

# User Experience – The Importance of Research

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User experience has become a hot topic in product design, and most companies have started to understand its value. An essential, but often missed, part of creating a good user experience strategy is to involve users early in the design process. A common misconception is to believe that having conversations and workshops together with the customer and key stakeholders (with great insights into the target user groups) is enough to get an understanding of the actual end users. It is easy to take shortcuts and make assumptions about users without validating their actual needs. Market research departments usually have a good understanding of the demographics of the users of a specific product and who they are. But they don't know how users act and behave when using the products and what their actual needs are.

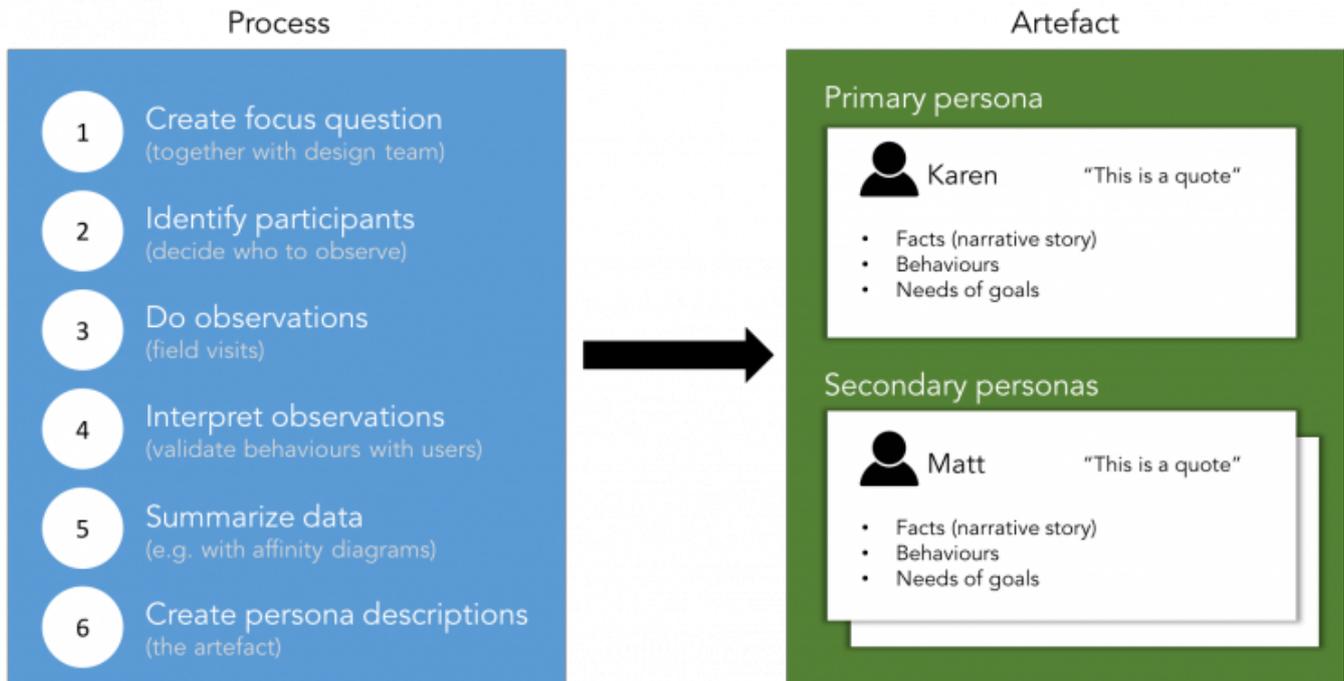
What the users say they want is often different from what they actually need. That is one of the reasons why it is so important to observe the users in the context of use by doing contextual interviews, in order to discover what the users' goals and behaviours are. The context of use describes the users, their tasks and the environment. What software, hardware or other material are they using? Who are the users interacting with? What are the users trying to achieve by using the product? What tasks are the users performing, and what are the sequence of actions?

You might think that it's too time consuming to do contextual inquiries and that it would be more time efficient to bring several users into a focus group session. And indeed, the observation activity itself can be time consuming, but the results of it will help you design better products. Contextual inquiries will help you to create a shared understanding of the **validated** user needs and behaviours, which you would relate back to during the whole development process. It is crucial that personas are not built on assumptions about the users, since if these assumptions are incorrect it will cause serious problems later. It is much more expensive to discover that you've built something that the users don't want later in the process. From user research that I've done, I've found that the most useful input about the users' actual needs and behaviours has been the data collected during observations in the context of use. A lot of details that I didn't discover in focus groups was discovered during observations.

In the figure below, a process of identifying the user needs, key user groups and goals is shown. Notice that several activities in addition to the creation of personas are needed to describe the context of use. Photos of the environment, the creation of key user journeys and

scenarios are useful to build the context of use.

## Process of persona creation



It is easy to fall into the trap of getting your users to become experts in using your product. Of course you should aim for a product that is really easy to use and that your users can master. But keep in mind that the focus should be on creating products that support the users to become really good at their tasks they are doing, not the product itself. For example if your users work in finance their goal might be to become better at analysing the stock market. Then you should aim for creating a product supporting the users in the best way to become better analysts, rather than aim for making them specialists of your product. If your product helps them become better at their job they would choose your product over competitive products.

When I went to a coffee shop today a customer asked an employee for a specific cookie. The employee then answered that they had a new system that didn't support adding the specific cookie into the system. Or at least the coffee shop assistant couldn't find a way to do it. That's a real-life experience where a system doesn't match the user need and user research might have flagged this up as required functionality.

Good user experience has several business benefits and could both increase revenue and reduce costs. By detecting problems early in the design process and identifying what the

users want, you won't end up spending time on functions that users don't need. In the design process it's essential to understand user requirements and good user experience helps you to elicit requirements and to avoid failure caused by misunderstandings. Good user experience also emphasises spending less time on documentation and more time on building working software, as agile development also does.

To finish, I would like you to think of 2 products that you could use for the same task. For example, it could be two different development tools or maybe two different websites for managing your personal finances. If you would have to choose one of them, which one would you choose? Then I would like to think about the reason why you would choose it. It's probably because it makes it easier for you to do your job. And if one of the products makes it easier to do your job, I would guess you're also more willing to pay for that product!

User experience increases the business benefit and helps you design better products by understanding the **context of use**. User research is an essential part of that.

When was the last time you were confused or frustrated by a product? Did you feel stupid or to blame? Would you use the product again?