

25 Years of the Stanley Caplan User-Centered Product Design Award: Origins, Evolution, and Impact

By Adam Shames, David Aurelio , & Stanley Caplan

FEATURE AT A GLANCE:

We review the origin, evolution, and impact of the Stanley Caplan User-Centered Product Design Award over the past 25 years. The annual Award has recognized product excellence in the areas of commercially available products, systems, and equipment. The Award is unique in its evaluation method that stresses both a product's design process and the end product of that process. Winners can expect increased visibility for their industrial design, user experience, and human factors groups, and increased support from their companies for human-centered designs and processes. Designers are invited to submit their human-centered designs into the Award's evaluation process.

KEYWORDS:

methods, product design methods, system analysis methods, test and evaluation methods, design strategies product design, product development product design, usability product design

For a quarter century, the Stanley Caplan User-Centered Product Design Award—informally known as the UCD Award—has recognized design teams who bring human-centered principles to life in commercial, consumer, and medical products. As the Award reaches its 25th year, this is an opportunity to reflect on its origins, highlight the evolution of its judging philosophy, celebrate the people and products that have shaped its legacy, and consider its future within the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society (HFES).

BACKGROUND

How it Began (1998–2002)

The Award began with a remarkably simple motivation. As Stan Caplan recalls: “I retired from Eastman Kodak in January of 1998, and I guess I was looking for something worthwhile to do. By the end of that year the gears were in motion.” He drafted the initial proposal with Matti Ameli and circulated it within the HFES Consumer Products Technical Group (CPTG). Those early drafts reveal a clear vision: elevate the role of human factors (HF) in product design, differentiate the new award from the HFES Alexander C. Williams, Jr Design Award, and highlight accomplishments in user-centered design, rather than pure engineering.

In 2001 at the CPTG annual meeting, Dianne McMullin volunteered to collaborate with Stan to run the program. She played a foundational role for many years, helping define procedures, recruit judges, and ensure

a polished annual awards session. Before webinars existed, the Award was presented live at the HFES Annual Meeting, often with the HFES President attending and often announcing the award—a testament to the visibility and seriousness of the program.

The judging criteria and processes were finalized during 1999–2001, with the first public winners announced in 2002.

The First Winners (2002)

The earliest published record of the Award in practice comes from the 2002 announcement by Dianne McMullin and Stan Caplan. The inaugural winners were:

- Evenflo & IDEO—Evenflo Insight™ Stroller and
- Agilent Technologies & Herbst LaZar Bell—Infinium Oscilloscope.

These two winners illustrate the breadth that would come to define the Award, spanning consumer family products to sophisticated professional tools. Both demonstrated usability rigor, innovation, and thoughtful application of user-centered research.

What the Award Has Recognized Over the Years

Across two decades, the UCD Award has showcased:

- consumer goods,
- industrial and laboratory equipment,
- medical and healthcare devices,

- workplace and commercial systems, and
- digital and hybrid physical–digital tools.

For examples, the winners for 2015, 2022 and 2023 were the interior cabins of the Class 800 train series by Hitachi, Versi PD Cyclor dialysis system by Fresenius Medical Care, and the INOmax EVOLVE gas delivery system by Mallinckrodt, respectively.

SUBMISSION EVALUATION

Criteria for Evaluation

Submissions are evaluated along six weighted rating scales along two core criteria:

- product design consisting of scales for functional obviousness, ease of operation, and creativity/innovation and
- research method consisting of scales for concept development, design method, and evidence-based evaluation.

This dual criteria emphasis has defined the Award's identity and shaped how winners present their work to HFES and the broader design community. As part of those presentations, the Award encourages its winners to submit a paper describing their process and product to the HFES journal *Ergonomics in Design*.

Evolution of Judging

While new judges are selected each year to ensure diversity and fresh perspectives, one source of continuity has anchored the Award since its inception: David Aurelio. David has served as a judge every single year except one. His perspective across products, industries, and judging approaches has helped maintain consistency and uphold the spirit of the Award.

Over time, judging has evolved to emphasize:

- greater domain diversity among judges,
- increased focus on ecosystem-level design (installers, maintainers, service technicians),
- stronger methodological transparency in submissions, and
- recognition of constraints and tradeoffs shaping design decisions.

One notable moment in the Award's history was the year the judges concluded that no nomination met the standard for excellence—underscoring how seriously criteria are applied and that winning is never guaranteed.

IMPACT OF AWARD

Impact on Winners and the Field

Winning teams for the Award often report:

- strengthened internal visibility and recognition for user experience (UX) and HF groups,
- increased adoption of human-centered methods,
- improved recruiting for design and research roles,
- validation that encourages continued investment in user research, and
- opportunities to publish in *Ergonomics in Design*.

The Award Today

Now administered by the HFES Product Design Technical Group (PDTG), the UCD Award continues to draw strong submissions, reflecting advances in automation, digital health, wearables, robotics, logistics systems, and connected devices. Despite shifts in technology, the Award's foundation—user involvement, rigorous research, and clarity of user interaction—remains central.

How the Award Became the Stanley Caplan Award

In its early years, the Award was not named after Stan Caplan. The naming occurred as a surprise to him—entirely initiated by others. During what was believed to be the 10th anniversary session, Dianne, Susan Hallbeck, and David interrupted Stan as he attempted to open the meeting. They announced that HFES had approved their proposal to name the Award in Stan's honor. Stan had not been consulted, did not know such a proposal had been submitted, and was visibly moved when the announcement was made. This moment remains part of the Award's oral history.

Award's Leadership

In the past decade, Adam Shames has taken over leadership of the Award, maintaining its continuity, refreshing its presentation, expanding communications, and shepherding its transition to modern formats such as webinars. His stewardship has ensured that user-centered design continues to have a strong and visible presence within HFES.

Recognition and What Makes the Award Unique

Unlike many industry design awards, the UCD Award:

- charges no submission fee,
- offers an honorarium to winners,
- provides winning plaques and certificates, and
- supports recognition of both the HF design team and the sponsoring company.

These aspects help encourage participation and broaden access, especially for teams without large budgets for product research and design.

FUTURE OF AWARD

As product ecosystems become more complex—incorporating AI-enabled systems, adaptive environments, distributed user interfaces, and multimodal workflows—the Award is well positioned to evolve. What should remain constant is its mission: recognizing design teams that created products grounded in real human needs, supported by rigorous research, and executed with clarity, creativity, and empathy.

The next quarter-century will bring new technologies and new challenges, but also new opportunities for the UCD Award to inspire practitioners, students, teams, and organizations to keep users at the center of their work.

Teams interested in showcasing their human-centered work are encouraged to submit to the upcoming UCD Award cycle at [UCDaward.com](https://ucdaward.com). Each nomination strengthens the community's collective understanding of what exceptional design can achieve.



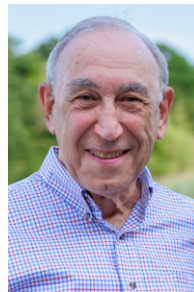
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