panels of marketing practitioners. Each event has the same objectives:

- to provide insight into current and emerging practices in online marketing
- to deliver practical insights that are immediately relevant to your business
- to challenge participants to achieve greater levels of awareness of digital marketing
- to assist in the integration of digital marketing into your big picture marketing strategy

To engage you in the community of marketing and business practitioners passionate about the future of internet marketing. The meet-ups provide a theatre for the discussion of the trends, tools and technology shaping how marketing practitioners who are using the digital space to greater involvement with their publics. By providing a series of networking and educational events, IIMA creates an environment in which the trends, tools, opportunities and risks that are shaping how people interact with the online market place.

For more information about IIMA, go to:

www.iimaonline.org

Contributors to this interview



James Laitinen, Director of IIMA – James is an entrepreneur at heart with a flair for technology and marketing. Burning the midnight oil turning ideas into reality, he often attempts intimidation tactics during games of Scrabble. Connect with James online via [@jlate](https://twitter.com/jlate)



Charity Robertson, Director of Communications IIMA - Charity is a marketing, advertising and human relations professional. While not creating marketing strategies or studying, Charity can be found chasing the sun to the nearest beach. She is currently residing in Yucca Valley, California. Connect with Charity online via [@charityswab](https://twitter.com/charityswab)



Ean Jackson, Director of Events IIMA- When not running a marathon or snowshoeing in gorgeous powder conditions, Ean helps us connect with professional speakers and industry experts to present to our membership. For speaking opportunities and events contact Ean online via [@eanjackson](https://twitter.com/eanjackson)



A special thank you to [@selmaz](https://twitter.com/selmaz) for her effort and expertise contributing to this interview.