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Working with your users to develop a modern user interface for search

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We all take feedback from our users very seriously, but how do we most effectively loop it back into our production systems? The real challenge is not merely finding the most effective channels through which to solicit feedback, but how to best integrate it with the expert knowledge of your team and to reconcile it with the overall product vision before it finally merges with and becomes part of the finished product.
In this talk we will discuss the approach used by the Summon User Interface Team to tackle this problem in terms of how we collect user feedback data, how that data is digested into discreet features, and, not least important, the implementation process through which those features must pass before they can ultimately be deployed to production.

User feedback is collected through the normal channels which include among others things user surveys, live usability sessions and usage statistics. We will not focus a great deal of time on the methods of collecting user feedback, but instead give a brief overview of which ones we find important, what data is interesting in each technique.

Once feedback has been collected, the next step is to use our knowledge of the domain and our knowledge of the users to produce a coherent feature or set of features which answer that feedback. We will detail these steps and explore the apparent (and sometimes actual) tensions between the opinions of our users, the opinions of our team experts and the overall product vision. We will also discuss why, in our experience, this process functions best when its participants represent a diverse set of opinions, especially those that lie outside the domain of library science.

Finally, we'll talk about why the agile methodologies we use are so integral to the total user experience. Far from a mechanical process for implementing a set of pre-ordained features thus derived from the steps above, we will show why the actual software development process must be an equal partner in the conversation, and how it can positively interact with the other parts of the system.

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