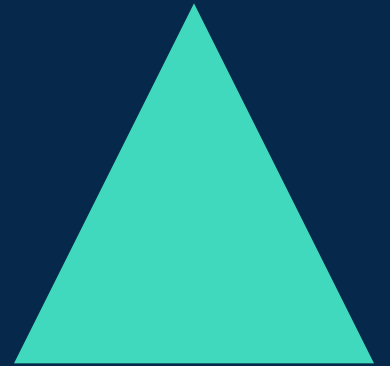

Customer discovery

Aleš Špetič

Lecture 3

Startup Management - Customer Discovery



Retrieval: problems and evidence

Problem

What makes a problem worth investigating?

Evidence

What does a workaround reveal?

Uncertainty

Which earlier founder decision should evidence change?



Lecture route

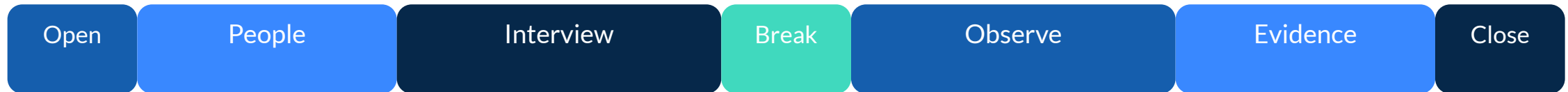
First part

People and jobs • recruitment • interview technique

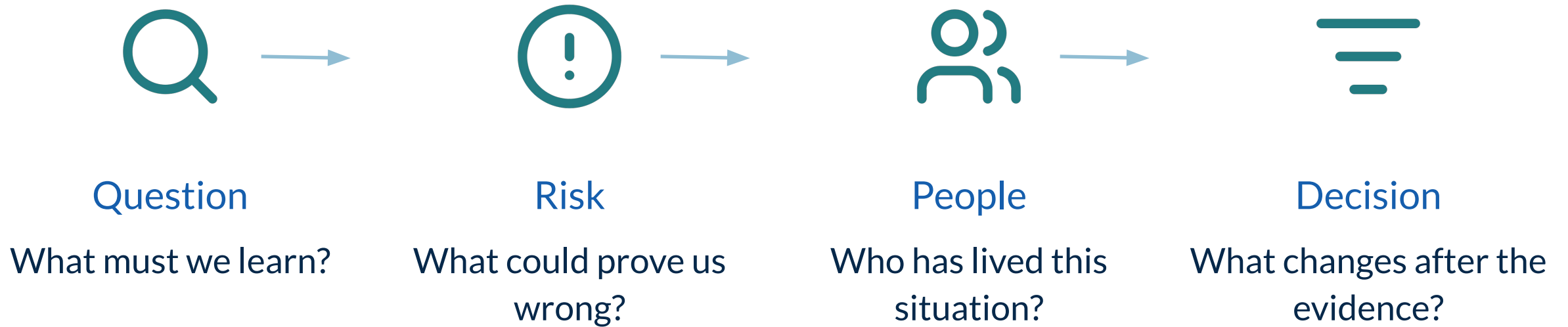
Second part

Observation • evidence synthesis • next decision

Case → concept → tool → decision



Today's founder decision



Example: a student startup asks room-seekers in Ljubljana whether the problem is too few listings or unclear total costs.

Discovery and sales conversations



Discovery

Understand how someone handles a situation and what remains difficult.

Example: “How did you find your last room?” explores the problem; “Would you book this specific service?” explores a sale.



Sales

Explore whether a specific offer fits and what a purchase would require.



DISCUSSION

How could an early product pitch change the answers you hear?

Jobs to be done



Circumstance

What is happening when the need arises?

Progress

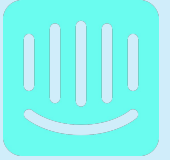
What does the person want to achieve?

Choice

What do they use or do instead?

Example: before lectures start, a student needs an affordable room near campus and compares listings, student groups and friends' leads.

Intercom: the decision to switch



Intercom helps businesses answer customers through website chat and a shared support inbox. Its researchers studied why customers switched tools.



First difficulty

Missed messages make the old inbox unreliable.

Searching

Compare a shared inbox, helpdesk and live chat.

Switching

A lost customer makes the change worth the effort.

Illustrative customer story using Intercom's interview timeline.



DISCUSSION

What would a switching timeline reveal that a feature wish list would miss?

Duolingo: different reasons to learn



Duolingo offers interactive language lessons. These learner situations are hypotheses for discovery.



Travel

Handle everyday exchanges during an upcoming trip.



Work

Participate confidently in a required conversation.



Personal interest

Enjoy practice and make gradual progress.



DISCUSSION

What recent experience would reveal the learner's actual goal?

Why do customer interviews?



Discover

Find real problems that founders did not anticipate.

Challenge

Test assumptions and hear contradictory cases.

Understand

Learn the context, alternatives and consequences.

Decide

Choose what to investigate or change next.

Example: “Finding a room is difficult” may mean no suitable listings, unexpected bills or uncertainty about flatmates.

Who belongs in the first interviews?

Relevant experience

External people with recent experience, including users of an adequate alternative.

Useful contrasts

People who struggled, succeeded, stopped or chose not to act.



DISCUSSION

Who would you miss by interviewing only friends or enthusiastic users?

Recruit participants by recent behavior



Fit

Did this task occur recently in the person's real life?

Contrast

Include struggle, success, switching and no action.

Exclude

Avoid friends and people responding to a suggested solution.

Twitch: three groups, different barriers



Twitch is a live-streaming platform for creators and viewers. Its founders investigated game broadcasters before expanding the product.



Existing broadcasters

Friction with a service they already use.



Rival platforms

Reasons they have not switched.



Non-broadcasters

Obstacles to starting at all.

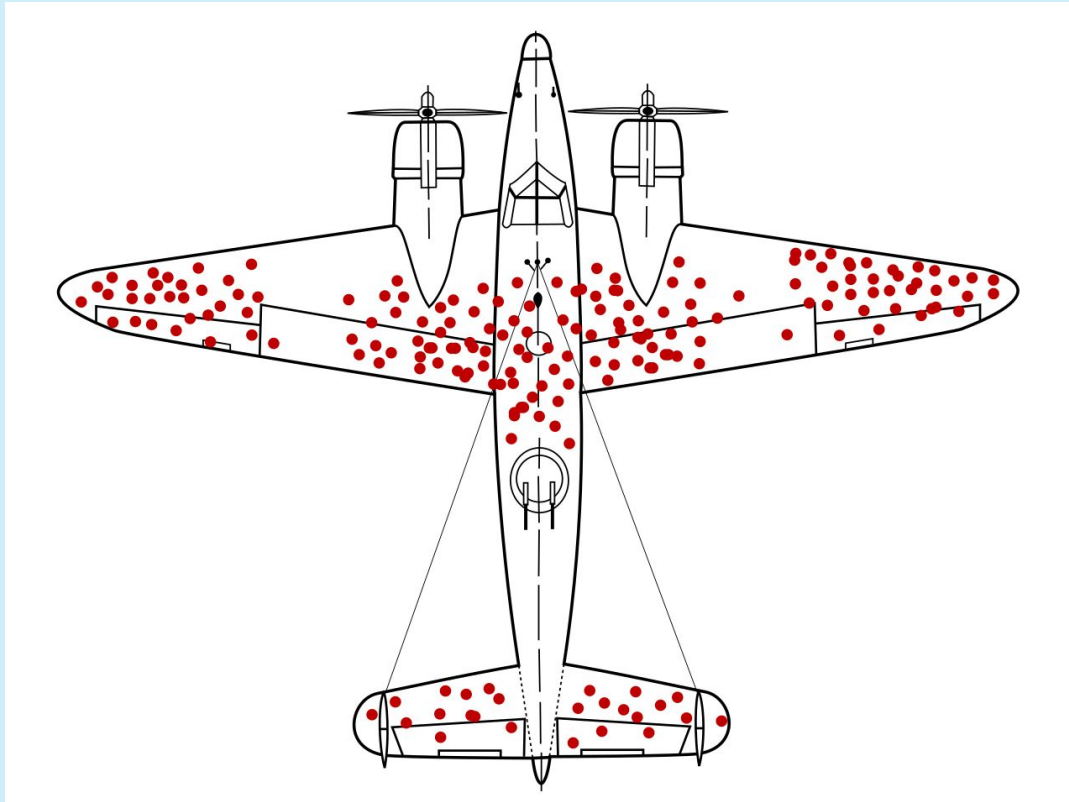
DISCUSSION



What would remain invisible if you interviewed only your active users?

Survivorship bias: the bombers that returned

WWII: Abraham Wald used damage on returning aircraft to assess where protective armour was needed.



Red dots: illustrative damage on returning planes.
Modern diagram, not an original wartime chart.
[Grandjean / McGeddon, CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

What we see

Holes show where a plane could be hit and still return.

What we miss

Aircraft hit in more vulnerable areas may never return.



WALD'S INSIGHT

Reinforce critical areas, such as engines, with few holes on survivors.

A focused interview plan



Decision

Which choice should this research inform?

Participants

Six external people with recent, contrasting experiences.

Evidence

Which episode and artifacts could clarify it?

Contradiction

What finding would make us revise the hypothesis?

Example: interview six students about their last room search to learn why apparently suitable rooms were rejected.

The structure of a discovery interview



Recent episode

When did the situation last occur?

What happened

What did you do, and what happened next?

Meaning

What mattered, and what remained unresolved?

Questions that encourage agreement

Leading question

“Wouldn’t clearer room listings help?”

“Isn’t searching student groups frustrating?”

“Don’t you want a room-finding app?”

Hypothetical purchase

“Would you pay €10 to find a room?”

“Would you subscribe to listing alerts?”

“If we checked landlords, would you pay?”



DISCUSSION

How would you rewrite each question around a recent event?

The complete interview checklist

Before the interview

- 1 Decision: what choice must we make?
- 2 People: who has lived this situation?
- 3 Evidence: what episode can we inspect?
- 4 Contradiction: what could disprove it?

During a recent real episode

- 5 Sequence: what happened, step by step?
- 6 Reason: what made it difficult?
- 7 Alternative: what else did you try?
- 8 Consequence: what was the impact?



REMEMBER

Start with consent and a recent event; close with “What have I missed?”

Follow-ups that make an episode specific



Sequence

What happened immediately before that?

Reason

What made that difficult in this situation?

Alternative

What else did you try, and why?

Consequence

What happened because the search took longer?

Finding a student room: a polite interview



A fictional student startup wants to help people find a room in a shared flat in Ljubljana. It begins by pitching its idea.

Founder

“Would an app that makes finding a room easier help you?”

Student

“Yes, definitely. Finding a room is a nightmare.”

Fictional teaching dialogue; not a company case or research finding.



DISCUSSION

What can we safely conclude from this answer?

The same topic, a concrete episode

STUDENT ROOM SEARCH | Following the same fictional interview

Interviewer

“Tell me about the last room you considered renting.”

Student

“Six messages later, I learned bills were extra. The total was beyond my budget.”

Fictional teaching dialogue. No empirical data implied.



DISCUSSION

What would you ask next before recommending another listings app?

Claim, record and interpretation

STUDENT ROOM SEARCH | Following the same fictional interview



Claim

“Those messages with the landlord were a waste of time.”



Record

The ad lists rent; the messages add monthly bills.



Interpretation

Unclear total cost may have caused wasted effort.

Illustrative room-search evidence. The record supports an account, not every explanation.

Etsy: the delivery route changes the need



Etsy connects buyers with sellers of handmade and vintage goods. Its buyer research examined the circumstances of gift purchases.



Same option

Gift wrapping at checkout.

A: buyer hands over the gift

Wants to inspect it and wrap it personally.

B: seller ships to the recipient

Needs it wrapped before it leaves the shop.

Two illustrative situations based on Etsy's gift-purchase research.



DISCUSSION

What would you ask about the buyer's last gift purchase before proposing a feature?

Interview first, then show a prototype

A prototype is an early sketch or clickable model of the proposed product.

First: understand today's problem

“How did you find your last room?”

Learn the process, alternatives and consequences.

Then: try the room-search prototype

“Use this model to choose a room within your budget.”

Observe understanding, obstacles and the next action.



DISCUSSION

What does a compliment tell you about future use?

Consent and a useful record

Clear purpose

Explain the research and ask permission before recording.

Relevant detail

Capture role, context and the date of the episode.

Accurate notes

Separate exact words, observed actions and your interpretation.

Respect for participants

Avoid unnecessary personal data and allow questions to be skipped.

A misleading survey result

The headline

80%

16 of 20 classmates agreed.

The question

“Would you use a free app that finds your ideal room and removes the stress of searching?”

Invented survey and results for classroom analysis.



DISCUSSION

Which parts of the claim does this survey fail to establish?

A better question and an honest headline

The 16/20 belongs to the original fictional survey; the revised question has no results yet.

Ask neutrally next time

“Think of the last room you considered: how did you decide whether it suited you?”

Ask about difficulties after hearing the story.

Report the old result honestly

“16 of 20 classmates said yes to a positively framed question about a free app.”

This does not establish demand or willingness to pay.



BETTER APPROACH

Recruit relevant people, ask about recent behavior, then test a real next step.

Return ready to observe a real task.

Next: observation



Break

Watch the task and hear the user's thinking



Set a task

Ask them to find a room that fits their budget.

Watch and listen

Record taps, pauses and what they say aloud.

Probe afterward

“What did you expect to happen at that point?”

Think-aloud prompt: “As you compare rooms, say what you are looking at, what you think it means and what you expect next.”

Airbnb: learning at the property



Airbnb connects hosts offering places to stay with guests seeking accommodation.

The founders' account

Poor listing photos limited what guests could see. The team visited New York hosts and took better photos.

The discovery value

They visited the real spaces and the work required to present them.



DISCUSSION

What could a visit reveal that a conversion chart could not?

What the Airbnb story can establish



Airbnb connects hosts and guests for accommodation. Its early host visits offer a learning example with limits.

A useful learning move

Direct contact exposed a concrete problem and a possible response.

A causal limit

A before-and-after improvement alone cannot isolate every cause.



DISCUSSION

What else might change while founders visit customers?

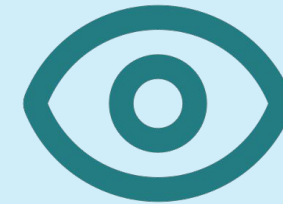
Figma: low use can hide a discovery problem



Figma is collaborative design software for product teams. Its comments feature lets colleagues give feedback inside a design file.

Research sessions

Users struggled to find comments in the editor.



Discovery implication

Non-use may reflect poor visibility.

Low use $\neq$ low value



DISCUSSION

What would you observe before concluding that nobody needs comments?

Figma: an appealing idea still needs a test



Figma's collaborative design tool includes comments. These are relative changes from two separate experiments.

+45%

Creation with a visible prompt.

-20%

Discovery after moving the icon.

Prompt experiment: Figma's published illustration



DISCUSSION

What does a plausible explanation establish—and what still requires a test?

Duolingo: an optional offer looked compulsory



Historical India case: learners could keep learning for free, but a paid subscription promotion made some believe payment was required.

What the product offered

An optional paid upgrade; free lessons were still available.

What some learners understood

Payment seemed required to continue, so they left instead of learning.



DISCUSSION

“What do you think you can do next?” would reveal the learner’s interpretation.

One pause, several explanations

Duolingo follow-on: a learner pauses at the subscription offer.



Meaning

They think payment is required to continue.



Consequence

They understand the offer but do not want to pay.



Context

Something outside the task interrupts them.

Illustrative explanations. A pause does not identify its cause.

When observation changes the behavior

DUOLINGO FOLLOW-ON | Applying the subscription-promotion case

Research setting

A learner may read the offer more carefully while being watched or thinking aloud.

Useful checks

Compare the session with another episode and ordinary exits after the offer.



DISCUSSION

How could helping a struggling participant hide the problem?

A research note that preserves uncertainty

DUOLINGO FOLLOW-ON | Applying the subscription-promotion case



Exact words

“I thought I had to pay.”



Action

The learner closes the app
after a promotion.



Hypothesis

The promotion may look like a
required payment.

Reconstructed teaching note inspired by the Duolingo account. Not a verbatim research record.

Interviews, observation and usage data

DUOLINGO FOLLOW-ON | Applying the subscription-promotion case

Interviews and observation

Ask what the learner thought the offer meant; watch how they respond to it.

Usage records

Count exits after the offer and returns to learning. These counts cannot explain the reason.



DISCUSSION

What would you combine to investigate an unexplained drop-off?

Synthesis: an evidence trail



Record

Link each note to a participant and episode.

Pattern

Group related observations within their context.

Exception

Preserve the cases that do not fit.

Implication

State what changes and what remains uncertain.

Finding a room: three interview records

Fictional room-search research: each column records one student's recent episode.

Episode	Student A	Student B	Student C
Situation	Room before term	Room after exchange	Replacing a flatmate
What happened	Bills added later	Ad already taken	Different house rules
Current response	Asked for total cost	Used student group	Met the flatmates
Next uncertainty	Which costs missing?	How current are ads?	What makes a good fit?

Different blockers: total cost, availability or flatmate fit. Three episodes do not establish demand.

Superhuman: a survey with a defined sample



Superhuman began as an email client for people who spend substantial time handling email.



Choose participants

Recent users who experienced the core value.

Ask about loss

How would you feel if you could no longer use it?

Compare groups

Which benefits matter to the most attached users?



DISCUSSION

Why is this different from asking classmates whether an idea sounds useful?

Confirmation bias in founder research

Selective recruitment

Only speaking to people likely to agree.

Selective interpretation

Explaining every objection as user error.

Selective attention

Remembering praise and overlooking hesitation.

A useful discipline

Write a competing explanation and seek a case that tests it.

When is there enough evidence to move on?

A clearer pattern

Relevant episodes reveal a recurring obstacle, a current response and a consequence.

A bounded next step

The remaining uncertainty fits a specific further investigation or experiment.



DISCUSSION

What would make ten interviews less useful than three?

The decision after discovery



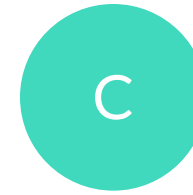
Continue

The same problem hypothesis has stronger support.



Narrow or revise

The problem matters in a more specific context.



Pause

The proposed problem lacks support or alternatives work well.

Example: if students reject rooms after discovering extra bills, narrow the idea from more listings to clearer total costs.

Closing discussion: a founder's next move

What we heard

Students say finding a room is difficult. One detailed episode reveals unexpected extra bills.

What we must decide

Which people should we speak to next, and what evidence could separate the explanations?

Fictional recap scenario.



DISCUSSION

Would you continue, narrow the hypothesis or pause? Why?

Customer discovery: key takeaways

Specific situations

A useful participant can describe a relevant episode.

Visible uncertainty

Keep records separate from interpretations.

Neutral questions

Recent actions reveal more than encouraged agreement.

A revised decision

Contradictions should change the next investigation.

Next: market and competition

Outside class

Interview six external customers; keep anonymized notes and revise the problem statement.

In Lecture 4

We will examine customer segments, alternatives and the size of a bounded market.



Methods and further reading

Interview practice

[GOV.UK: in-depth interviews](#)

[The Mom Test](#)

Planning

[Planning a research round](#)

Customer context

[Jobs to Be Done theory](#)

[GOV.UK: contextual research](#)

Synthesis

[Analysing a research session](#)

Case sources

People and jobs

Intercom

Duolingo

Observation

Airbnb

Figma

Interview context

Twitch

Etsy

Interpreting evidence

Twitch

Figma

Superhuman

Homework 3: customer evidence

Coverage

Interview six external people with recent relevant experience; report anonymized roles and contexts.

Decision

Revise the problem statement; continue, narrow or pause, and name the next check.

Episodes

Show specific tasks, workarounds and consequences with traceable notes or artifacts.

Submit

Add 2–3 exam slides; save the guide, anonymized notes and evidence matrix in the folder.