

The role of user research in the discovery phase

The discovery phase plays a key role in delivering successful software projects. As one of the first steps in product development, the discovery stage lays the groundwork for building a user-centric product. How? By putting your users front and centre.

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User research should be the driving force behind your decision-making. During the discovery phase, you have a chance to dive deep into who your users are, their needs, goals, pains, distinctive characteristics and what drives their behaviour.

All of these insights will help your team make data-backed decisions that will drive forward the development process. Building a successful product starts with understanding and empathising with the people who will be using it daily.

Understanding the discovery phase

The discovery phase is the first step you take towards building a new product. It involves defining the problem, possible solutions, your target audience, technical requirements and unique market value.

One of the main goals of the discovery phase is to gather in-depth information and user feedback that will give the right direction to the project. It also serves to align stakeholder expectations and establish a shared vision for the product among project team members.

What is user research?

User research is the process of studying and uncovering unique characteristics, preferences, pain points and needs of users to inform the design and development of new products. It involves collecting feedback from real users through various qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Testing with real users is key here as user research goes beyond assumptions and guesswork. The main goal of user research is to uncover comprehensive insights about the way different users use the product, what value it brings them, and how it solves their problems.

Through user research, the project team can identify new opportunities, uncover unmet user needs, and discover potential areas for improvement. These insights can guide product strategy and establish key differentiating factors of the product on the market.

It's important to involve users early and often in the process to minimise the risks of building a product that fails to generate market demand and meet user expectations.

Qualitative research methods

Some qualitative research methods include interviews and focus groups. These aim to uncover deep insights into “why” users think and behave the way they do.

One-to-one interviews allow you to delve deep into the thoughts, motivations, and experiences of individual users. It provides rich, descriptive insights and enables you to uncover nuanced details about user needs and pain points.

Focus groups, on the other side, encourage group discussions among participants, generating diverse perspectives and uncovering shared experiences and opinions. This method can reveal social dynamics and collective insights that may not emerge in individual interviews.

Quantitative research methods

Surveys, consumer questionnaires and A/B testing are some of the tools used in quantitative research.

Surveys and questionnaires are particularly useful if you're looking to collect data on a bigger scale. A large sample size is used to uncover statistical insights, quantify user preferences and identify trends and patterns.

A/B testing involves comparing two or more versions of a product or feature to determine which performs better. It helps measure the impact of specific design or functionality changes on user behaviour.

How user research fits into the discovery phase

Creating Personas. User personas are fictional representations of your user groups, created based on research findings during *the discovery phase*. Personas can help you better understand and empathise with your users, by giving them human characteristics.

But personas on their own don't offer any value or insights until they are put into some kind of context. That's why different user scenarios and use cases are developed together with the personas to understand how a product or feature might be used in real-world situations.

User Journey and Empathy Maps. With the findings from your qualitative

or quantitative research, you can visualise the flow and how a user navigates through the product, what are the steps, touchpoints and overall experience (user journey maps). This can help uncover potential limitations, frustrations and areas for improvement.

Empathy maps are also used to help visualise what we already know about the user from our research. It promotes a shared understanding of the user's thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and needs.

Usability Testing and Prototyping. Usability testing involves observing users as they interact with prototypes or early versions of the product. It helps identify usability issues, user frustrations, and areas for improvement. Usability testing can be conducted in-person or remotely to gather qualitative and/or quantitative data.

By testing initial design concepts and prototypes with users, you can gather feedback and insights that validate or challenge your assumptions. This iterative process ensures that the project stays user-centred and reduces the risk of investing in a product that doesn't meet real user needs.

Product Strategy. By collecting, analysing and synthesising user data, you uncover common themes, user needs, expectations and pain points. These insights will help you prioritise features that users want to use.

Conducting in-depth user research during the discovery phase (and throughout the project) is critical for truly understanding and being able to empathise with your target audience. After all, products are built by humans for humans.

User research best practise and tips

- Start early: Don't neglect user research or wait too much. Conducting

user research as early as possible is crucial for identifying user needs and preferences which guide the overall strategy of your product.

- Use a mix of research methods: Depending on the needs of your project, you can utilise a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to gain a holistic understanding of your users. Qualitative methods like interviews and usability testing provide rich insights, while surveys and questionnaires offer quantitative data to support your findings.
- Define clear research objectives: Clearly define your research objectives and align them with your product goals. This ensures that your research efforts are focused and targeted, leading to actionable insights that directly impact your product decisions.
- Involve diverse user groups: Aim for diversity in your sample size to capture a wide range of perspectives. Consider factors such as demographics, behaviour patterns, and user expertise to ensure a comprehensive understanding of your target audience.
- Ask open-ended questions: When conducting user interviews, ask open-ended questions that encourage participants to provide detailed and honest responses. This allows you to delve deeper into their thoughts, experiences, and pain points.
- Be mindful of biases: Be aware of potential biases that may influence your research process and findings. Take steps to minimise confirmation bias, leading questions, and other cognitive biases that can impact the objectivity of your research.
- Iterate and validate findings: Continuously iterate and validate your research findings throughout the discovery phase. Regularly test your assumptions and hypotheses with users to ensure your decisions are grounded in user insights.
- Involve stakeholders: Share research findings and involve stakeholders in the decision-making process. Collaborate with product managers, designers, developers, and other team members to ensure that user research insights are considered and incorporated across the

board.

- Embrace an empathetic mindset: Approach user research with empathy and a genuine desire to understand your users' perspectives. Put yourself in their shoes, listen actively, and be open to uncovering insights that may challenge your assumptions.

Key takeaways

Investing time and resources in conducting proper user research will pay dividends later on. Building a user-centric product will give you a competitive advantage, facilitate business growth and drive conversions.

Key tips to remember are to start early, define clear research objectives, and incorporate diverse user groups. If you can and it makes sense, leverage a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to uncover valuable in-depth insights.

And remember, user research isn't a one-time event. It should be an ongoing process that informs decision-making throughout all phases of the project, not just the discovery. Ultimately, the success of your product hinges on understanding and meeting the needs of your users.

David Stellini is the cofounder at [*All Front*](#).