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WR 432

The Design Communication of Homebase

In our modern work environment nearly every job utilizes some form of a schedule. This is needed to keep employees accountable, workflow steady, and the business as a whole organized. In the service industry schedules have traditionally been made available to employees via a paper printout that is posted in a common area. These schedules will show an entire week, with all of the staff listed. If you needed to alter your availability, request time off, or swap a shift, that would have to be done by communicating with your manager. Additionally, you'd have to come into work on your day off to see the schedule and maybe take a picture of it for future reference.

With the advent of the internet and other technology like smartphones, scheduling in the service industry has largely been moved to a digital platform. There are a handful of smartphone applications that are commonly used now for scheduling. These applications fulfill the basic function of posting schedules for everyone to see, except you don't have to come in to work to view it. Additionally, they have other features like swapping shifts, requesting time off, adjusting availability, clocking in/out, showing sales data, and various methods of communication.

One of the more widely used apps of the last few years is called Homebase. Homebase is an app that provides scheduling and tools like swapping shifts, requesting time off, and updating your availability. It also has a clock in / clock out function. Additionally, it provides a platform for direct messaging between employees, however there is no "posting" function like some other apps have, which can be nice when

needing to share information with large groups of people; similarly, there is no option to enter any sales data to share with your team.

Homebase communicates its main functions easy enough, it's easy to understand what the app *can do*. Ultimately, the app does function properly. However, it's poorly designed, implementing careless organization and excessive clutter that damages the apps technical communication.

The app primarily suffers from a failure in design communication. To analyze this, we'll first take a look at some of the main design principles we'll be exploring. While these principles can be applied to a wide variety of designs and physical objects, for this instance we'll be referring to their use in an app.

Discoverability - Discoverability is basically whether or not you can you figure out what an object's intended use is. What functions are even possible? This is perhaps the most basic function of design communication.

Affordances - This refers to what an object can do, what are its functions, what can it "afford". Can it make phone calls or can it cook an egg? As Norman states, affordances refer to "what action is possible." (Norman, 32).

Signifiers - Often affordances are obvious to the user. However, if the function of an object, where to act, or how to act are not clear, signifiers can be used to help that function become clearer to the user. Signifiers "communicate where the action should take place." (Norman, 32). "If an affordance or anti-affordance cannot be perceived, some means of signaling its presence is required" (Norman, 30). This could be an arrow, or different colors, words, or anything that helps you understand the affordance. This can improve part of the discoverability.

Feedback - Feedback is when you get clear communication of what your action has resulted in, whether successful or unsuccessful. Examples of this could be the checkmark icon on Facebook messenger turning blue once the message has sent, or it could be a “safe to remove” message when ejecting a USB drive. Feedback is helpful to communicate whether a function is working properly, and working how we intend it to.

Localization - Localization gives attention to the different audiences that are potentially involved with a technical communication situation. Different groups, and especially different cultures will perceive things slightly differently, so tailoring a message is important. Therefore, it's crucial that designs are precise and well-considered when targeting and speaking to different audiences. Sun describes a culture as the “meanings, values, and behaviors” and “tangible manifestations of a way of life.” (Sun, 460).

Consistency - Humans often learn and identify things through repetition. Similarly, when you disrupt a pattern of repetition, it can have the opposite effect. People are used to stop signs being red, and turning doorknobs left to open; if those were suddenly changed, people would be confused, communication would be disrupted. Keeping design principles consistent is important not only to prevent people from getting derailed, but also to help discoverability and ease of use.

Visibility - While not a traditional design principle because of its obvious importance in all walks of life, it is a good thing to note. If you can't easily see something, it's not going to be easy to find or use.

Before we jump into all the problems, let's briefly talk about what the app does right.

1) It does have good **affordances**. Everything works, once you find it. The user is able to view their schedule, swap shifts, request time off, update availability, clock in / clock out, and message their coworkers.

2) There is generally good **feedback**. It's very clear when an action has been carried out. Clocking-in gives you a check mark, submitting time off gives you a "submitted" message, and my personal favorite - a eyeball that changed from 0/1 to 1/1 when one person views your message.

3) **Signifiers** are easy to identify once you've found the icon that represents a specific action, but as we'll see later, finding that icon can be difficult. Since apps often require multiple steps to complete a task, we could think of this as a chain "signifier #2 is clear, but there is no signifier #1 to get us there". These are both important parts of signifiers. Similarly, the **discoverability** is mostly adequate, but again, there are some areas where it could be better.

So what is the app doing wrong in its technical communication? To answer that questions, let's first reiterate the main functions of the app. By far the biggest function is scheduling, followed by messaging, and finally clocking in / clocking out. There are some fringe functions that are rarely used, that we won't touch on.

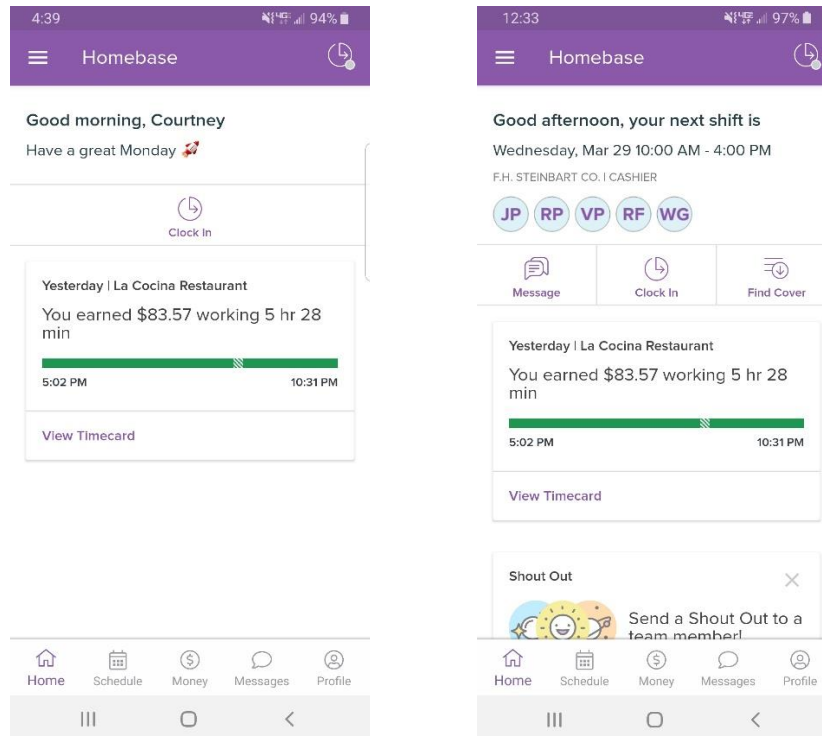
These functions have two main **problems**:

- 1) Poor **organization** - things generally aren't where they should be.
- 2) Excessive **clutter** - the app is way too busy, with functions appearing in multiple places for seemingly no reason.

Those problems produce these **sub-problems**:

The app is time consuming and difficult to navigate, things are hard to find, certain areas can be hard to understand, and there is poor legibility - these sub-problems can be itemized as **discoverability**, **signifiers**, **localization**, **consistency**, and **visibility**. To get a wholistic view of how these problems present themselves, we'll analyze the most important areas of the app as they pertain to our main functions. These areas are the **home page**, **hamburger bar**, **scheduling tab**, and the **clock in / job button**. I will be referring to icons that appear in the same place on every screen as "stationary" icons,

which are a major part of **consistency**. The only icons that truly stay stationary are “Home”, “Schedule”, “Money”, “Messaging”, “Profile” all located on the lower toolbar, and the hamburger bar located in the upper left-hand corner. You can see this shown below in two screenshots of the home page, taken at different times of the day.



Home page:

- The clock-in function is redundantly on the home page’s main screen, and in the upper right-hand corner as a seemingly stationary icon. It’s in the heading of the app, an area that usually does not change. However, the upper right-hand icon is not stationary, and it ONLY appears on the home page, being replaced with other another icon on the subsequent pages (more on that in the “clock-in / job button” area below). I’ll start by saying that it is good to have a clock-in function somewhere on the home page, that’s where it should be. That said, the redundancy is completely

unnecessary, there only needs to be one button for this. The redundancy only adds **clutter** to the page. Additionally, changing what should be a stationary icon means that when you are on another page, you expect the clock-in button to be there, and it isn't. This means you have to go through extra steps backtracking to find it, and you also don't know what it's been replaced with. This poor **organization** leads to **inconsistency**.

- Things will seemingly appear on the homepage, almost like ads to the user. "Messages", and "find cover" have both appeared some days, and then will be gone other days. First and foremost, this is incredibly **inconsistent**, and confuses the user. Secondly, even if they were stationary, they would be redundant and add to the **clutter** since they are also located in the toolbar and hamburger/scheduling tab, respectively. Lastly, it doesn't make sense to arbitrarily **organize** (even if temporarily) "messages", or "find cover" on the home page. "Find cover" should only be under scheduling, and "messaging" should only be on the toolbar as it is a main function. Pop ups are dangerous to technical communication when used like this, only confusing the user.
- There is a box on the home page that displays information regarding your hours worked, like a miniature timecard. I actually like this display on the home page. Unlike "messages" and "find cover" this information is always relevant. However, this information should also be available in the scheduling tab, and it's not. There should also be a fuller breakdown of your work week or work period under the scheduling app, and there isn't. Not only would this expanded feature be a nice feature to have, but the limited feature that is available again demonstrates bad **organization** and **inconsistency**, not being where it should be. It also shows poor **signifiers** because it can be difficult to back track and think where to find it when you aren't on the homepage.

Hamburger bar:

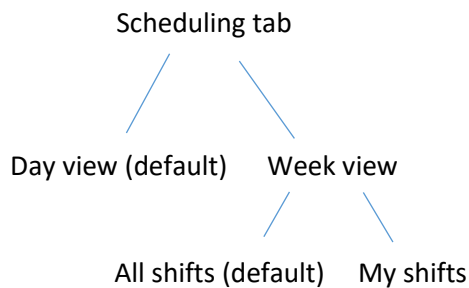
- Speaking of “find cover” (located within “requests” in the hamburger bar), it shouldn’t be **organized** under the hamburger bar among other administrative things like “support” and “settings”. There is nothing about “requests” that connects with these other functions in terms of organization. It is a scheduling function and common sense would have it only be in the scheduling tab. The hamburger bar has absolutely no **signifiers** to indicate that’s where “requests” would be, and this leads to poor **discoverability**. To further add to the confusion, “find cover” does appear in the scheduling tab, but not with the rest of the “requests”, and ONLY when your schedule hasn’t been posted yet. This again is arbitrary and confusing. Why would “find cover” appear on a page without any shifts to cover? This constant change of function placement just adds to the **inconsistency**. It also adds to the **clutter** of having “find cover” in multiple places, and it regroups the functions from “requests” for no reason.

Clock-in button / job button:

- Not only is there **redundancy** and **inconsistency** to have multiple clock-in buttons, and to have the clock-in button disappear in future screens, the same is also true for what replaces it. It is replaced with a toggle that allows you to switch from one job to another, this is useful if you work two different jobs, for different companies. One could argue that this isn’t needed on the home page anyways, since the only real main function that’s unique to the home page is the clock-in function, and that prompts you to choose a job to clock-in for anyways. Additionally, the miniature timecard could show all jobs, not just one at a time. The problem is that it doesn’t do that, it only shows one random time card at a time. This is something that pertains to different jobs, and therefore shouldn’t randomly show one time card or the other. There should be the option to select a job from the homepage, and view that timecard. This arbitrary use of information again confuses the

user. Additionally, the changing placement of the job button shows further bad **organization** and **inconsistency**. Having it in a seemingly stationary position means it shouldn't move. We could easily keep the clock-in button on the upper right-hand corner of every screen, and add the job function either right next to it, or in the hamburger bar.

Scheduling tab:



- The schedule tab opens with a “day view” sub-tab of all shifts, situated on a horizontal timeline showing 12am - 10pm. It shows all the FOH employees shifts for the day, automatically centering the page on the first shift of the day, which is 10:30am. The first problem here is that this should not be the first page you see. Most employees want to see their schedule first, not the schedule for the entire FOH staff, that should be in the secondary tab. This is poor **organization** and it leads to difficult **discoverability** in finding your schedule. This is also poor **localization** - different industries or different cultures might have more need to see their entire staff at once, but the western service industry is not one of them. The exception here would be that managers might need that view more often, but they are the minority; there could be different software for different users, if absolutely necessary. Secondly, the huge size and scale of the timeline doesn't allow the viewer to see the schedule in a single shot, the way a list or chart would. Having to scroll through the entire chart to look at (any) shifts is tedious. This adds to the **clutter** on the screen, and damages the **visibility**. Lastly, because it's on a timeline of the current day, that means there needs to be an additional tab to select the day of the week. That shows up at the top of the screen as a mini 7-day

calendar for the week. The calendar takes up more space, and adds to the **clutter**. While this is necessary under this timeline model, it just provides another reason the timeline structure is inferior to a list or chart.

- When you select “week view” the schedule changes from a horizontal timeline, to a vertical list. For example:

Jessica 10:30 am - 3:00 pm

Courtney 3:00 pm - 10:00 pm

While this version is the nicer of the two because it has less dead space, it creates more **inconsistency**, creating two different layouts for scheduling. This is unnecessary. The default sub-tab for “week view” is “all shifts”. Again, “all shifts” is not the tab that most users are going to want to see as their default. The 7-day calendar remains at the top of the page, a stationary feature for the schedule tab. The problem is that under the “week view” you don’t need to select different days; this renders the calendar useless, it literally does nothing. The calendar again adds to the **clutter**, and takes up more room on the page. Coupled with the fact that the name of the business, and the initials of each employee are displayed next to every shift - the space management is so poor that you can’t see more than one day without scrolling. All of this leads to the poor **visibility**.

- The best option for viewing one’s schedule is the second option under “week view” - “my shifts only”. This shows only the user’s shifts, in a vertical list. However, it still suffers from the poor space management listed above, and you can only see 3 days on the screen before you have to start scrolling. Still being unable to escape the bad **visibility**.

As we can see, there is a wide variety of problems here with the **organization** and the **clutter** that stem into our sub problems. The arbitrary nature of the poor organization and excessive clutter leads to bad **discoverability**, weak **signifiers**, lazy **localization**, terrible **consistency**, and awful **visibility**. Cleaning this

up would result in more page space, clearer legibility, easier use in finding functions, and faster scrolling through the app. Most of these benefits are self-explanatory, but I'd like to take a second to talk about one area in particular - what we could put in newly decluttered space.

As previously mentioned, I liked the use of the timecard. This information is static on the page and does not confuse the user or seem out of place; it's pretty much always relevant. This is the kind of useful information that I could see taking up maybe one more spot on the home page, almost like a news feed. This could include a more detailed timecard, or it could be broader, pertaining to the sales of the restaurant. Deciding what static information could be up to the user - this could be the one area where users get to customize a little bit. As the app has shown, there isn't anything crucial that needs to be on the home page. Therefore, the home page is not only an opportunity for clean-up, but also an opportunity to add some tailoring to a screen that doesn't have to be tied down the way other screens should be. Scheduling should show scheduling. Messaging should show messaging. The home page could show...whatever the user wants.

I have a good grasp of the other apps available, and a good understanding of what other users think of the app. That said, further analysis could come in the form of directly comparing Homebase to another app, or in interviewing another user about their personal experiences. There are things that I might not have noticed, or things that I liked / disliked that others may disagree with.

This product is interesting because while there are a couple missing features like the extended timecard, financial data, and team posts, the app ultimately does what it advertises. It's not generally the lack of **affordances**, it's the plethora of other design communication failures that make the app very difficult to use.

References

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