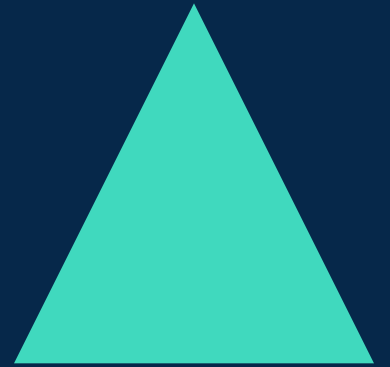

Problems and ideas

Aleš Špetič

Lecture 2

Startup Management - Problems and Ideas



Retrieval: decisions under uncertainty

Startup

What is a startup still searching for?

Evidence

What does one paying customer establish?

Action

Why keep early commitments reversible?



Lecture route

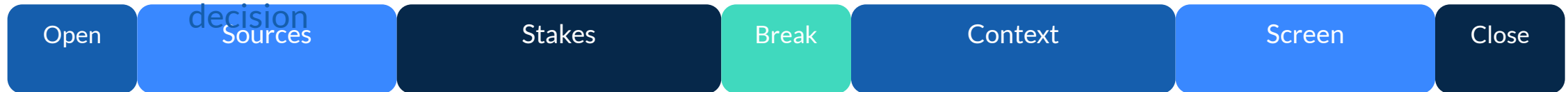
First part

Sources of opportunities • problem severity • real cases

Second part

Customer context • idea screening • opportunity brief

Case → concept → tool →



Today's founder decision



Opportunity

Consequence

Context

Focus

Where does a problem
appear?

How much does it
matter?

Who faces it, and when?

What deserves
investigation?

A sequence for deciding where to investigate next.

Where opportunities come from



Personal friction

A task repeatedly causes trouble in your own life.



Workarounds

People combine messages, spreadsheets or manual fixes.



Domain knowledge

You understand the task and can reach people who do it.



Changing conditions

A new capability or constraint changes what is possible.

A problem and a product idea



Problem hypothesis

People lose time coordinating a meeting because availability sits in separate calendars.



Product idea

A booking link that shows available times and confirms a slot.

The problem can remain worth investigating even if this particular idea is weak.

Wise: a personal workaround



Wise helps people and businesses move and manage money across currencies.

The origin

Two friends needed money in different currencies. They arranged local transfers to each other.

Historical case. Discussion is an interpretation.

DISCUSSION

 What did their workaround reveal about the problem and the existing alternatives?

Wise: what the workaround reveals



Wise helps people and businesses move and manage money across currencies.

What we can observe

Two people coordinated local transfers to meet currency needs.

What remains unknown

How often does this need occur? What stops other people using an adequate alternative?

A real workaround reveals a task. Wider demand still needs investigation.

Canva: a narrow starting point



Canva is an online platform for creating visual content. The founders first tested a simpler design workflow through school-yearbook company Fusion Books.

The starting segment

Schools had a specific, recurring design task: create and print a yearbook.

Historical case. Discussion is an interpretation.

DISCUSSION



Why was this a useful place to begin learning about a broader design problem?

Canva: a manageable first market



Canva is an online design platform. Its founders first served school-yearbook customers through Fusion Books.

A bounded task

A school must coordinate content and produce a finished yearbook.

A useful learning boundary

The team can focus on one workflow, its users and the required output.



DISCUSSION

Which questions become easier when the first market is narrow?

Generate options from one problem



Observe

Describe a recent episode and the current workaround.

Vary

Change one lever: actor, workflow, channel or timing.

Compare

Keep the desired outcome fixed; test each option's trade-off.

What the origin stories teach



Access

Founders could see the task closely.



Workarounds

Existing behavior made the problem tangible.



Limits

An origin story cannot prove future demand.

What makes a problem consequential?



Severity

What happens if the problem stays unresolved?



Frequency

How often does this episode occur?



Urgency

How quickly must someone act?



Current response

What effort or money goes into coping?

Calendly: repeated friction adds up



Calendly is scheduling software that lets people share availability and book meetings without repeated email exchanges.

The observed friction

Tope Awotona encountered back-and-forth scheduling in sales, then researched existing tools.

A founder's experience opens a question; it does not settle demand.

DISCUSSION



When does a small inconvenience become consequential enough to change behavior?

Calendly: the current alternative

Calendly helps people share availability and book meetings. Consider the email workflow it aims to simplify.

01

Propose

One person suggests possible times.

02

Compare

Others check calendars and respond.

03

Confirm

Everyone agrees on a workable slot.



DISCUSSION

Which step causes the delay, and for whom?

Uber: urgency changes the stakes

Uber

Uber is a platform that connects passengers with drivers to request rides through an app.

The starting problem

The founders described the difficulty of getting a taxi when one was needed.

Need

Get to a destination

Constraint

A usable ride in time

The customer outcome

Reach a destination at a workable time, with less uncertainty about the ride.



DISCUSSION

When does waiting become a consequential problem?

Uber: urgency depends on the trip

Uber connects passengers with drivers. These two illustrative trips show how the same service can address different stakes.



Flexible evening plan

A delay may be inconvenient. Public transport or a later arrival may still work.



Fixed departure

A delay may cause a missed flight. The traveler has less room to adapt.



DISCUSSION

What changes: frequency, severity, urgency, or the available alternatives?

Severity and frequency are different

Rare, serious

A missed departure can matter even for an occasional traveler.

Frequent, serious

Repeated disruption creates cumulative consequences.

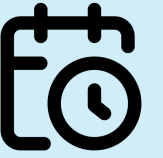
Rare, minor

Switching effort may exceed the benefit.

Frequent, minor

Repeated scheduling friction may add up over time.

Zocdoc: one workflow, several interests



Zocdoc is a healthcare marketplace where patients find clinicians and book available appointments.

Patient

Find a suitable clinician and a usable appointment.

Constraint

Insurance, location and appointment timing affect the choice.

Practice

Make availability visible and coordinate bookings.

DISCUSSION



Does easier discovery also create more care capacity?

Three cases, three different stakes

Calendly and Uber

Scheduling exposes repeated coordination effort.
A ride can become urgent when the destination has a deadline.

Zocdoc

Finding an appointment depends on suitability and availability as well as search speed.



DISCUSSION

Which consequence would you investigate before proposing a solution?

A problem deserves investigation when...

The consequence matters

Someone can describe a specific loss or obstacle.

The context repeats

We know when and for whom it happens.

A gap remains

The current workaround leaves something unresolved.

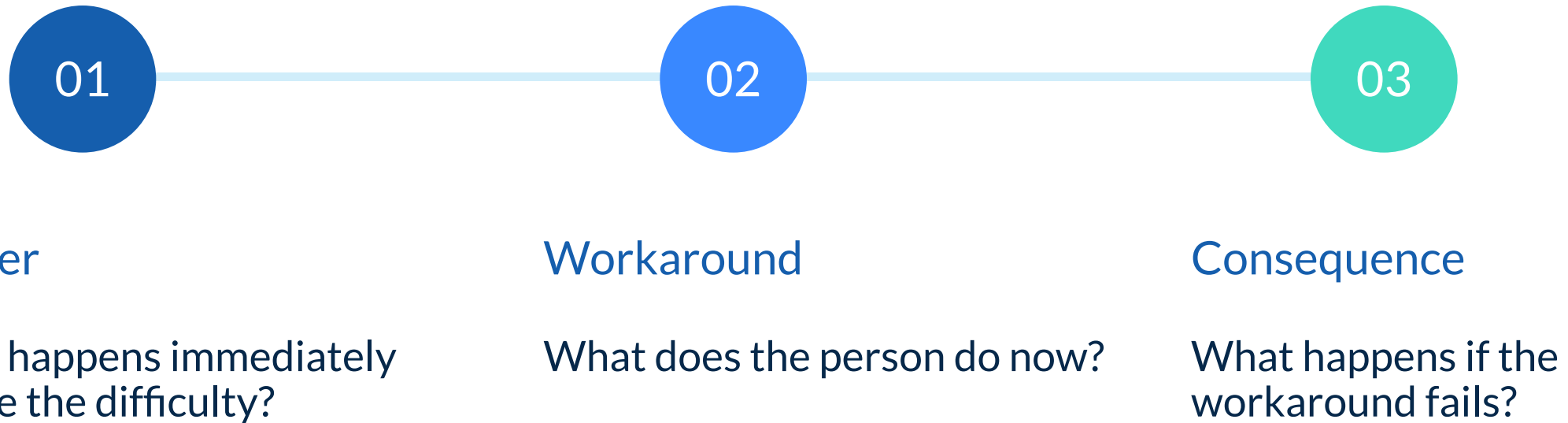
Return ready to examine customer context.

Next: customer context



Break

A problem happens in a situation



Write a testable problem statement



When

Name the trigger and a recent situation.

Who

Identify the person and job, not a vague market.

Cost

Describe the workaround and consequence; leave the product out.

Duolingo: learning must fit daily life

Duolingo offers app-based learning through short, interactive lessons. Its language courses aim to make learning widely accessible.

The customer's task

Make progress in a language while fitting practice around everyday commitments.



The design response

Short lessons and streaks support a regular practice habit.



DISCUSSION

What changes when the learner has a deadline, limited time or a different goal?

Duolingo: one app, different goals

Duolingo provides short interactive language lessons. The situations below are hypotheses about learner needs.



Upcoming holiday

Useful phrases and confidence for a trip with a known date.



Work opportunity

Language tasks required for a role or a conversation.



Personal interest

Enjoyment and gradual progress without a fixed deadline.



DISCUSSION

Would the same evidence of progress satisfy all three learners?

Vinted: the same item, two viewpoints



Vinted is an online marketplace where people buy and sell second-hand items, especially clothing.

Seller's situation

An unwanted item has potential value—but listing, messaging and shipping take effort.

Buyer's situation

Price matters alongside condition, fit, delivery and confidence in the seller.



DISCUSSION

What must work for both sides before a transaction happens?

Vinted: a transaction has several steps

Vinted is a marketplace for second-hand goods. Both buyer and seller must find the exchange worthwhile.

01

Discover

The buyer finds a relevant listing.

02

Agree

The parties accept the item, price and conditions.

03

Exchange

Delivery and the received item meet expectations.



DISCUSSION

At which step could uncertainty prevent a transaction?

BlaBlaCar: an empty seat is not enough



BlaBlaCar connects drivers with passengers heading the same way so they can share a ride and its cost.

Trigger

A holiday journey when trains were full.

Observed alternative

Cars passing with empty seats.

Matching constraints

Route, time and willingness to travel together.

DISCUSSION



When does spare capacity become a usable option?

A useful problem statement names the context

Too broad

Travelers need better transport.

Specific, still a hypothesis

A traveler facing a sold-out train cannot find a trusted driver going the same way at a workable time.



Example based on BlaBlaCar

Claims, observations and inferences



Claim

“People need a better way to schedule meetings.”



Observation

A recent email thread shows repeated attempts to find a time.



Inference

Coordination may cause the delay. Other explanations remain possible.

Illustrative evidence types applied to the scheduling problem; not Calendly research data.

One observation, several explanations

Observed: a meeting thread takes several exchanges to reach an agreed time.



Scattered availability

People cannot easily compare free times.



Little overlap

Their calendars genuinely leave few options.



Unclear priority

The meeting matters less than other commitments.

Illustrative explanations. One observation does not tell us which explanation is right.

Context changes the next question



Duolingo

What outcome does the learner need, and what limits practice time?



Vinted

Which uncertainty stops the buyer or seller from proceeding?



BlaBlaCar

Which route, timing or trust constraint prevents a match?

Discussion questions derived from the cases; answers require customer evidence.

Screening ideas before building



Problem strength

Does the consequence
matter?

Alternatives

What gap remains
today?

Customer access

Can we reach the
people affected?

Learning

Can we examine the key
unknown?

Choose one problem to investigate first; state what evidence could reverse the choice.

The shortlist: evidence still missing

Screening lens	Calendly	Zocdoc	BlaBlaCar
Problem episode	Arranging a meeting	Finding suitable care	Finding a usable ride
Current alternative	Email and calendars	Calls and directories	Trains, buses, forums
Potential gap	Coordination effort	Discovery and booking	Route and time match
First uncertainty	How costly is the delay?	Discovery or capacity?	What blocks the match?

Instructor analysis of known cases. These questions are not validated customer findings.

Burbn: which feature deserves focus?



Burbn was a broader check-in app with photos. Its founders faced a focus decision.

The original direction

Burbn combined location check-ins with social features, including photos.

Decision point

Early traction was limited beyond friends.
Which behavior deserves a closer test?



DISCUSSION

What evidence would justify keeping one feature and removing others?

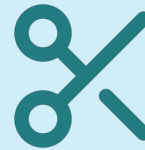
Instagram: the choice and the next test

Instagram began as a photo-sharing app after the founders narrowed their earlier Burbn concept.



Founder choice

Focus Burbn on taking and sharing photos.



Limit

The narrower behavior still needs evidence of reach and repeat use.



Next evidence

Check whether new users use and return to the focused app.



DISCUSSION

Which finding would make you reconsider the new focus?

Juicero: test the extra value

Juicero sold a connected countertop press and proprietary produce packs for making juice at home.

The alternative

Reporting showed the packs could be squeezed by hand.

The counterargument

The CEO pointed to consistency, convenience and connected safety controls.



Opened produce pack. Image: Juicero, via Ars Technica (2017).



DISCUSSION

What benefit would have to justify buying the hardware?

Two cases, one screening lesson

Instagram

Does a narrower product better support the behavior users value?

Juicero

Does the device add enough value over a simpler alternative?



Shared lesson

Identify the assumption that could change the decision. Examine it before committing more effort.

The opportunity brief



Customer and situation

Who experiences the problem, and when?

Problem and alternative

What happens today, and what remains difficult?

Evidence and assumptions

What do we know, and what are we guessing?

Next question

What finding would change the decision?

The one-minute opportunity pitch



Customer

“[Who] faces [situation] when [trigger].”

Problem

“Today they [workaround], leaving [consequence].”

Evidence

“We observed [episode]; [claim] still needs testing.”

Next test

“We will speak to [people] or observe [behavior].”

An opportunity brief in practice

Customer and situation

A traveler faces a sold-out train on a holiday route.

Problem and alternative

Existing transport is unavailable. Spare car seats may offer another route.

Evidence and assumption

The origin story describes empty seats. A feasible, trusted match remains a hypothesis.

Next question

What stopped a traveler from using a shared ride on the last comparable trip?

Worked teaching example based on BlaBlaCar, not a historical company document.

Closing discussion



Problem quality

Can a rare problem deserve attention?



Customer context

Why might user and payer care about different things?



Decision quality

What new fact would make you stop?

Problems and ideas: key takeaways

Problems have a context

A person, a situation and a consequence.

Screening directs attention

A ranking sets the next investigation.

Workarounds reveal behavior

The current alternative belongs in the analysis.

Ideas remain revisable

New evidence can change the problem or response.

Next: customer discovery

Before the next lecture

Bring a problem hypothesis, its workaround and identify six external people to interview.

In Lecture 3

We will practice interviews, observation and interpreting conflicting evidence.

Case sources and further reading

Origins

Wise

Canva

Calendly

Customer context

Vinted

BlaBlaCar

Severity and context

Uber

Zocdoc

Duolingo

Screening

Instagram

Juicero

Homework 2: choose a problem (2 slides)

Slide 1

Define customer, trigger, job, workaround and consequence. Leave the product out.

Evidence

Separate observations from hypotheses; identify six external people to interview.

Slide 2

Compare candidate problems by stakes, recurrence, alternatives and access; justify the choice.

Submit

Add both slides to the team pitch deck; save the opportunity brief and recruit list in the folder.