Problem Statements & Research Questions

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Who's Involved with Writing These

Preparing for a successful research study means writing an effective problem statement and research question. This takes involvement from multiple team members. At the least, it will involve the Product Manager/Owner and UX Researcher. Other key people to involve as appropriate include the Product Director, Product Designer, or Business Process Stakeholder (like Legal Affairs or Operations).

Problem Statements

Every research study should align with an effort the company is making to solve problems with the internal delivery or customer experience of services.

It is very important to have a standalone, clear problem statement. Clear problem statements contain information that explains *how we know this is a problem*. This is observable data.

- Examples of observable data include: metrics on customer service requests, analytics on user behavior in the system, or a verified trend in the content of customer reviews.

A problem statement does not include a solution. Sloppy problem/solution statements shut down creative thinking, deter innovation, and set the study up to produce results that are redundant to knowledge we already have.

- Clear Problem Statement Example: *The Call Center has seen an 40% increase in calls relating to trouble signing in to the mobile application in the last 6 weeks.*
- Sloppy Problem Statement Example: *We need to redesign the sign-in flow to our mobile application because the Call Center is being flooding with calls about problems customers are having signing in.*
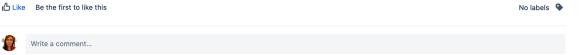
You could also make a list of hypotheses that explain the cause of the problem. This sometimes helps clarify a good research question when landing on one is slippery. It's always ok to make a list of solutions that could potentially solve the problem, as well. Just don't do that in place of writing a problem statement.

Research Questions

"Discovering" the right research question is arguably the most important discovery in a project. The research question determines the nature of the knowledge to be generated, as well as the methodology we'll use to create that knowledge.

In essence, research will answer one of two categories of questions:

1. Who are our customers, and what are they trying to do?
   - Research for these types of questions focuses on verifying *why* the problem is occurring. We need to know if this is the right problem to focus on, or if the observed problem is a symptom of an underlying problem. Research will also clarify *who* it is occurring for, *what* strategies are being attempted (without working), and *how severe* the problem is.
   - Once we know the problem is a problem, that it is a big enough problem, who it involves and what's not working to fix it, we will return to the list of potential solutions to determine if one or more of those is worth pursuing, or if we should find another solution.
2. Can people use the thing we've designed to do what they're trying to do?
   - Here we've chosen one or more solutions we think will fix the problem, and now validate whether it, or which one, addresses the user's need best.

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