Meet Dovetail and manage your customer insights, analysis and automation

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Benjamin Humphrey, cofounder and CEO of Dovetail about data analysis, creating a customer insights hub, working with Canva and creating an "office-first" culture.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Dovetail started when I was working with a researcher on a diary study project at Atlassian, which involved a unique and truly time-consuming data analysis process.

As part of the diary study, participants were asked to write journal entries regularly. After collecting the journal entries, the researcher I was working with printed them out in order to have physical copies of the data. In order to identify common themes or specific patterns within the data, she manually highlighted relevant content in each journal entry.

The highlighted content from all the journal entries was then manually mapped onto a whiteboard. But while the diary study itself only took two weeks, the process around representing and analysing the data took around three months. I thought to myself, there has got to be a better and faster way of collecting, storing, accessing and using customer research, and I recognised that there was a huge gap in good software for researchers.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

Dovetail is a software company that helps product teams turn customer research and user feedback into actionable insights. We've created a new category of 'customer insights hub' software, helping teams leverage insights to improve their products and services.

The companies that are likely to see the value in Dovetail's software are those that have a high volume of data generated from multiple sources, and those that want to centralise that data, and democratise it so that it's possible to grant access to different teams easily. They may also be companies that do a lot of customer research and want to ensure they are getting the biggest bang for their buck when it comes to that research - there's no point in investing in it if no one can see it, or if it becomes a 'one and done' and gets stored away somewhere that isn't accessible.

Design platform Canva is a great example. The company is highly invested in conducting user research and uses this data to define its product and uncover new innovation opportunities. Before it launched its dedicated Design Research team in 2020, designers and PMs would conduct ad-hoc research, like customer interviews, on their own. They'd focus on getting information and making decisions from the insights, but not much thought went towards where video recordings, transcripts, and findings reports lived afterward. This made it challenging to track down previous research or understand where findings had come from. New starters struggled with discovering past research and often found out about previous research reports through word-of-mouth.

Canva's product team is now using Dovetail to store its moderated research recordings and transcripts, creating transcriptions quickly, and

tagging their data to find emerging themes and analyse that data.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

I started Dovetail solo in 2016, and in 2017 I convinced my old Atlassian colleague Bradley Ayers to join me full-time, not least of all because of his impressive engineering background.

The first version of our product was an email and SMS interceptive surveying tool where you would set up a schedule with your research participants. It was effectively a diary study tool that evolved into a user research platform, which eventually became a knowledge platform.

After that, we pivoted to create a new version of Dovetail to transform raw data into insights. Anyone, including researchers, designers, product managers, support people, and marketers, use it. We currently have over 3,800 paying customers and more than 100,000 users around the globe.

Tell us about the working culture at Dovetail

We're an 'office-first' working culture. While we encourage flexibility and our team has the freedom to work remotely if that suits them best, we recognise that the impact of remote work and lack of social interaction on mental health is often overlooked. Humans are social creatures, and the workplace is one of the strongest communities we have in society. At Dovetail, pretty much everybody has lunch at the same time across two of our farmhouse-style tables. The average age in our team is 30 and a lot of people live close to the office. It's a very social vibe, as we have a coffee machine, stocked fridges and a couple of beer taps. We also do workshops, whiteboard sessions, brainstorms and lots of catered events, such as an LGBTQ+ panel discussion followed up with live drag bingo.

How are you funded?

Brad and I didn't raise money for nearly two and a half years because we had enough savings thanks to our previous jobs at Atlassian, so that was a lucky break.

In January 2022, we secured our $63M Series A led by *Accel*.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

In the early days, we had challenges around not being tight enough in our values and culture interviews. We learned the hard way the cost of having someone that isn't the best cultural fit. It can bring the whole company down and really tank morale if you even have a few negative people. So after making that mistake, we've really tightened up our interview process and multiple people from leadership interview every person that joins Dovetail, which has been really positive.

How does Dovetail answer an unmet need?

The world will become better when more organisations are able to embrace a customer-centric mindset. True customer-centricity produces higher quality products and services, which have the power to meaningfully improve people's lives. There are obvious impactful products - think about a Cochlear implant that helps children and adults hear for the first time. However, there are also everyday crowd-pleasers like our customer Canva, which delights and inspires its customers to design and innovate.

The path to customer-centricity begins with world-class research—and Dovetail is uniquely positioned to help with this. Through the power of

customer research, we are helping our customers create better products and experiences for users to engage with, and better services for the public to rely on. The products we build help organisations understand their customers better. And customer understanding is simply a means to an end—the end is creating better things.

What's in store for the future?

In the near term, we will use AI to speed up analysis and reduce bias. Large language models are unparalleled in their ability to hold and interpret data. We are looking to harness this potential to give companies a broader and more unbiased perspective of their customers.

Currently, we're testing an AI-powered feature that enables our users to automatically cluster highlights into themes on a canvas view. Soon, they'll also be able to summarise data from various sources. For example, simplify a lengthy support conversation or turn an hour-long customer interview transcript into a few bullet points.

Our vision extends beyond simply speeding up workflows. In the future, AI will automatically create draft insights, find related insights, provide increased accuracy for automatic classification, and allow companies to quickly search your insights hub and answer questions about their customers.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

The main thing in the early days: you need to get in there and get stuff done. I think many founders and maybe investors in early-stage companies spend too much time strategising. Dovetail is a real success story, but until very recently, we never had a business plan, or a pitch deck, a budget or an annual operating plan. We invested our time wholly

in product development.

In comparison, I see founders who haven't got a product, but yet they've put together a detailed annual operating plan complete with expenses down to the smallest detail. To me, that level of detail isn't really going to matter if you don't have a product because without a product, effectively, you don't have a business.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

Ninety-three per cent of our customers are overseas and there's always a lot of activity overnight in our _San Francisco_ office. At 8am I walk to our office, and by 9am we often have an 'all hands' meeting, where I'll do a founder update, and where we may have a guest speaker, or internal staff presenting to the rest of the company.

Every three weeks I have an executive coaching session with Ed Batista, who used to be a lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

The rest of the day may consist of my founder check-ins with the product teams, or workshops with our creative and content teams, and the marketing team.

For me, one of the key things is lots of sleep. I have invested in things like dark bedroom shutters and ear plugs, and I try to go to sleep at the same time every day.

Benjamin Humphrey is cofounder and CEO of _Dovetail._