Influence of Site Maps

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1. Abstract
We evaluated the influence of site maps in an information-searching task. Users performed better with a constantly visible site map and they were faster with clickable links. The benefits were more pronounced with large sites. A continuously visible, clickable site map is recommended particularly for large web sites or complex hypertext documents.

2. Site Map
A site map is a potentially useful aid in web navigation. It shows the structure and the organization of the site explicitly. It can also provide shortcuts to the important pages of a site [3]. Numerous design and usability guidelines have recommended that every site can benefit from the addition of a site map [3, 4].

An available site overview is beneficial for users when performing information-seeking tasks [1]. However, since many site maps are hidden from users, they are often overlooked [4]. A continuously visible site map may encourage use.

Also, although hyperlinks provide access to other pages, a heavily linked site can cause disorientation [2]. Site maps may help avoid this.

In this study, the influence of visibility and clickable hyperlinks were examined. The size of web sites was also varied.

Hypotheses
1. Users will perform better:
   • with a continuously visible site map
   • with a site map with clickable links

2. The benefits of site maps will be more pronounced as site size increases

3. The Study
66 students (37 males and 29 females) at the University of Toronto participated.

The within subject variables were the visibility of a site map, and whether it had clickable links. In the control condition no site map was provided.

4. Results

5. Discussion
Participants performed better with a site map. They found the correct information more frequently. Also, they used less time, visited fewer pages, and required fewer clicks, when the site map was visible and clickable. These results confirmed the first hypothesis that users perform better with a continuously visible site map, and with a site map with clickable links.

The second hypothesis that the benefits of site maps would be more pronounced as site size increases was also supported. Site maps are more effective with larger and more complicated sites.

6. Conclusions
This study provided empirical evidence for the positive benefits of site maps. Making the site structure explicit, and providing clickable links, enhances performance in an information searching task.

These results should be taken into consideration when designing a large web site or complex hypertext document.

7. References

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