You may know the work of Tadao Ando, a respected Japanese architect. He’s known for envisioning buildings that follow the landscape while emphasizing simplicity in form and feel. His work depends on understanding context, which he explains with these words:

> Wherever you build there is an existing landscape. In my mind, a reading of the landscape is an extremely important phase. You have to make something that is unique to that place.

I’ve been thinking about the idea of “existing landscape.” As user experience professionals, we strive to develop products that meet the existing landscapes of our users. We try to understand what they want to accomplish and their mental models and understanding of the online performance environment.

I’m also fascinated by how the “existing landscape” relates to how we go about accomplishing our work.

For example, recently I was asked to provide instruction for a development team of 10 people. These programmers, analysts and managers were responsible for developing eight communication products including applications, an external-facing web environment and a Shareware-based Intranet portal. I listed them on the whiteboard.

> “Don’t forget number nine.”

I turned my attention to a student who had not been very involved in the other eight projects. He explained that management had just made a decision to buy and adapt an off-the-shelf product, the darling of the industry.

> “This is now priority number one, with rollout planned for three months from now.”

No other student was aware of this new decision. But they knew what deadlines meant. They would need to adapt the off-the-shelf product. Demands would escalate toward the time the due date neared. The product that had not yet been procured.

> “OK,” I said, “Let’s list project number nine at the top of the board.” I took a green marker and squished it into a prominent position.

Then we ignored it.

I’d like to say I had the instructional foresight to have everyone begin thinking of the audiences who would be using the new priority one product. And I would love to comment on how we thought fully about how we might plan for a better user experience, even before the product is procured.

Instead I believe we all sighed. Including me – and I wasn’t even part of the team.

What could we have done? Perhaps we could have...
talked about what happens when any prefabricated performance tool is dropped into a work environment. Perhaps we could have focused more on the existing landscape of the people who were about to get this new product. What will change for them when this new product drops into their lives? Will they need to stop using one product and start using another?

And what about the development team planning the products? Will this team of professionals successfully navigate their work context? Or will the time crunch and management requirements thwart them, keeping them from fully understanding their audience and their audience’s needs? The obstacles are significant; but maybe they have the eyes to read the existing landscape.