UX RESEARCH STUDY

Outlook Usability Research Report

Identifying usability barriers in Microsoft Outlook's cross-platform experience that increase cognitive load and slow down everyday academic workflows.

Ethan Cabral
Individual UX Researcher
Heuristic Evaluation · Moderated Usability Testing

Microsoft Outlook · Academic Usability Study · 2025
Not affiliated with or endorsed by Microsoft.

> **Identified 5 usability barriers across Outlook's web and mobile experiences and translated them into design recommendations prioritized by user impact and implementation cost.**

Executive Summary

The problem. Students who live in Outlook across both web and mobile lose time and confidence to interface friction: buried actions, ambiguous icons, and workflows that behave differently on each platform. Outlook handles core email well, but discoverability and cross-platform consistency break down exactly where fast, multi-device academic work depends on them.

My role. As the sole researcher, I planned and moderated the usability sessions, ran a heuristic evaluation against Nielsen's 10 Usability Heuristics, synthesized the findings, and prioritized a set of evidence-based design recommendations.

Headline finding. Five recurring barriers surfaced. The sharpest, hidden contact management, produced the strongest signal in the study: every participant failed to find contacts on their first attempt and independently proposed the same fix. The recommendations that follow target the highest-impact, lowest-cost fixes first, while preserving the power-user capabilities Outlook is built around.

Research Methods

I ran a mixed-method usability evaluation, pairing observed user behavior with expert analysis so the two could validate each other.

Moderated usability testing. Three participants, all university students matching Outlook's core academic-user profile, each completed the same four tasks in sessions under 20 minutes. I used a task-based think-aloud protocol, asking participants to narrate their thinking as they worked, which surfaced not just where they failed but why they hesitated. Each task was run on both the web version (Outlook on the web, on a computer) and the mobile app to assess cross-platform consistency. To keep sessions clean, I used goal-oriented tasks, avoided leading questions, stayed neutral, and only intervened when necessary.

Heuristic evaluation. In parallel, I evaluated the interface against Nielsen's 10 Usability Heuristics, documenting strengths and violations independently of the sessions.

Synthesis. I grouped session observations into recurring themes, then mapped each to the heuristic it violated. Where observed behavior and a heuristic violation pointed to the same issue, I treated that convergence as higher-confidence evidence and prioritized accordingly.

Tasks tested (each on web and mobile)

- Send an email with an attachment
- Schedule a calendar meeting
- Search for a previously sent email
- Add and remove a contact

Scope & Limitations

This was an early-stage evaluation with three participants. I've been deliberate about not overstating what that supports. Two things justify confidence at this stage: issues recurred across all three sessions, and behavioral observations aligned with independent heuristic violations. Convergence between methods, and across every participant on the sharpest issues, is what let me prioritize confidently. Natural next steps would be a larger, more diverse sample plus accessibility and keyboard-navigation testing.

Key Findings

Contact management was the clearest failure, and the strongest signal.

All three participants failed to locate contact management on their first attempt. Each instinctively checked their profile or tapped the "+" icon, and none expected contacts to be filed under "Apps." One participant summed up the mismatch directly:

> *"I didn't think of contacts as an app."* — one participant

Removing a contact also caused hesitation across participants, who were unsure whether a deletion had been confirmed. Most tellingly, all three independently proposed the same fix: a dedicated contacts tab in the mobile bottom navigation. When a problem and its solution both emerge unprompted from every participant, that is as strong a signal as a small study can produce.

The calendar icon and rigid scheduling created consistent friction.

All three struggled to locate the small calendar icon on the web version, lengthening an otherwise routine task, and all three found time-and-date entry unintuitive there. Participants reached for shortcuts that didn't exist, with one proposing exactly the feature the interface was missing:

> *"A quick scheduling option would make things a lot easier."* — another participant

Another wanted natural-language input such as "Tomorrow 3 PM," reinforcing that the current flow asked for too many manual steps.

Scheduling exposed a platform split worth learning from.

Participants consistently preferred the mobile app's swipe-based time selection over the rigid entry on the web version. One described the mobile flow plainly:

> *"Flows nicely, and feels intuitive."* — a third participant

This wasn't a defect so much as a design lesson: the mobile interaction model was simply better, and the web version should adopt it. The one mobile weak point was cramped day selection.

Search worked, but inconsistently across devices.

Every participant completed searches, but found mobile faster for recent emails and the web version necessary for older ones, via filters they described as "buried." One recommended quick-access filter chips such as "From" or "Older than 6 months." The absence of a unified search experience forced participants to relearn the workflow when switching devices.

The default toolbar overwhelmed through icon-only, unlabeled actions.

Participants described the desktop ribbon as cluttered, powerful but hard to navigate, with valuable features such as rules and delayed delivery buried in menus that forced recall over recognition. One captured the problem while scanning the toolbar:

> *"This is a little packed, I don't know where to look."* — one participant

On the web version, the default toolbar presents actions as icons without visible labels, so participants had to hover or guess to identify functions.

Error prevention and recovery were helpful but inconsistent.

Outlook does prevent some mistakes well: it blocks invalid email addresses and prompts users who mention an attachment but forget to add one. But the safeguards were uneven. Error messages such as "couldn't send this message" offered no explanation or path to recovery, and the "Undo Send" window was often too short and

inconsistently available across platforms. The result was that participants trusted the system in some moments and felt stranded in others.

Where Outlook succeeded.

Not everything was friction, and noting what worked mattered for the diagnosis. Core actions (reply, forward, delete) were consistent and instantly recognizable across platforms, supported by familiar icons like the paperclip for attachments, which aided learnability. The Focused Inbox was appreciated for cutting clutter, and Outlook's plain, conversational language (“Opening your event” rather than technical codes) kept the system approachable. These strengths confirm the core problems were discoverability and cross-platform consistency, not the fundamentals.

Heuristic Evaluation Summary

The table summarizes the Nielsen heuristics with significant usability issues. The remaining heuristics were reviewed but surfaced no notable concerns. Severity was rated by how often an issue recurred across participants and how much it affected task completion.

Heuristic	Severity	Key Issue
Recognition vs. Recall	High	Contacts and advanced tools are hidden
Consistency & Standards	High	Web and mobile workflows differ
Aesthetic & Minimalist Design	Medium	Icon-only toolbar increases cognitive load
Error Prevention	Medium	Scheduling conflicts and time zones unclear
User Control & Freedom	Low	Undo Send limited and inconsistent

Design Recommendations (Prioritized)

High Priority

Elevate Contacts to primary navigation (mobile)

High impact, low implementation cost. Surfacing Contacts as a primary tab directly addresses the single most consistent failure in the study, and it is the fix participants themselves proposed.

Surface action labels in the default toolbar view (web)

Show text labels for core actions by default rather than relying on icons alone. Note: Outlook does offer tooltips on hover and an expandable labeled view, but both are opt-in, requiring the user to already suspect what an icon does or to discover a setting most infrequent users never find. This recommendation concerns the *default state and discoverability* of those labels, not their existence: at-a-glance recognition should not depend on hovering each icon one at a time.

Medium Priority

Introduce quick-scheduling options on the web version

Preset meeting times, and ideally the fluid swipe-style selection participants preferred on mobile, to close the gap with the faster mobile flow.

Improve icon visibility and visual hierarchy

Larger icons, clearer spacing, and stronger contrast to aid recognition for the calendar and contacts entry points, with clearer confirmation prompts on deletion.

Rewrite error messages in plain, actionable language

Replace vague notifications like “couldn't send this message” with clear explanations and a recovery path, and make the “Undo Send” window longer and consistently available across platforms.

Low Priority

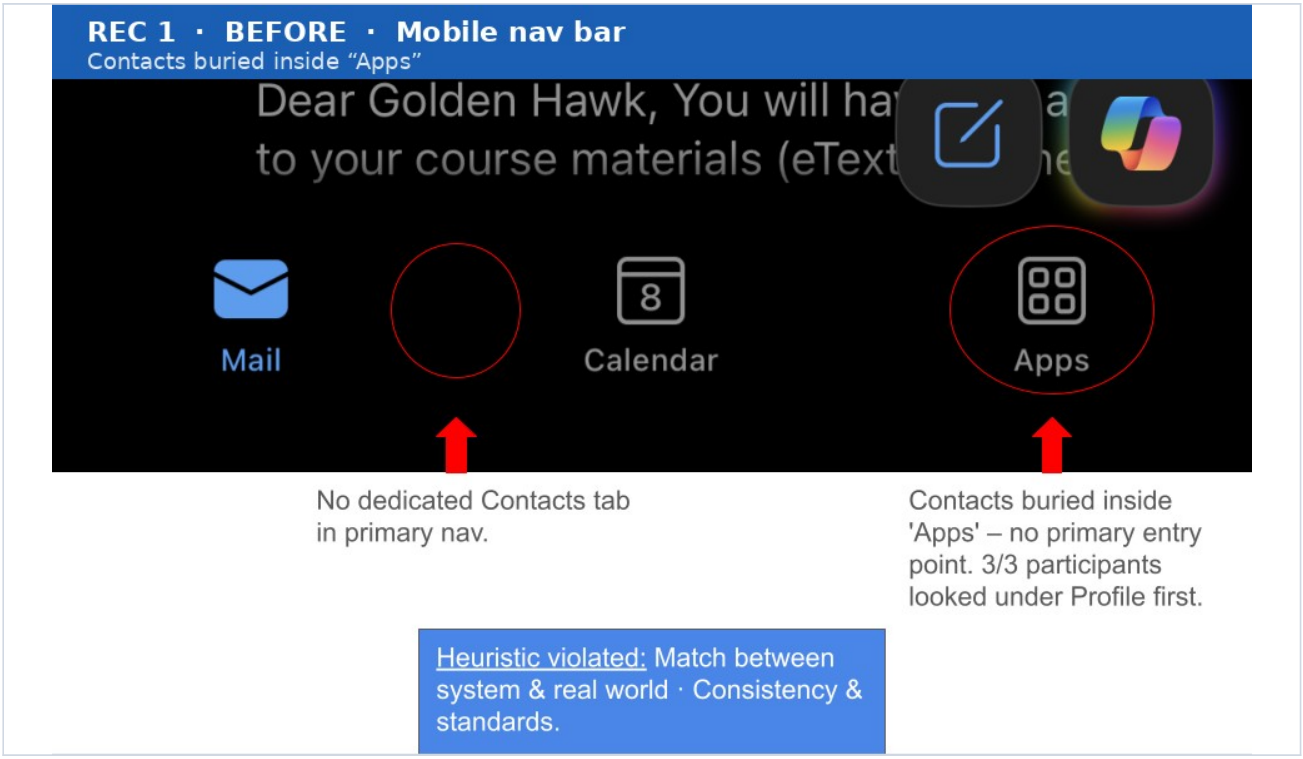
Unify the search experience across platforms

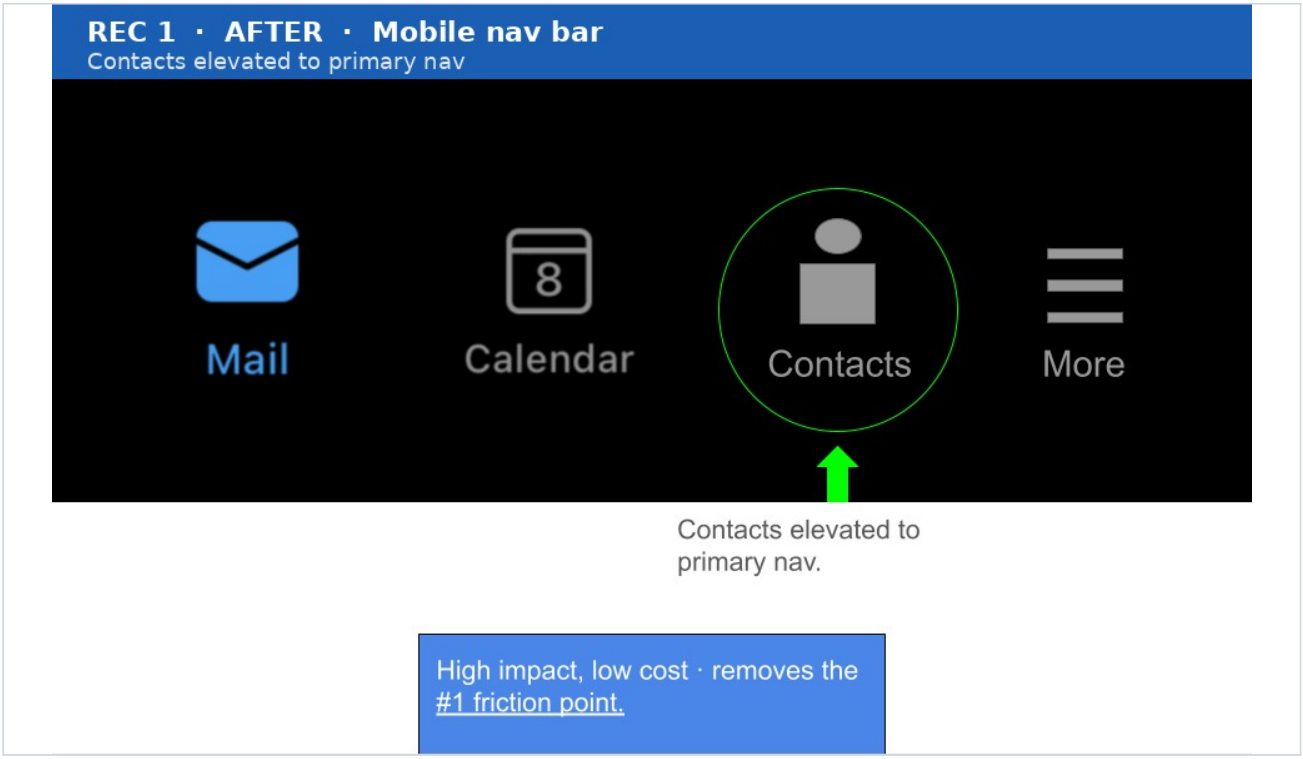
Consistent filters and smart suggestions (frequently emailed contacts, quick filter chips) so users don't relearn search when switching devices.

Visual Design Artifacts

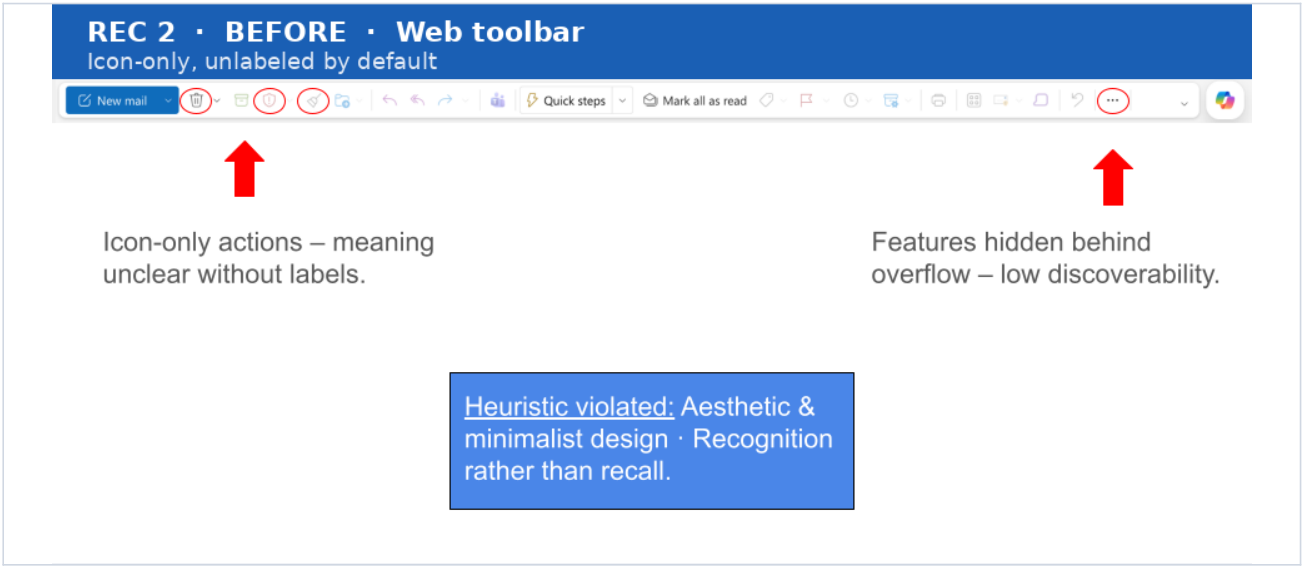
Annotated before / after screens for the two highest-priority recommendations.

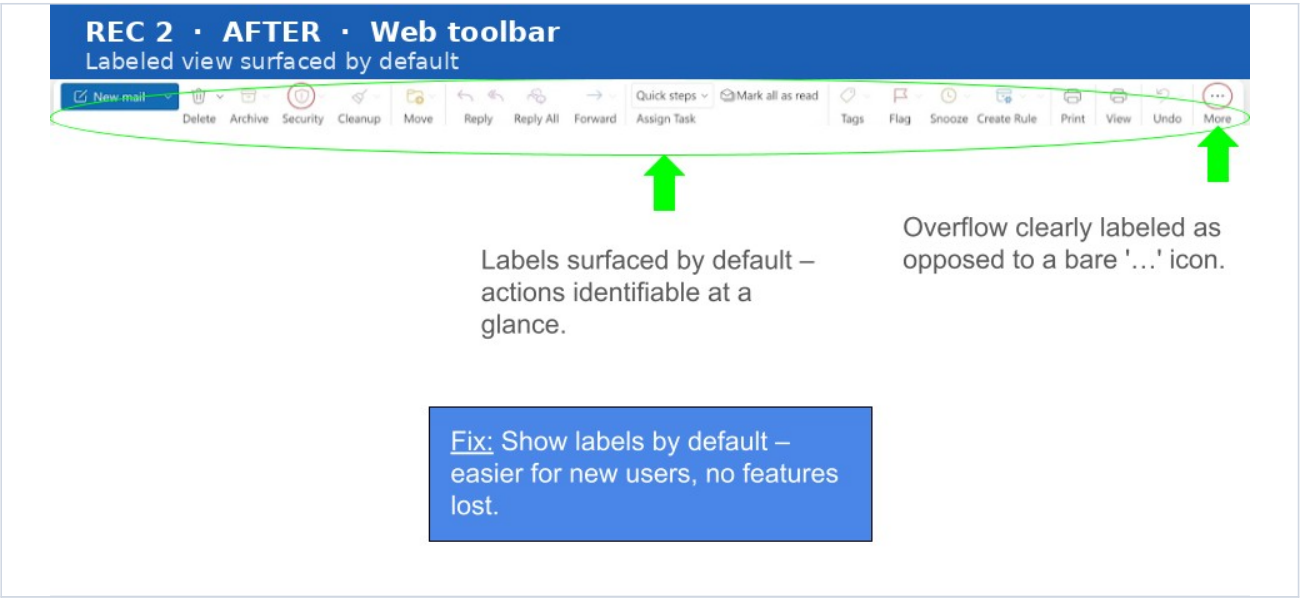
Recommendation 1 — Elevate Contacts to primary navigation (mobile app)





Recommendation 2 — Surface action labels in the default toolbar (Outlook web)





Business & User Impact

- Faster scheduling and email workflows improve day-to-day productivity
- Clearer contact visibility reduces communication errors and wasted time hunting for a buried function
- Lower cognitive load increases feature adoption and satisfaction
- Greater cross-platform consistency lowers relearning costs for multi-device users

Reflection: What I'd Improve Next Time

- Increase the participant sample size and diversity beyond university peers
- Add accessibility and keyboard-navigation testing
- Add lightweight task metrics (time on task, success rate) to complement the qualitative findings
- Prototype and test the proposed fixes with users to close the loop

Conclusion

This study highlighted Outlook's core tension: balancing deep functionality against everyday usability. The most consistent friction wasn't a lack of capability but a lack of discoverability, most visibly in contact management, where every participant failed and every participant proposed the same fix.

Running the sessions myself was the part that taught me the most. Watching people think aloud made it clear how often a design that seems obvious to its makers quietly works against a first-time user, and how much signal lives in a moment of hesitation rather than an outright failure. Sitting with that discomfort, resisting the urge to step in and help, was where the real findings came from.

Turning those observations into solutions was equally valuable. Prioritizing recommendations by impact and implementation cost, rather than simply listing everything that could be improved, forced me to think like someone who has to ship, not just critique. The strongest ideas were the ones the users had already pointed to themselves, which reinforced a lesson I keep returning to: the best solutions usually come from listening closely rather than designing in isolation.

More broadly, this project sharpened how I evaluate any product. Surfacing hidden functions, simplifying default interfaces, and aligning experiences across platforms would make Outlook more approachable for new users

while preserving the power that advanced users rely on. More than anything, it reinforced the kind of design work I find most worthwhile: finding the friction people can't quite name, and making the small changes that let a product feel effortless.

Disclaimer This project was completed as an academic exercise and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Microsoft.