Jobs-to-be-done at scale: Disrupting the status quo with customer focus

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Abstract

This paper shows how Stepstone leveraged the Jobs-to-be-done (JTBD) framework to achieve customer focus at scale. Transformations typically span a decade and often fall short of initial goals. In under three years, however, Stepstone successfully ingrained a strong customer-focused mindset throughout the organisation, with tangible contributions to its product pipeline. Four phases were critical. First, recognising the need for change, setting a vision and getting senior leadership in touch with JBTD was critical. Secondly, an extensive customer research project identifying opportunities was conducted; in-depth qualitative research uncovered Jobs-to-be-done and unmet user needs and a large sample size survey quantified these unmet needs. Thirdly, internal JTBD champions in the product and research departments were trained on the insights and provided with tools to apply them in workshops across the organisation. Finally, JTBD insights were integrated into regular product development. Stepstone is on course for shifting the mindset from inside-out (ie a technology-driven perspective focused on optimising and scaling existing solutions) to an outside-in viewpoint (ie a focus on unmet user needs in the market and user-focused growth and innovation).

REVIVING AN INDUSTRY: INNOVATION TO DISRUPT INCUMBENTS

Stepstone is a leading global player in the recruitment and employment classifieds sector, with double-digit growth over the past two decades. A few incumbents dominate this market, and competition focuses on performance of existing capabilities. Such an environment fosters incremental product development, making game-changing growth unlikely. Incumbents are often complacent, and the threat of low-end disruption is minimal, reducing the incentive to innovate.[1]

We characterise this market tendency as 'inside-out', ie maximising operations and efficiency of existing capabilities. Growth is believed to come from within, and optimising the current business model becomes the organisational imperative. To break this deadlock and disrupt the industry, Stepstone made a strategic decision to leverage its strong incumbent position (see Figure 1). To reach its goals and desired competitive differentiation, the company sought an 'outside-in' approach: to find innovation opportunities by starting with unmet user needs and working back towards the solution.

Why and how did Stepstone recognise the need for change?

Stepstone's Product business-to-consumer (B2C) organisation was formed over three years ago. This inside-out approach worked very well with the existing systems and 200 per cent growth was achieved within two years. How could this growth continue? The existing inside-out approach is limited. How could the product organisation drive continued growth for the coming three to five years? In the words of Florin Ciontu: 'You cannot be a leading product organisation and ensure long-term success without having both engines — innovation [the outside-in approach] and scale [the inside-out approach] — operating well and equally strong.'

Industries where incumbent players have a strong competitive moat
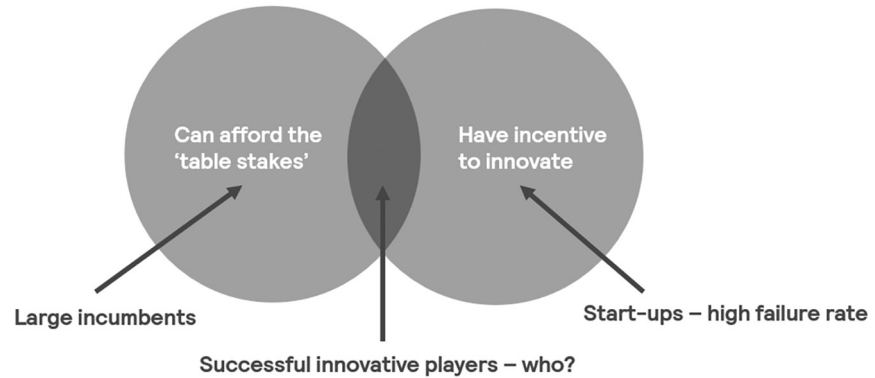

Figure 1 Incumbents with no incentive to innovate

JOBS-TO-BE-DONE: A FRAMEWORK FOR HUMAN-CENTRED INNOVATION

There are many user-focused innovation approaches: design thinking, personas and ethnography, to name a few. They all seek to create empathy for customers and then design with them in mind. There are two general limitations with these methods: (a) they are often only applied within a department or discipline, that is, marketing has its own personas different from sales; and (b) as with design thinking, there is no quantitative or data element to the process. In contrast, the Jobs-to-be-done (JTBD) framework combines two features, making it an ideal candidate for user focus at scale. It is not a framework tied to a specific silo or discipline and it is heavily reliant on data.

For example, user personas are often seen as being too fluffy, intangible, insufficiently based on facts and data and therefore ephemeral and not universally accepted. While initially conceived to be based on research and data, the reality of personas remains often anecdotal and not evidence-based. Buyer personas are based on demographics rather than on user needs and pain points. As a result, they are usually of limited use for user

experience (UX) and design. Developers prefer user stories focusing on technical functionalities.

These approaches of 'user focus' also tend to be driven by a single discipline and its specific purpose. They fail to align cross-functionally, company-wide, and their impact often fails to extend to other disciplines.

Stepstone needed a 'discipline agnostic' approach with the potential to align all departments involved in product development on the user: a data-based approach based on real user research; an approach that does not rely solely on qualitative user insights, but also provides the quantitative evidence that business requires; and an approach that combines both high-level vision and purpose and more granular user goals and tasks. Stepstone found the JTBD framework to be just this approach.

While JTBD is not immune to the fate of being applied without user evidence, it is inherently cross-functional because it disregards any solution-oriented limitations. Thus, JTBD brings the customer into the company, aligns all disciplines on the user, and thus achieves 'outside-in' innovation. This methodology pinpoints

unmet needs in the market and reveals what customers really want: to get something accomplished. It posits that they do not desire products, services or features themselves but instead 'hire' and 'fire' these solutions to accomplish specific jobs.[2] A 'job' can be a goal, task, or purpose that someone aims to achieve.

JTBD has its roots in business practices dating back to 1960, when Theodore Levitt, a Harvard Business School professor, wrote the groundbreaking article 'Marketing Myopia',[3] introducing elements of JTBD thinking. Later, Peter Drucker coined the term 'Jobs-to-be-done'.

In his book 'Marketing Imagination', Theodore Levitt illustrated the core idea of JTBD with a quote attributed to Leo McGivena: 'People don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole!'.[4] Rather than focusing on an existing offering (a drill), growth opportunities come from shifting attention to the outcomes people seek (a hole). This sentiment summarises the inside-out (organisation's point of view) versus the outside-in (customer view) perspective succinctly.

Although Levitt never used the phrase 'jobs to be done' himself, his work was the inspiration for the perspective shift with JTBD. JTBD moves attention away from technology and solutions as a starting point towards what the customer wants to achieve. For example, people use Netflix to relax and unwind after work; the same 'job' could be achieved by a walk in the park, or meeting friends in a pub. Thus, from a JTBD perspective, Netflix competes with those other means of relaxing.

The key benefit of the JTBD framework is that it liberates innovators from the constraints of existing solutions, offering a broader set of possibilities. Consider the fate of Kodak: improving the quality or speed of developing printed photographs became irrelevant when digital photography better fulfilled the job of capturing memories. Incremental product improvements in its film offerings were insignificant against disruptive market forces.

JTBD also explains why radical, technology-driven innovations often fail. Customers are not inherently interested in groundbreaking technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), for instance; they care about achieving their jobs. While companies may emphasise new technologies, features and solutions, JTBD demonstrates why such messages often fail to resonate with the broader market.

The JTBD framework enables innovators to systematically and repeatedly identify human-centred opportunities. The process begins by focusing on a core job that customers are trying to accomplish. The appropriate unit of analysis, then, is the job, not the customer *per se*.[5] Through qualitative and quantitative research, the JTBD framework allows innovators to isolate the critical factors in understanding customer needs; an otherwise elusive endeavour that is often characterised as the 'fuzzy front end of innovation'. JTBD identifies the right problems to solve, ensuring a strong differentiated product-market fit and thereby accelerating adoption in the market.

ACTIVATING JTBD AT SCALE

From the beginning, it was clear that rolling out a customer-centric approach at Stepstone based on JTBD would be a transformational challenge. Merely understanding the methodology and interpreting results were not enough; Stepstone needed to embed JTBD knowledge across the product organisation so that teams could internalise an outside-in view of customer needs. Doing so avoided the common pitfall of creating slides that gather virtual dust, and methodologies

used half-heartedly by only a few individuals; often seen when working with external agencies and consultancies.

The approach to activating human-centred innovation through JTBD involved several distinct phases.

Recognising the need for change: The vision

Commercial organisations operate under intense growth imperatives. Improving results quarter by quarter becomes the driving motivation, often leading to short-term thinking while reinforcing an inside-out mindset. Within this environment, identifying the need for change towards an outside-in perspective is not obvious and requires longer-term strategies.

In the case of Stepstone, Florin Ciontu spelled out explicitly the need for the organisation not only to excel in the short term but also plan for the next three to five years.

The vision was to have a high-performing, ambidextrous organisation,[6] with the ability to both *exploit* existing capabilities and at the same time *explore* future possibilities for innovation. For this, Stepstone had to build out the ability to perform outside-in innovation in addition to inside-out optimisation.

JTBD offers a unique way to rethink how companies provide value to their customers, and it does so in a systematic and repeatable manner. Given the data-centric culture of modern businesses, transformation works best when innovation opportunities are backed by data. This is a crucial requirement for balancing the protection of the core business while investing in innovation.

Additionally, any newly introduced innovation framework had to be accessible and scalable within an organisation comprising over 50 product teams.

The JTBD framework met all of these requirements: 'We have found JTBD an excellent framework to develop real customer insight and guide innovation at scale', said Florin Ciontu.

Training a core group: The early advocates

To kick off the JTBD thinking within the organisation, Stepstone trained a small core group of employees in the JTBD framework. They first reached out to Jim Kalbach, author of the 'JTBD Playbook',[7] for an initial workshop designed to equip participants with the skills needed to drive the framework internally. These training sessions also served as a rallying cry for the transformation, creating a sense of shared purpose and commitment. It is important to have skilled champions on the ground before scaling new human-centred innovation practices.

This first JTBD training took place in June and July 2022 with representatives from the B2C Product, UX Leads and Product Operations departments. This composition of the core group was critical: product managers were included because of their decision-making function within the product organisation and UX roles because they would be responsible for executing future JTBD research and applying it.

The training started with an intro session hosted by Jim Kalbach to establish awareness of JTBD. Jim explained the JTBD framework and presented examples demonstrating how JTBD can be used to find human-centred opportunities and how it can be practically applied to innovate.

Central to the training were two JTBD workshops with Jim Kalbach, in the format of two 2.5-hour-long remote sessions with breakout groups. The 23 attendees were mostly product managers but also four design managers and one research manager. The workshops trained the core techniques from JTBD with several

hands-on exercises to bring the theory to life and train such practical skills as:

- *Scoping and finding jobs:* How to scope your JTBD landscape and then conduct research.
- *Formulating job statements:* How to write job statements in the JTBD language (JTBD has grammatical rules just like any other language).
- *Creating a job map:* How to build a basic job map related to Stepstone (job maps are a primary tool in JTBD to understand how the job process unfolds).
- *Finding opportunities:* How to use JTBD to spot opportunities and integrate findings into your roadmap.

Everyone was supposed to read Jim Kalbach's 'JTBD Playbook' before the workshops.

Conducting the research: Identifying and quantifying unmet customer needs

The next big step was to create the data basis for the transformational change.

Stepstone needed reliable customer research about the JTBD of its users, the job seekers, with quantified unmet market needs; the direct opportunities for innovation.

With Vendbridge, a Swiss-based consultancy with more than 15 years of experience in applying JTBD, Stepstone found a partner with a hands-on method to achieve this. Vendbridge had developed a JTBD application methodology in close cooperation with F-1000 companies, namely, the customer-focused innovation (CFI) approach to make JTBD actionable. The ambition of CFI is to turn customer insights into concrete opportunities, and this in four stages (Figure 2).

Frame

The Frame phase defines the business intention, selects the target group, and establishes an initial JTBD hypothesis. To achieve this, a tool called the JTBD hierarchy (Figure 3) was used. The JTBD hierarchy organises the 'jobs' of job performers in a hierarchical way similar to a Maslow pyramid. It is useful to create an internal
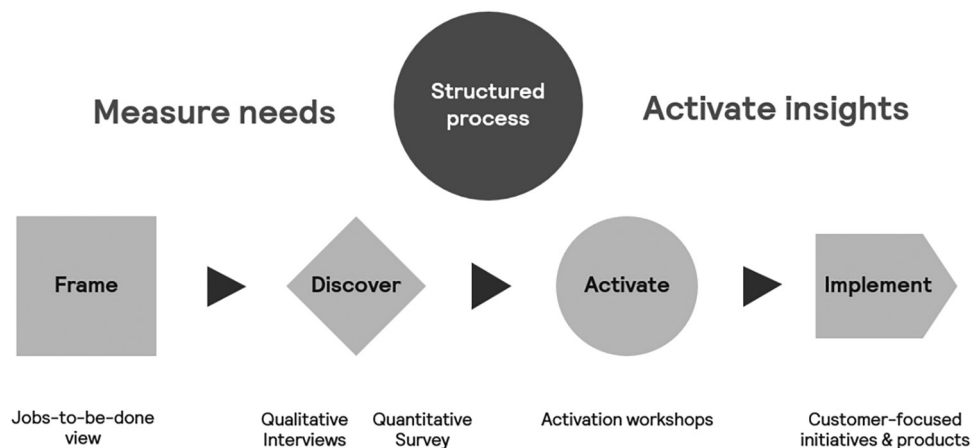

Figure 2 The customer-focused innovation process (CFI)

hypothesis of the different jobs in play, to align the altitude and breadth of the JTBD, and to navigate through the Discover phase. In the experience of many practitioners, JTBD is notoriously hard to scope, as the question *why?* always seems to reveal another higher-level job. The JTBD hierarchy allows a clear framing of a hypothesis which can later be challenged by the actual people who want to get that job done.

Two primary groups of job performers were identified: individuals who occasionally browse the job market without actively looking for a new job (job browsers) and those actively seeking new employment (active job seekers). Job browsers want to keep an eye on the job market (Focus Job 1), while job seekers are actively looking for a new job (Focus Job 2).

The JTBD hierarchy has three levels: a focus job in the middle, higher-level jobs above it and job steps describing how the focus job gets done below. Ideally, there is only one focus job per target group and the six to eight steps follow a logical sequence. JTBD does not map the customer journey with a specific offering, but rather how customers achieve their goals independent of a solution step by step. For instance, 'do a search on the website' is not a job step, but 'find open positions' is.

Discover

The Discover phase in CFI has two distinctive parts, consisting of qualitative and quantitative research (see Figure 4). In the first part, trained interviewers perform primary research through qualitative interviews with the target groups to validate the JTBD hierarchy and to extract insights. In total, over 50 qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with active job seekers and job browsers.

Figure 3   The Stepstone JTBD hierarchy

Figure 4   The Stepstone JTBD research

The JTBD hierarchy serves as a guide to conduct the interviews.

Special questioning techniques extract and collect so-called job metrics, the criteria customers use to evaluate their success in completing their job. The distinction between job steps and job metrics is important. If the job steps describe how the job gets done from a functional standpoint — getting from point A to point B — the job metrics reflect how well the job performer got the job done.

Job metrics are a key element of CFI and are crucial to make JTBD actionable and measurable. A job metric is a solution-free customer need with a strict syntax to ensure that they are concrete, measurable and leave as little room for interpretation as possible. In this way, teams avoid orienting to generic customer needs like 'quality' or 'ease of use' and instead have very granular and specific targets to guide solution creation and development. Here is an example of a job metric that was mentioned by active job seekers: 'To know as precisely as possible what salary to ask for in a job negotiation, not too low, not too high.'

Removing any reference to technology is critical in gaining the core benefit of the JTBD framework. Capturing and formulating job metrics in a consistent manner allows them to be compared with one another and ranked quantitatively in terms of how well job performers can achieve those outcomes. In Stepstone's case, over 200 job metrics were identified.

In the second part of the Discover phase, each job metric is rated by the target group along two dimensions: importance, the relative significance of each metric while getting the core job done, and fulfilment, how well current solutions help them attain that measure of success. Figure 5 shows an example of a job metric.

Surveying a large enough group of people in the target groups allows to prioritise job metrics based on statistically significant data, giving not only precision to the result but also instilling confidence in the team. In the case of Stepstone, the survey was done anonymously, which is best practice, with over 9,000 people — either job seekers or job browsers — in Stepstone's two main markets, the UK and Germany. This process identified three distinct sets of needs: *pain points*, or highly relevant but unmet job metrics; *essentials*, or highly important but already fulfilled job metrics; and other, less relevant job metrics. The pain points make it
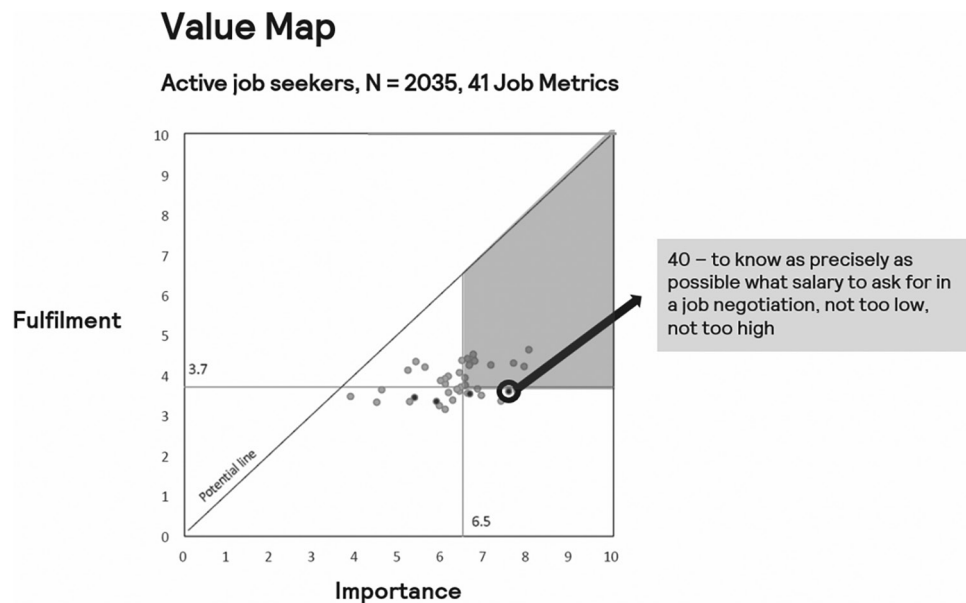
Value Map

Active job seekers, N = 2035, 41 Job Metrics

Figure 5   Example of a value map with high-opportunity job metric

possible to create innovative concepts to differentiate value, while the essentials are must-have needs to be fulfilled.

Stepstone has summarised the JTBD insights in a journey map with the phases of the job seeker journey, displaying top, medium and low-priority job metrics. Several workshops with the Stepstone leadership team were conducted with this job journey and product managers and UX use it frequently in their daily work.

To communicate the results in an effective and illustrative way Vendbridge created *fever curves*. Each job metric and its respective importance and fulfilment ratings are mapped in a sequential flow along the job journey on a fever curve (shown in Figure 6). This reveals the biggest opportunities for innovation visually: the area where the gap between importance and fulfilment is largest. In Figure 6, this is indicated by the ovals. The interview process is the job-seeker phase with the highest importance and lowest fulfilment. Job seekers want to be less nervous in the job interview, remember the answers and after the interview know how it went.

When enough data are generated, the insights are activated in the organisation and go into creation and implementation. In CFI, these phases are called *spin* and *develop*, and are an integral part to avoid results ending up in a drawer. Effective activation and evangelisation of the JTBD insights within the organisation is necessary to achieve true transformational change. This can ideally be achieved via working on real projects rather than just communicating results.

Activating the insights: The JTBD activation team and the workshops

Stepstone established a JTBD activation team with internal trainers, an important success factor for the activation phase. The JTBD activation team consisted of members of product and research teams, product operations and product comms.

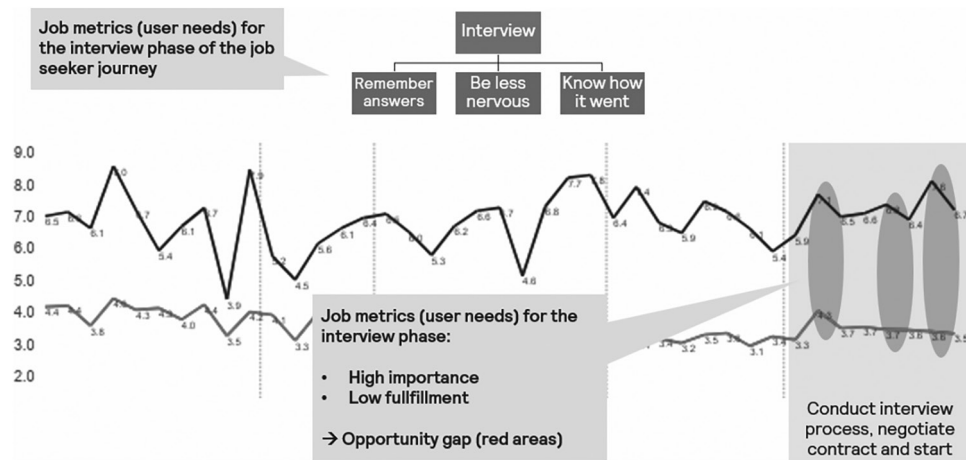How to activate a whole product department with more than 100 people in

Figure 6   Example of a fever curve

JTBD? Stepstone decided to roll out the training by portfolio (ie product area), using a combined approach of a tailored presentation of the JTBD research and two hands-on workshops where people would work with the job metrics and apply them to their portfolios. To focus the participants on the highest opportunities, only the top-priority job metrics were used in the workshops. The workshop participants were cross-functional from one portfolio. Thus, the workshop activities were highly relevant and cross-functional collaboration within a single portfolio was enhanced.

The JTBD training took place in May and June 2023, over a period of seven weeks. The inception phase with leadership and the train-the-trainer sessions was held in person in London, with Vendbridge, scheduled over two weeks. The portfolio training (by product area) took place over five weeks, remotely. Each workshop lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Every member of the product team was trained for approximately 4.5 hours in total. We trained 120 people from B2C Product, with an average of 30 people attending the intro presentation (delivered by Vendbridge) and an average of 16 people in each workshop (moderated by the internal Stepstone trainers).

Training a core group ensures that there are internal champions who deeply understand the JTBD framework and results and can advocate for its adoption across the organisation. These trained individuals can then apply JTBD principles in their daily work, fostering a culture of customer-centric innovation. Having a trained core group also helps to maintain the integrity and quality of the JTBD implementation. These individuals ensure that the methodology is applied correctly and consistently to ensure its effectiveness. The core group's involvement also promotes cross-functional collaboration. By including product managers, researchers and UX designers, Stepstone ensured that different disciplines were part of the JTBD activation.

Vendbridge conducted in-person 'role model' presentations and workshops with leadership and with the future trainers from the product and research departments, supported by a Q&A session for the trainers. Following this, the remote portfolio training presentation (delivered by Vendbridge) and two remote Mural workshops (planned and moderated by Sabrina and internal trainers) were prepared and scheduled (see Figures 7 and 8). For moderating the workshops, trainers

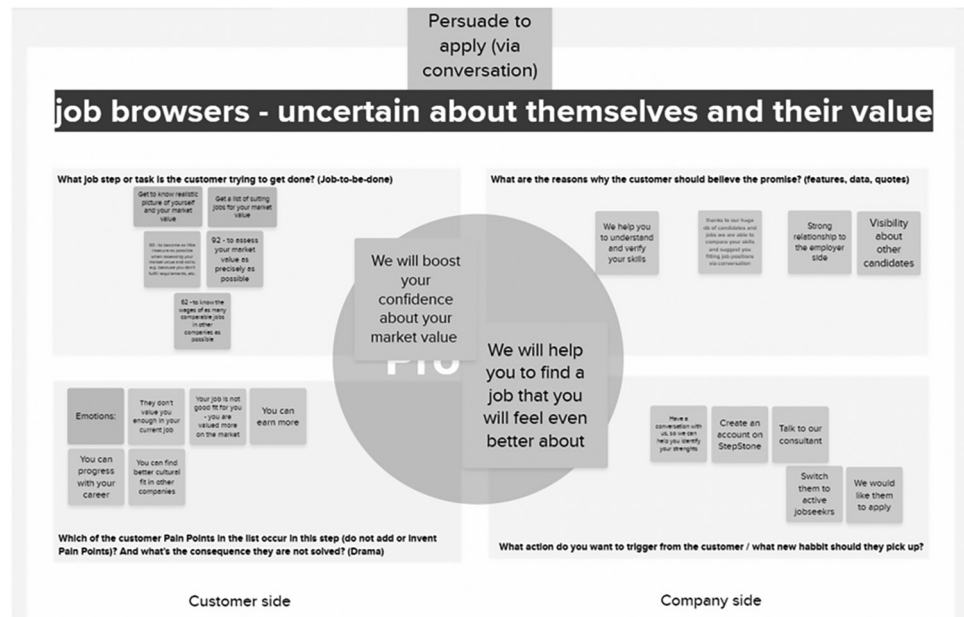*Figure 7   The pain point matching and value proposition workshops*

Figure 8   Example workshop value proposition

always worked in pairs, with someone from the product team working in concert with someone from research. The workshop participants included product directors, product managers, lead engineers, UX designers, UX researchers and business analysts.

The first workshop was the pain matching workshop, in which participants matched the job metrics to their ongoing product initiatives to determine whether these initiatives actually addressed user pain points. The results were eye-opening, helping product managers

to see the direct relevance and prioritisation of their work from the customer's view.

The second workshop was the value proposition canvas workshop, in which participants ideated value propositions for key upcoming initiatives based on the insights.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive; participants had fun and were very engaged.

Getting a broad understanding and buy-in was necessary for the adoption of JTBD as a lever for customer-centred transformation. Without active uptake of both the framework, in general, and the research study results, in particular, the effort would not scale. The workshops were a key step in anchoring JTBD. They not only helped in applying the insights but also ensured that the knowledge gained from the research was used in the organisation's product development processes.

Integrating JTBD into development: Ongoing customer-centricity

Once teams turn back to solution development, there is a common tendency to revert back to an inside-out view. A technology-centred perspective comes to the foreground of team thinking and the understanding of customer needs gained through research gets ignored.

To counter this tendency, the JTBD activation team at Stepstone did not stop their work, but rather continued evangelising the JTBD approach with internal articles (see Figure 9) and presentations, as well as hosting webinars and speaking at conferences, for example at the BAD Conference London, November 2023, where Sabrina Duda's presentation, 'Jobs-to-be-done: A framework for product discovery influenced by behavioural design', highlighted the critical role of product discovery within the design process, with a focus on the Stepstone Group's implementation of the JTBD framework.
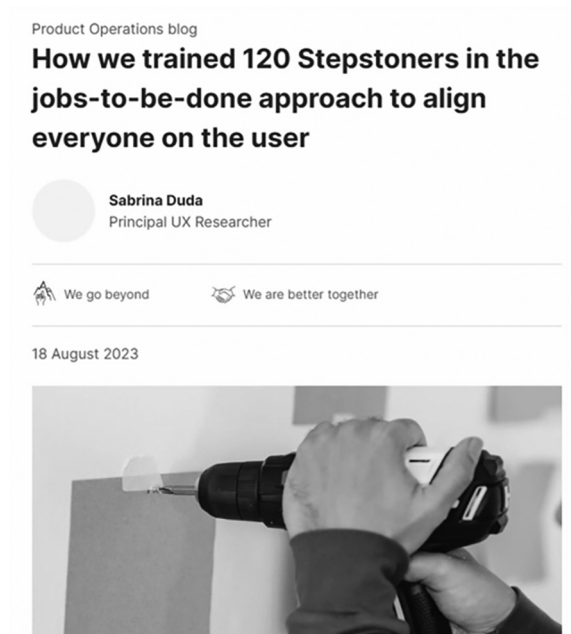

Figure 9   Internal activation in Stepnews article

Since moving from the activation phase to the enablement phase, the JTBD activation team has been enlarged and renamed, and is now known as the JTBD enablement team. With its JTBD ambassadors, the renamed team acts as a knowledge hub, and the advocacy and training for JTBD continues. Constant awareness and exposure to the JTBD framework are necessary to keep the momentum going. Now, JTBD is a required competency for anyone in Stepstone's product team.

The product managers at Stepstone applied the job metrics to their portfolio and either conducted further JTBD research, when they needed more detailed job metrics for their product area, or conducted design sprints to ideate solutions to address the highest opportunity pain points. As Florin Ciontu commented: 'In practice, JTBD is very complex. There are hundreds of job metrics, but each of our product managers need to adapt it to their area and look into users' micro jobs.'

Stepstone Product Director Lawrence Hardy developed a repeatable discovery and delivery process. Individual product managers are using JTBD to define the problem space in their product area for one specific problem; they call this *micro* JTBD. To date, six micro JTBD studies have been completed to explore the problem space, followed by nine design sprints to explore the solution space. Every initiative and innovation at Stepstone must include a link to JTBD and the job metrics. This helps focus product teams during development and ensures that customer-centric thinking is pervasive in development cycles.

The biggest benefits of JTBD from a user researcher's point of view:

- JTBD removes the guesswork about the user by focusing on users' goals (jobs). This makes a lot more sense than just having empathy with users. Users don't want (only) empathy, they want help in getting their jobs done.
- JTBD is solution agnostic; it describes the problem space without thinking about solutions.
- JTBD has long-term validity, because the goals of users tend not to change quickly.
- JTBD also includes higher-level goals like visions, aspirations and emotional needs.

BUSINESS OUTCOMES: JTBD IN ACTION

From the JTBD activation phase in the middle of 2023 until the time of writing, in the middle of 2024, Stepstone has put three innovative products on the market, solving key user pains based on JTBD: the cover-letter generator, the interviewer and the work-life guide.

The virtual interviewer (see Figure 10), a solution for job seekers based on JTBD, has a current NPS score of 70, and 60 per cent of users would strongly agree to track all interviews with this tool.

In 2024 Stepstone will leverage JTBD and AI for innovation. In terms of return on investment, Stepstone will have the first business outcomes by mid/end-2024.

SCALING JTBD FROM THE TOP DOWN AND BOTTOM UP

Our recommendation for a successful implementation of the JTBD framework is a two-pronged approach: top-down commitment and bottom-up mobilisation.

A clear vision at the leadership level has to initiate the transformation, with senior management buy-in and a long-term perspective. This top-down adoption was accelerated by partnering with external specialised consultants (Vendbridge, Jim Kalbach) who brought a level of expertise,
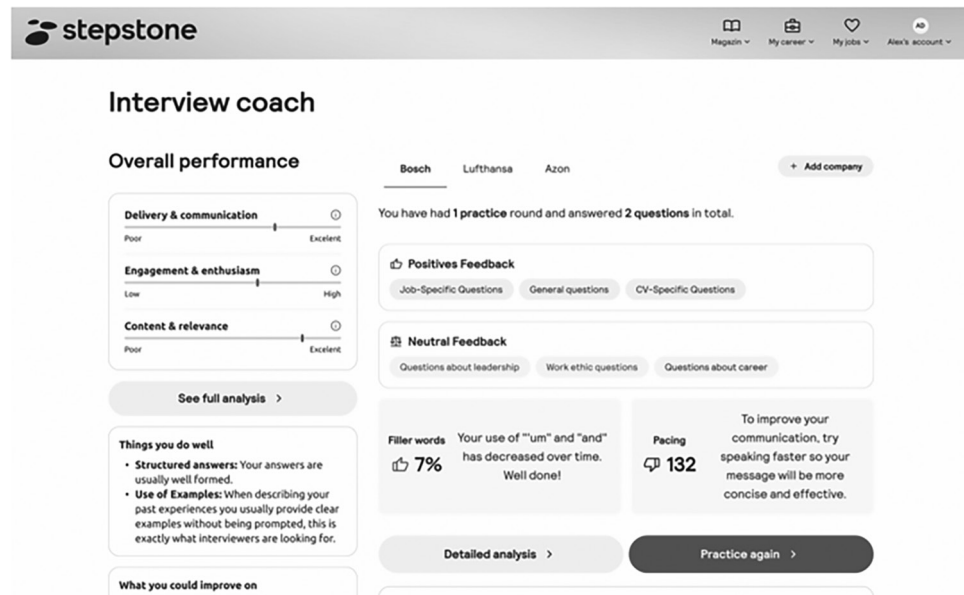
Figure 10   The virtual interviewer

rigour and consistency that internal resources alone might not achieve.

From the bottom up, an internal JTBD activation team, internal trainers and ambassadors can anchor the JTBD mindset within the organisation. External research or training alone is not sufficient to achieve long-term success. Internal advocates and sustained internal communications and activities are necessary. JTBD insights must be integrated into the normal product development processes for long-term impact.

The impact of JTBD at Stepstone has been transformative. The framework has fundamentally shifted the company's approach to understanding and meeting customer needs and has driven the development of three innovative products.

In the words of Beat Walther, from Vendbridge: 'In addition to strong leadership from the top, the fact-based clarity of the unmet needs in the market were a decisive factor to make this transformational shift possible'.

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