

Dawn Shaikh, PhD — Human Factors Psychologist

HUMAN FACTORS PSYCHOLOGY: A FONT OF COOLNESS

Ever wonder who has the coolest job in the world? Dawn Shaikh, PhD — who works for Google in Mountain View, Ca. — could lay a claim to that title.

Shaikh is a human factors psychologist who conducts research and works with engineers to develop culturally specific digital infrastructure for the Google platform. Her colleagues and staff, whom she describes as “hardcore computer science geniuses,” are charged with building type fonts and similar tools driven by research.

LEARNING WHAT FONT PEOPLE WANT

Shaikh manages research studies to determine what worldwide Google users want in fonts and font-related tools.

For example, Ethiopic is a 277-character alphabet used by five different languages spoken in and around Ethiopia. Shaikh worked with Ethiopic experts and native speakers of its associated languages to assess a mock-up of Ethiopic letters and spacing on a mobile device. Her team of engineers and designers will use the results to create the Ethiopic font.

“By creating more fonts, we are enabling more content we can index on our search engine,” she says.

LIFE AT THE GOOGLEPLEX AND ABROAD

Beyond the multicultural nature of her work, Shaikh also runs studies for Google’s Web fonts team, developing new typefaces, sprucing up digital content, and briefing designers on the overall look and readability of current and new fonts.

When she’s not trekking the “Googleplex” campus on a seven-seat conference bike — a genuine meeting on wheels — Shaikh is jetting off to New York, London, Dublin or Munich for research and conferences.

“Meetings are so much fun when you’re on a bike with six other people,” says Shaikh.

At the office, Shaikh is intent on keeping her team members focused on developing tools and features that are dictated by research studies, not necessarily by what her engineers think is “cool.”

“The engineers here can build anything,” says Shaikh. “Sometimes they want to build something incredible, just because they can. But we don’t always need all the bells and whistles.” Although a helmet every now and then might help.



Scott Squire/NonFiction Media

“In a lot of countries, there aren’t fonts that are appropriate for onscreen reading. We are trying to change that.”

HUMAN FACTORS AND ENGINEERING PSYCHOLOGY

Human factors and engineering psychologists combine technology with psychology to improve the relationship between people and machines, which can enhance performance, productivity and safety. They use psychological science to guide the designs of products, systems and devices we use every day.

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