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Business software used to be dowdy and unintuitive. That's still the case in some industries, but in recent years, many SaaS solutions have taken on a look and feel that is clearly focused on the user experience. Features that were once only seen in gaming and social media are seeping into business products, and competing products are increasingly similar in interface design. While business software ecosystems are still popular, the ability to integrate with third-party solutions and use SaaS products across different devices is becoming the norm. As a side effect, UI/UX developers are tasked with creating products that are as easy to use as simple, lightweight apps but as powerful as legacy enterprise software. Meanwhile, businesses are feeling pressure to replace older, traditional business systems with streamlined SaaS products. Understanding how technology has been adopted thus far can give us insight into the tech trends we're seeing today and help us predict what's coming next. Here's how the worlds of consumer software products and business software products collided, resulting in a landscape of increasingly homogeneous and user-friendly products that bridge the gap between B2B and B2C. Computer adoption and shifting expectations In 1995, the Pew Research Center continued its established studies on computer usage in the United States. The resulting research showed that just 14 percent of U.S. adults had internet access at the time, and that 42 percent of adults had never heard of the internet (while an additional 21 percent had heard of it, knew it had to do with computers, but weren't sure what it was). By 2014, Pew's research found that 81 percent of American adults were using computers. Most early users were introduced to computers in work settings, which perhaps explains Pew's findings that both income and education level correlate to significantly higher rates of computer usage (with a 30 percent gap between college-educated and high school-educated Americans). Of course, home computers are common now, but even as of 2000, only 62 percent of Americans were using laptops or desktops. In other words, as ubiquitous as computers have become, the adoption process didn't happen overnight, and the way computers and subsequent devices were adopted has had a massive impact on UI and UX design. Initially, most people viewed computers as business devices, so they were focused on the way those devices could make work tasks more efficient. Little thought was given to how attractive a piece of software was, because the alternative was doing everything by hand. Since there was very little comparison and technology was already being pushed to its limits (of the time), the general idea was that any system was better than no system at all. Employee opinions on software were essentially irrelevant - not only because there were fewer products to choose from, but because in the 1990s and even early aughts, work culture was one of hierarchies and formalities, not one where employees felt they could or should dictate how they worked. If work systems weren't user-friendly, employees had to get over it and use them anyway. Puneet Gangal, CEO and founder of Aciron Consulting (a business management and IT consulting firm based in Boston), has been in the technology and management field for more than 20 years and seen the shift firsthand. He told Business News Daily, "For a long time, businesses were prioritizing functionality over design for their internal applications - it didn't matter what it looked like, as long as it got the job done. Employees used the systems because they had no other choices. Now, however, employees have gotten so accustomed to using intuitive, beautifully designed consumer products in their personal life, they are demanding a similar experience for their business software." While many clickbait articles blame millennials for the increasing demands business users make of their work technology, the experts we talked to seemed unanimous in their opinion that the shift has more to do with availability and exposure than age or generation. Adam Conrad, a software consultant and business owner with 10 years of experience as a UX engineer, explained the demand for beautifully designed work software as a natural step in the evolution of business technology. "First, we simply had to put out products online to increase distribution. Then, when everyone had their products online, it evolved to become about creating a great experience around those products. We are simply at that point now where there is enough market saturation that we require strong brands to distinguish ourselves, and a brand includes the experience of using our products and interacting with the employees." According to Gangal and several other UI/UX experts we consulted, companies that fail to offer employees easy-to-use systems now run the risk of their staff going rogue to find their own solutions. "We have seen companies that lacked an easy-to-use document management system, so employees chose to use a variety of unsanctioned consumer products, such as Dropbox and Google Drive, instead," he explained. "To compete with these personal software solutions and improve user adoption, business software needs to embrace UX design. Otherwise, business software will get pushed out of the marketplace by consumer products that are crossing over to the enterprise market, such as G Suite." In addition to a shift in work culture and an explosion of lower-cost SaaS solutions, the way people interact with technology has changed dramatically in the last 10 years. This is yet another trend often pegged as a millennial affectation that has actually spread across workers of all ages. People are increasingly working from home, setting their own hours, contracting, accessing business systems on the go and demanding work-life fusion. All this has been possible thanks largely to the trend away from high-cost locally hosted software and toward SaaS solutions and mobile apps, which couldn't have happened without the widespread adoption of cell phones. Cell phone ownership has contributed more to how people view and use business technology than you might think. In 2000, while only 62 percent of Americans were using computers, an even smaller percentage (53 percent) owned cell phones. However, by 2014, a whopping 90 percent of American adults owned cell phones, and cell phone ownership was never as closely tied to education or socioeconomic status as computer ownership and usage was (and still is). The entry-level price point for cell phones lowered very quickly once usage became common, and when smartphones were first released by Apple (2007) and HTC (2008), the mobile online experience got a lot better too. Suddenly, if consumers wanted to get online but couldn't afford a laptop or desktop (plus the added costs of an internet connection), they could get a smartphone. In the early 2000s, the first version of downloading add-ons onto phones arrived in the form of custom ringtones and wallpapers. In 2008, things changed again when Apple debuted the App Store and Google released Android Market (which later became Google Play). When the App Store launched, it offered a mere 500 applications, paid and free, for download. Now, both Android and Apple stores offer millions of applications to choose from, allowing users to customize their devices in a way they couldn't before. This had the unintended side effect of turning average consumers into UI/UX critics. Like Yelp, app marketplaces allow users to leave ratings and reviews, and once users gained access to millions of apps, they learned to be choosy (just like today's lay restaurant critics). If you peruse app reviews, you'll see criticisms on aspects such as the inability to change an app's color scheme, the pervasiveness of advertisements and in-app purchase offers, and the presence or absence of certain features. In 2010, when apps were just taking off in a big way, the most popular apps were generally games, Facebook, media platforms like Netflix or Pandora, and communication platforms such as Skype. As it became clear that apps were not a fad but an evolutionary step on the tech ladder, major software companies started making apps to complement their products, including business software. Then the mobile social media big bang happened and a whole new field of marketing and e-commerce was born, permanently blurring the lines between personal-use and business-use apps. The rise of ubiquitous social media resulted in more consumer exposure to personal and business products, as well as more crossover and competition between B2B and B2C technology. Examples of this are Facebook's foray into business products, monetized Instagram accounts and advertising on the platform itself, and the development of G Suite from a formerly consumer-focused product (Gmail). Now, rather than business solutions and consumer products being developed separately with vastly different aims, consumer products are influencing business UI/UX, and vice versa. Many of the dev experts we spoke with said they thought social media design had a direct influence on business software and business app design. Some examples they gave us as evidence of this trend in work software include "at" mentioning (@EmployeeName) in work systems, upvoting and downvoting in work systems, emojis in work chat systems, GIFs in work chat systems, and live notifications in SaaS products. The demand for intuitive work products has resulted in a sort of homogenization of many business and consumer products. While different branded CRMs and CMSs used to look and function in drastically divergent ways, now most of the industry leaders across many spheres of business software have similar features, interfaces and dashboard designs. Relevance CTO Randolph Morris, who has been in the tech world for 31 years, noted both the proliferation of mobile usage and increased focus on employee comfort as reasons for the consistency between product interfaces for consumer and business products. He agreed that the line between business and personal products is blurring and said it's no surprise that elements from consumer products are finding their way into business solutions. "Software is at a point where most features of functionality have an established UI element [that] users are comfortable using," Morris said. "Add to that a generation of people who have had these elements available to them their entire lives. In most cases, it makes sense to use interface elements that users are expecting. Additionally, most platforms have a standards guide that reinforces these expectations to product consistency in our interfaces." Because users expect to feel an immediate sense of familiarity with business products they've never used before, developers have taken on a user-first approach to design. Nowadays, a design that isn't instantly easy to use can kill an otherwise stellar product. Lisa Baskett, a senior UX researcher at RevUnit with 17 years of experience in the industry, said she has seen clients become "increasingly better versed in user experience process and methods" in recent years. She noted that, in reaction to this change in business consumers, today's UX/UI pros are "starting to understand the value of considering the user first and foremost." She believes the main influences driving this change are experience (in the form of past failed products and lost revenue) and "greater visibility of the UX industry as a whole through social media, conferences and industry blogs." She also noted the influence of social media, specifically the use of social media in business, as a turning point in business software design and consumer expectations. "[Clients] desire the same transparent and immediate communication options present in the software they use at home to be available in the software they use at work. They want the same level of engagement as well [...] People are becoming way less tolerant of the disconnect between personal software that works effortlessly and the clunky, inefficient experiences of the business software they use every day. Users want immediate and effortless experiences." What homogeneous design means for business adoption and onboarding When workers first started using software in the office, there was an understanding that each program had a steep learning curve. Now there's the expectation that good technology should be intuitive enough to eliminate the need for training beyond a few learning guides and videos. While the blame for this impatience with learning is (yet again) often attributed exclusively to millennials, they certainly aren't the only ones bringing strong opinions about technology into the office. It's true that younger people have higher exposure and adoption rates when it comes to social media, smartphones and computer use, but older generations are catching up. According to the Pew Research Center, 92 percent of millennials currently own smartphones, but so do 85 percent of Gen Xers (born 1965 to 1980) and 67 percent of boomers (born 1946 to 1964). Additionally, 75 percent of Gen Xers and 57 percent of boomers use social media either personally or professionally, and if you only look at Facebook stats, the generational differences are even narrower. Several experts said they knew colleagues who had quit jobs over poorly designed technology, and many more cited examples of employees or clients flat-out refusing to use unintuitive legacy solutions. This attitude - that the need for onboarding is a sign of a poorly designed system - will likely become more prevalent as users who are growing up with Snapchat and Instagram enter the workforce and software products become increasingly similar in look and feel. All of this means that SMBs should think long and hard about the software they adopt and carefully consider how using less user-friendly legacy systems may impact employee morale, retention and productivity.

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