All the business and marketing books tell you to get to know your client – this book tells you how

BE A client whisperer

A short guide on getting clients to tell you what matters

John Holcroft

BE A CLIENT WHISPERER

A SHORT GUIDE ON GETTING CLIENTS TO TELL YOU WHAT MATTERS

JOHN HOLCROFT

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johnholcroft.co.uk

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Too Long; Didn't Read

Here's the TL;DR for this book.

Talk to your clients and your potential clients and find out:

- The pain they want relief from
- The better future they are attracted to
- The concerns and anxieties they have
- How much they care
- How they feel when something isn't working
- How they want to feel once it is

This is discovering where our client is trying to get to. Not in terms of the features of our product, but how it improves their lives.

Learning about your clients is the foundation for a successful product and a successful business. Build this foundation and everything becomes easier. It's easier to make products and services that clients engage with. It's easier to niche down on an audience. It's easier to do sales and marketing.

This foundation will save you time and stress as you'll know what to work on and what not to work on. You won't waste time going down the wrong path or worrying that you are.

So why does this book exist? Because everyone should do this, but very few do. Because just telling you to talk to your clients isn't enough.

All the business and marketing books tell you to get to know your client. This book tells you how.

What's coming up

Chapter 1 - Why My First Start-Up Failed

What to expect if you do a poor job of talking to your clients, and what is to be gained by doing it well.

Chapter 2 - The Rookie Mistake: Pitching

Why pitching and 'selling yourself' to your client is bad. You don't like doing it, and they don't like hearing it. We get far better results when we aim to have conversations with our clients where we listen and understand their situation.

Chapter 3 - Marketing is Hard, Ignorance Makes It Harder

Clients work with us because they want a result. Our craft is only a means to an end for them. If we can find out what

success is for the client, in their terms, then everything becomes easier.

Chapter 4 - It's All About Change

This chapter describes a model for understanding a client's motivations and concerns around change. This matters because it is fundamental to your business. You are trying to get people to change from whatever they do now to working with you.

Chapter 5 - Questions To Discover Forces For Change

A big bank of questions you can ask a client to discover their forces for change — including why you ask them and what you can expect to learn.

Chapter 6 - Feelings Are Vital

For the client, doing what you say you'll do isn't enough, and isn't how they will measure success. The client has negative feelings about the current situation. Fixing those negative feelings is how the client will judge you. Let's get the client to share what these feelings are.

Chapter 7 - Learning To Listen

How to become a selfless listener. The questions from chapter 5 are a good starting point but being a selfless listener is how you get the client to open up, and the core to strengthening a relationship. Being a good listener isn't about being quiet, it's about engaging with the person we're talking to, helping them share, helping them feel heard.

Chapter 8 - What Does A Real Client Interview Look Like?

I learn better from real-world examples than from theory, I believe most people do. That's what this chapter is.

Chapters 9 to 12 - 'Asking By Email', 'Before The Interview', 'During The Interview', and 'After The Interview'

All about the logistics of doing a client interview. How do you ask someone for an interview by email? How do you prepare? How do you set them at ease and conduct the interview? How do you finish the interview? What notes should you take?

1

WHY MY FIRST START-UP FAILED

I built a brilliant product in my first start-up, but it didn't sell.

Yohondo was a music education app that helped kids learn their pieces for the graded piano exams in the UK. Technically it was brilliant. It had a lovely user interface, was a pleasure to use, and did what it said on the tin. It was the easiest and fastest way to learn those pieces. The handful of people that used it loved it and sent me thank you emails.

It still failed.

There is an old saying that founders don't give up when the company runs out of money, but when they personally run out of money. That happened to me. I spent four years working on Yohondo. I only stopped when I couldn't pay the mortgage.

I'd spent years and all our savings on Yohondo, and now I had to go back to the commute and being someone's employee.

You know the worst bit? Yohondo was never going to work, and I could have known before I'd started. I didn't need to build it to find out. I didn't need to spend years and all our savings. I just needed to talk to people and listen to them.

I was scared to talk to people

Back then I was scared to talk to people about my business. Or rather I was scared to talk to the people that mattered.

I felt comfortable talking to music teachers, who weren't my customers, but was scared to talk to parents of learners, who were.

Talking to the teachers was easy as I wasn't selling to them. They were the experts, so I could easily get into the mindset of learning from them. We would discuss the struggles kids had learning their instruments and what could be done about it. I could show them my ideas and get feedback.

I found it terrifying to talk to my real audience of parents of kids learning an instrument. I believed that talking to people was pitching my idea. I do all the talking and then at the end ask 'would you buy it?' or 'what do you think?'

I didn't want to pitch as it made me feel like a door to door salesman.

My biggest fear was talking, or pitching, to people I knew. I had school age kids so I knew lots of parents with kids learning musical instruments. Yet the idea of selling to my friends felt so shameful I never reached out.

Learn, don't pitch

When I was trying to learn from my piano teachers I had normal conversations with them. They were easy and fun.

Trying to sell my idea was hard and unpleasant and I avoided it, as I did with my actual audience, the parents.

That fear of talking to the people that matter evaporated in the years that followed.

I learned that talking to people isn't pitching, it's listening. I'm not selling my idea, I'm learning about them and their lives. I'm trying to find out about their challenges and how best I can help them.

I didn't learn this lesson early enough to save my first start-up, but now talking to people and learning about their world is a critical early step. That's what this book is all about and what being a client whisperer is all about. I'm sharing the lessons I learnt on how to talk to our clients, or potential clients, and how to discover what will work for them.

How to win by talking to your clients

I've described how I screwed up my first start-up by not talking to people. Let's flip that around to what I'm doing today. I make apps for hospitals containing clinical guidelines. These let doctors and nurses know what to do when dealing with urgent situations. They've won awards for advancing patient safety.

My first client signed up a few years ago, and recently I've been thinking about other ways I could help them. I booked a call with my main contact at the hospital and talked to them about

their challenges. They were completely upfront and told me everything. In fact they were delighted that I'd taken this interest in them.

I was amazed how easy this was. I didn't have the stress of selling myself or pitching something. Instead I took an interest in them and properly listened, and in return they told me what mattered to them.

In that conversation I saw an opportunity where I could help and asked if I could send over a proposal. The proposal I sent over was largely a situation appraisal where I wrote down what they told me, and then I said what features I'd add, the problems they'd solve, and the benefits to the hospital. All of this related to the things they told me mattered to them.

The reply I got from the client was 'excellent comprehensive summary'. I won the work and they paid me up front before I'd built anything. I was left wondering 'Is it supposed to be this easy? I just listened to them and wrote down what they told me'.

I set out to interview the people in the hospital who would use it or be affected by it. Each conversation guided me to ideas that would work, and away from ideas that wouldn't, and I still hadn't designed it yet.

This was so much easier than what I'd done in the past. I used to think I had to build something and have something concrete to offer before talking to people. That would take a long time and a lot of stress, as I never fully knew what mattered to the client. Now I had a clear and simple goal of what mattered and what to build, before I started.

I particularly remember the conversation I had with one of the senior nurses. She had been doing impressive work in her department and could tell me about the challenges they were facing and where they'd like to get to. After a lengthy and insightful conversation I said 'Do you mind if I summarise what I've heard from you? Let me know if I've missed anything important or if I got anything wrong.'

I repeated back the situation they were in and where it was an issue, then I described where they wanted to get to, and finally I talked about the main concerns she had.

At the end of that summary she laughed and smiled and said 'That's it!', followed up with 'This is going to make a big difference'.

There was more to it than that. I noticed something happen while I was saying my summary, I thought I caught an emotional reaction. Was she moved by someone properly listening to her? Again, I was thinking 'I just said what you told me', but it is more than that. It is rare to have people properly listen to us. More often than not they are too busy making their point, or waiting for their turn to talk.

Someone listening is rare. You will come across as special when you learn how to be that person.

Your clients want to talk to you

It may surprise you to learn that it's easy to get people to talk to you. They want what we want. We want to make a product that makes our clients' lives better. Our clients want that too. What holds people back is they don't want to be pitched or sold to, and they don't want to have someone take up a lot of their time.

Our clients want us to succeed. They want us to help solve the problems in their lives. That's why they'll reveal all the secrets we need to know, we just have to ask them in the right way and then listen.

Most of us could be better listeners. Being a good listener isn't about being quiet, it's about engaging with the person we're talking to. Helping them share, helping them feel heard.

We're going to cover how to do this soon. But first, let's look at a common mistake entrepreneurs make when talking to someone — pitching.

2

THE ROOKIE MISTAKE: PITCHING

The worst date ever

Imagine you're a guy looking for a girl. You're single now, but looking for the happy life of marriage and kids.

Somehow, magically, you've got a date. You don't know her that well but you're having your first date tonight in a fancy restaurant.

You get to the restaurant and she's looking fabulous. The hair, the dress, she's obviously put in a lot of effort. You start with a little chit chat, get some drinks and order your food. It's all going well.

Then you pull out your laptop.

You're executing your master plan, you're going to pitch yourself and why you're amazing. Your pitch is going to be so good she'll agree to marry you on the first date.

You ignore the apprehensive look on her face as you clear space on the table for the laptop. You open the presentation and have slide after slide explaining the problems with existing boyfriends and the benefits of you.

You tell her what a good mountain climber you are, you have pictures and maps and everything. Does she care? You don't know.

She doesn't get many chances to talk. She occasionally nods, and says encouraging things like 'that does sound impressive'. All while trying to get the waiter's attention to fill up her wine glass.

You want to impress, and that means pretending to be something you aren't. You don't specifically say that you earn a fortune, have a massive house and have women clamouring to be with you, but you allude to it. In reality you're desperate for any girl and are living in your friend's spare bedroom.

It crosses your mind that you don't actually know anything about this woman: what's important in her life, what she cares about, what she wants. You discard that thought and get on with your pitch. After all we're here to persuade, we have a goal.

You've heard that FOMO - fear of missing out - is a good persuasion technique so you decide to try that. You tell her that you've got another date next week, and you'll need her to say yes before then. She tells you that she'll bear that in mind as she checks the time on her phone.

You ask if she'd like dessert and she passes. Apparently she has an important meeting in the morning to get ready for.

You leave thinking that went well, she said lots of encouraging things.

You never hear from her again.

Don't pitch when you're starting out

Pitching when you're talking to someone for the first time is like asking someone to marry you on the first date. It won't work, puts you under impossible pressure, and you miss the opportunity to learn and build a relationship.

> ***On Start-Ups***
>
> *In the start-up world of accelerators and investors the 'pitch' is a different thing and isn't used on your customers. It is a short presentation to investors, in a defined format, explaining what you do and why they should invest. This format comes about as professional investors need founders to keep it simple and get to the point.*

Don't build in isolation then try to find clients, listen to your clients and see if you can help

There is a common mistake to starting a business or making a new product or service. It's to build something in isolation, and then try to convince people to buy it. I call this the build it and pray technique. You have a sense that you can help in an area, so you build something based on your own thoughts of what you think people want. Then you try to sell it.

This is often made worse by trying to get clients to go from not knowing you exist to agreeing to give you a lot of money in one step. That's like trying to get married on the first date.

If you put all this time and effort into building something and then it doesn't sell, why is that? Is it because the product isn't right for the market? Or because you aren't very good at sales and marketing?

Instead, how about we listen to our clients, find out about their lives, and see if we can help.

No-one wants to be pitched to. Creating a pitch isn't a lot of fun either.

Why Pitching Doesn't Work

What happens when someone pitches to you and you aren't interested? You want to get rid of them, but how do you do it while not being rude?

You do it by being nice to the person. You nod and smile, say some encouraging things, but don't make a commitment. That is the quickest way to get out of this situation without being unpleasant. If it drags on a bit you can make an excuse to get out of the conversation.

A terrible meeting is where you talk all about your idea and the potential client says nice things about it. You feel like you got good feedback but things haven't moved forward.

A good meeting has them doing most of the talking with you summarising their goals and motivations at the end. They'll also make a commitment to the next stage on the journey.

Pitching puts you under insane pressure

Trying to get someone to marry you on the first date is impossible. As is trying to come up with the perfect sales pitch, guaranteed to work. Not only is it impossible, you'll torture yourself with the pressure of trying.

Pitching is bad selling

I'm a reluctant salesman, I don't really want to do sales. I want to stick to my job of working with people and making their lives better. If I'm developing software then I want to be developing software, if I'm training people then I want to be focussing my attention on the people and delivering great training. I wish I could just do the job and clients would magically find me and offer me money.

Unfortunately I live in the real world, where if I want to have a business then I have to do sales. I need to sell the product otherwise no-one will know it exists, and in the modern world you have to sell yourself too.

I misunderstood what sales was for years. I thought it was pitching, and because of that I avoided it and what little I did was poor. I got clients but it was rarely through my 'sales' efforts.

In recent years I forced myself to learn how to do sales. It turns out great sales people don't pitch, they listen. They build rapport, they understand their customer's needs, they learn what a better future looks like for their customer. And eventually they offer them a path to that better future.

Good selling starts with listening and understanding, not pitching.

If you've got an existing business then getting to know your clients more deeply will make everything in business easier. It will make the marketing easier, the sales easier, the product development easier. You'll know what they care about, what motivates them, and what to say.

If you're just starting out then why are you trying to sell a product that doesn't exist?

If we haven't built our product yet and only have an idea of what it should be then selling it is the wrong thing to be doing. And it kind of pushes you into lying, of pretending to be further on than you are.

At the start, until we have a product, we're in the discovery phase. We need to find out what will work, and the relationships we build are more important than the product.

We need to explore the inner workings of our clients' minds and what they really want. By understanding what a better future looks like for our customer, we have our goal: to create a product to help them get there.

We aren't building a product then trying to find customers, we're learning about people's problems and seeing if we can help.

Clients want to be heard and understood,

then they'd love to hear how you can help

How would a conversation work?

From now on each chapter will end with questions for you. Fill out these worksheets to apply the ideas to your clients and your business.

What would a conversation look like if your only goal was to understand where the client is at with 'the problem'?

Download printable versions of these worksheets at johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

HOW WOULD A CONVERSATION WORK?

When could you engage clients, or potential clients, in a conversation?

Imagine a conversation where your only goal is to understand where they are at with 'the problem'

What would you ask to find out if it a problem for them, and the ways it affects their life?

I'd ask...

3

MARKETING IS HARD, IGNORANCE MAKES IT HARDER

> People buy for their own reasons and often not the reasons you think.
>
> — BLAIR ENNS, WIN WITHOUT PITCHING

Offer what the client wants, not what you do

There is an assumption that business owners understand their clients. I've found this is rarely true. They know what they do, what it is they are an expert in, but the complex motivations of their clients is a mystery. You can spot this whenever someone offers what they do, not what the client wants.

I'd be making this mistake if I offered my services to a client as a programmer. I am a programmer by training but software is only a means to an end for the hospitals I work with. They work

with me as I can help their junior doctors provide better care in urgent situations and when working alone.

Sarah Silva is a German to English translator with a specialisation for the chemical industry. That's what she does, but she knows that isn't what motivates her clients. If you go to her website she describes herself as 'helping chemical companies increase their international sales'. She is describing what she does in terms that matter to the client.

Every client has a pain they want relief from and a better future they are attracted to. There is emotion under those desires as well: how they feel now and how they want to feel. They have concerns and objections.

Do you know what these are without guessing? Have you heard them said by a client?

Let's take a situation I was in earlier this year. I have some woodwork on the front of my house, and the paint was starting to peel. The distressed look was easy to ignore at first, but as the winter and the weather worsened, it started to look less distressed and more distraught! I decided something had to be done.

This problem could have been solved in a number of ways. I could have replaced all the woodwork with uPVC plastic as all my neighbours seem to have done. I could have bought the right paint and tools, gone up a ladder and done it myself. Or I could have employed a decorator to do it for me.

I researched these options. The companies tended to tell me what they offer and assumed I was comparing them against a direct competitor. The uPVC fascia companies told me about how their uPVC fascias don't yellow, they have an expert team

of fitters, and they have a 5 year guarantee. The paint company told me their paint sticks to stuff, can handle frost, has a great finish, and only needs two coats.

They are all advertising what they do. How does that match what I want?

I had peeling paint on the front of my house that looked ugly. That was the pain I wanted relief from. The better future was for it to look good. I also had concerns and anxieties, like how much it was going to cost, and how much effort I'd have to put in to get the results.

There was also a deeper emotional level, as there always is. I felt ashamed at the state of my house. My neighbours across the road are a lovely young family and have spent a lot of money doing up their house since they've moved in. I've watched them get a new driveway, kitchen and bathroom, along with a fancy front door and good planting out the front. I imagine them leaving their house in the morning, looking across at my house and their hearts sinking as they look at my run down house. Shame was the emotion I felt the most and the one I wanted relief from.

What was the emotion I wanted to feel? It was pride and a sense of belonging. I wanted to look at the front of my house and be proud. I wanted to look down the street of other well maintained houses and feel that I belonged, that I was one of them.

I didn't care whether I replaced the wood with uPVC, painted it myself, or got a decorator in. I wanted the experts to tell me they could give me the best looking house on the street.

Removing the torture from sales and marketing

Describing what you do in terms of benefit to the client is something I've seen every business owner struggle with.

If you get it right then you can have certainty you are working on the right things and the marketing material can all but write itself.

In the first years of building my business the opposite was true. I didn't know the full situation my clients were in. I couldn't speak in their language about the things they cared about. Just getting started with sales and marketing felt like wading through treacle. I had no idea what to say to them.

This isn't a sales and marketing book, but it does tell you how to get the foundation of knowledge required for marketing to work.

Any reputable marketing guide will tell you to speak in the customers' language. To describe the benefits of your product – how it will improve their life – and less about the features of your offering. To talk about the pain they want relief from, and to address their concerns. To talk about them and not about you.

If you don't know the inner mind of your clients then you have to guess. Then every landing page and every sales message is torture as you try to find the words and message that will chime. Doubt makes progress difficult. If your thoughts are divided between helping certain people one way and another group of people a different way, then you'll be second guessing yourself all the way through.

Where you want to be is certain. When your preferred marketing guru asks you about your clients – how they feel now and how they want to feel – you can just tell them, because you know.

When do you talk to your clients? Here are some options.

If you run a course, either in person or online, then a great time to talk to your clients is when they've just signed up. They're excited about getting the benefits of whatever you do, and generally they'd love for you to express an interest in them. You can find out about their pain by asking why they signed up or what challenges they are facing. They'll tell you where they are trying to get to and why.

You can ask those questions by email or in an online form but I prefer to ask them in person. Then it can be a conversation where they can go into detail, and we start to build a relationship where it is obvious I care about their success.

Sometimes going straight to asking for an in-person conversation is too much. If you have a mailing list then it makes sense to start the dialogue by email. When I signed up to Jonathan Stark's email list he sent me a welcome email titled 'Nice to see you here'. The email itself was a great introduction to his list, explaining what it was about and how I could get the best out of it. It ended with this message:

> Please hit the REPLY button in your email client right now and give me a 1-sentence summary of what success would look like for your business. Heck, even a short phrase is fine. I'd really love to know!

I hit reply and told him, apparently most people do, and then he replied back. I now feel a stronger relationship to Jonathan

and his mailing list than to the others I'm subscribed to. And Jonathan's in a great place too. He doesn't just have a stronger bond, he's learning what his audience cares about in their own words.

What about existing clients? There are clients I've had for years where I didn't originally get to know them in the way I'd do today. I've found it's never too late to ask. I drop them an email saying I'd like to catch up, then we get on a call where I ask them about the challenges they are facing, what's frustrating, and where they'd like to get to. I do my best to be a good listener and in return they tell me everything. At the end of the conversation they are delighted I've taken this interest in them. I'm not pushing sales on this call, but sometimes there is an obvious opportunity where I could help. In which case we talk about options and then I ask if they'd like me to put that in a proposal.

Summary

As I quoted Blair Enns saying in the beginning of the chapter 'People buy for their own reasons and often not the reasons you think'. Taking the time to ask puts you in a higher bracket of business owners in the client's mind, those who really care.

All clients have pain they want relief from and a better future they are attracted to. This is how your clients will measure their success with you. Not whether you have done the thing you said you'll do, but whether their life has improved. If you want your clients to have success, to buy from you again and recommend you to their friends you need to find out what this is for them.

Once you have found out what success is for the client in their terms, and what concerns they may have, then marketing

becomes easier. You'll know how to describe the better life they'll have. You'll know the concerns you need to address.

Describe your audience and what they want

In this worksheet describe your audience and the result they are looking for, then come up with a good answer to the question 'so, what do you do?' in terms the client cares about.

Download printable versions of these worksheets at johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE

Who do you help?

Your clients want a result. What you do is a means to an end for them. Let's think about the result your audience wants.

Being vague makes this hard. You might need to consider multiple types of people and they might want different things.

What result does your client want from working with you?

Going Deeper

Let's dig deeper with the 5 Why's technique. Go as deep as adds value.

Why do they want that result? Then, why do they want that?

So, what do you do?

Imagine a child has asked 'So, what do you do?' Answer in the form:

I help [*who I help*] [*achieve a result*]

The rules:

- No buzzwords, a 6 year old should understand it
- As few words as possible
- Don't try to be 100% accurate. Imagine their next questions are 'how do you do that?' and 'why does that matter?'

You can try lots of different answers, for all the different types of people you help and the results they want to achieve.

So, what do you do?

I learnt this technique from Clay Herbert's presentation 'The Perfect Intro': https://vimeo.com/170572720

4

IT'S ALL ABOUT CHANGE

Change is hard

One of the hardest things in life is getting any person, or organisation, to change. Even when it's clearly in their interest. In fact you can't make anyone change, they have to choose to.

Adopting any new product is a change. If you're presenting a consumer product, you're asking your customers to make a lifestyle change. If you have a corporate product, this is part of a business process change.

If we understand why change is hard then we can address the underlying issues. What are the forces that support change, and what are the forces that work against it?

The Jobs To Be Done model of why change happens, or why it doesn't

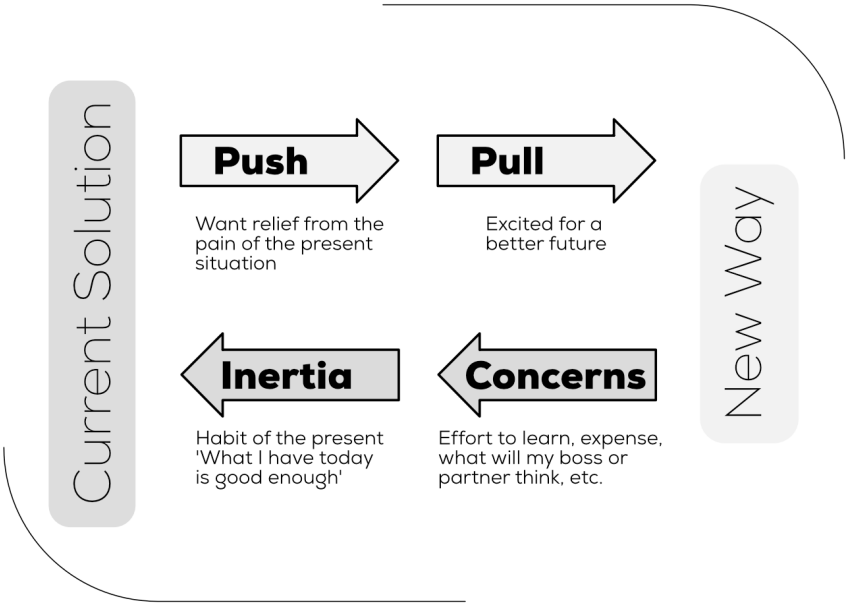
Clayton Christensen lectured at Harvard Business School. He came up with Jobs To Be Done to describe the forces for and against change when adopting products or services. In an article in the Harvard Business Review Clayton describes what 'Jobs To Be Done' are.

> We all have many jobs to be done in our lives. Some are little (pass the time while waiting in line); some are big (find a more fulfilling career). Some surface unpredictably (dress for an out-of-town business meeting after the airline lost my suitcase); some regularly (pack a healthful lunch for my daughter to take to school). When we buy a product, we essentially "hire" it to help us do a job. If it does the job well, the next time we're confronted with the same job, we tend to hire that product again. And if it does a crummy job, we "fire" it and look for an alternative.

A job isn't a task, and isn't a product, it's what the customer is trying to achieve.

Any product or service is a new way the customer is going to try and get their job done, and that involves changing from the current way they do it.

Clayton describes forces that support and oppose change.



The forces supporting change:

- Push of the current situation - There is a pain associated with the current situation that we want relief from
- Pull of the new solution - We're excited about the better future

The forces working against change:

- Concerns about the new solution - Expense, effort to learn, perception of others, not convinced it will work, etc
- Habit of the present - What I have right now is good enough

If someone is going to adopt something new the forces supporting the change need to be stronger than the forces against. The pain they want relief from combined with the vision of their better future has to be stronger than the anxieties they have about changing and how strongly they are attached to what they are currently doing.

Why did Harry Potter go to Hogwarts?

Let's take an example of a change that we can all understand. What forces supported Harry Potter changing his life from living with the Dursleys to going to Hogwarts.

The job to be done in this case is a big one: have a better life.

His push was living under the stairs and the abuse from his adopted family. His pull was Hogwarts, the magical school of witchcraft and wizardry with its promise of an exciting new future. He had to be anxious about going to a new school in a new world with no-one he knew, but this was overwhelmed by the push to get away from his horrible living situation and the exciting possibilities of learning to be a wizard.

Imagine if Harry Potter was already at Hogwarts and got the offer to move to one of the other wizarding schools. Would he? Professor Snape is awful to him, so that would be a push, and maybe a different school could offer a better quidditch team and coaching programme. Would that be enough to change? He knows Hogwarts, how it works and is comfortable there. Another school might have a better quidditch team, but the one at Hogwarts is good enough. There is anxiety about changing school as well. He'd have to learn a whole new school and culture. He'd be leaving Ron and Hermione and need to make

new friends and possibly even learn a new language. He also knows that the new school is going to have problems, he just doesn't know what they are yet. If you were Harry would you move?

The secret to a good client conversation

Let's bring this back to talking to clients.

We've already covered that pitching to our clients is a bad idea. No-one wants to be pitched to and you don't learn anything from pitching. You don't build a relationship either.

Having a random chat isn't good either. It is pleasant enough in small doses and does help build a relationship but few people want to spend much time on chit chat with an acquaintance. You don't tend to learn much about the client in the process either. You might learn some things about them and their lives, but it's completely random if they share anything important or not.

We want to have a targeted conversation with our clients, one where they get to share what matters to them and we listen and learn. We can use the forces for change to uncover what matters to our clients.

We are going to ask questions that allow them to share the pain they want relief from and the better future they desire. We'll also ask questions that help them share the anxieties they have about trying something new in this area. And it will be essential to cover how much they care, or how wedded they are to their current ways of doing things.

We'll start covering those questions in the next chapter.

What do you believe your client's forces for change are?

We'll find out the client's forces for change by asking them, but there is still a lot to learned by writing down what you think they are.

Download printable versions of these worksheets at johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

FORCES SUPPORTING CHANGE

What do you think your client wants?

What pain does your client want relief from?

What better future is the client attracted to?

FORCES PREVENTING CHANGE

What do you think your client **does not** want?

What are your client's concerns and objections?

How stuck is the client in what they already do? Is what they have today good enough? Are they actively trying to fix it?

5

QUESTIONS TO DISCOVER FORCES FOR CHANGE

Let's go through each area of the forces for change and see what questions we could ask. We don't ask all of them, we choose the right questions and tweak them for the person we're talking to.

Pain

What's your biggest challenge?

The aim of this question is to uncover the big picture. The key here is to keep them talking and dig down. Later in the book we'll cover the conversational skills that get people to open up and share more, but in general get them to describe the details of their challenge. How does it show itself? Do they have any examples?

What brings you here today?

If you go to your family doctor the first question they'll ask you is 'what brings you here today?' If you sell a course or have something that people sign up for then you'll want to ask your own version of the same question. You want to know why they signed up.

The perfect time to reach out to people is when they've just signed up. They'll be happy to share the problem they are looking to address and their hopes for a better future. It forms a bond too, you aren't just taking their money, you're caring about improving their life.

What frustrates you or stresses you out?

We learn as adults to not complain, or at least to keep it brief. No-one wants to hear us complain at length. So even though we really want to complain, the social pressure is to hold it in.

In talking to our clients we want them to do the opposite, we want them to let loose and tell us all. They want to as well, we just need to give them permission to vent. Asking what frustrates them is giving them that permission.

Is there anything else?

In the questions above we asked them their opinion on what the problem is. The first answer they give may not be the most important. So it's important to follow up with 'is there anything else?'

This is an important question and one to get into the habit of asking. They might not have anything else to share, or they might be holding back something that unlocks a new line of questioning.

When did you first realise you needed to do something to improve the situation?

You want them to tell you the straw that broke the camel's back. The point when things had got so bad they felt compelled to take action. Your job will be to make sure that scenario doesn't happen again, or at least to improve it.

The answers to this are also gold dust for marketing. The story they tell you is the perfect anecdote, the shortcut that anyone in the same situation who hears these words thinks 'you get me'.

How does this problem show itself? Walk me through an example?

We're trying to flush out a story of the real world pain they are dealing with.

An alternative is to ask something like 'When you arrive in the morning what situation do you not want to deal with?'

In talking to clients we love it if they tell us stories about things that actually happened.

People are also prone to self-diagnosing their problem. If you went to your doctor and said 'my chest hurts, I need a triple bypass' they wouldn't book you straight in for surgery. Yes the client has the problem and they are the expert in how it affects

them, but they are rarely the expert in what is causing it and how to fix it. There is a reason they came to you.

When the client tells you a story about the problem you get the truth. A story told in the moment about a real experience will be honest, and you get to think about what the real issue might be and the possible solutions, to make your own diagnosis.

What brought about the current situation?

You can use this question to dig down on a situation they've described.

What happens if...?

This is where we walk them through plausible issues to help flush out challenges we suspect are there. For example: 'What happens if the person responsible goes on holiday?'

Why is this important to you?

This question delves deeper into why it matters to them. If they're stuck telling you superficial information this question can get you to the deeper truth. They'll tell you about a failure they want to avoid and the success they want to achieve.

Couldn't you just…?

This is where you suggest a simple way they could manage without you. When they disagree they'll tell you why, and in describing how they disagree they'll tell you what matters to them.

There is a simple off-the-shelf solution for most things, suggest they use that. There's probably a book on it and they could try to fix it themselves. For my clinical guidelines app business I could ask 'Couldn't you just put all the documents on Sharepoint?'

This question builds trust as you're suggesting alternatives that don't include buying from you.

Habit

Often one of our main competitors isn't another product or service, but the customer not taking any action to resolve their situation.

Take video editing as an example. If you want to do video editing then you have to use a video editing package, and they range from slightly complicated to get-a-PhD-in-it complicated. If you're a budding amateur filmmaker then the benefits of getting your film edited outweighs the anxieties of paying for and learning Adobe Premiere Pro. A typical parent with videos of their kids might like them to be edited, but never does. Even if the software were free, the cost related to installing and learning a new software package is greater than the benefit. It just isn't worth it.

We ask the habit questions to find out how much they care and how stuck they are in the habit of the present.

Couldn't you just…?

Our last question of the pain section is also our first habit question. If we suggest a simple alternative, and they agree it is a good solution, then we're not for them.

It might seem weird to try and talk someone out of doing business with us but we aren't. If they agree then they don't need our expertise and won't value it. We'll only be able to do business with them if they disagree. They'll also be talking themselves into why it's important to do business with us.

What have you already tried?

If they say something is a big issue but they haven't even googled for a solution then they don't care. If they are actively trying to fix it then they care a lot.

I went to an NHS Hack Day a couple of years ago. This is where groups of doctors and techies get together for a weekend and work on finding tech solutions in the healthcare industry. The weekend starts by doctors pitching the problem they think tech could help solve, then teams form naturally. They see where they can get to in the weekend and present their results at the end.

At one weekend in London I was casually telling the doctors I talked to that I was an app developer and was looking for ideas for health education apps to make. Time and again young doctors would tell me how hard it was to learn to read ECGs. ECGs being those machines you see beside the hospital bed on TV showing the heart rate as a series of squiggly lines. To doctors the pattern of squiggly lines is important, the different

patterns tell them what is going on with the heart. Those patterns may be important but they are also hard to learn to read, which was the pain point all these doctors were telling me about.

I thought I could be on to a winner with an ECG training app – I was already creating ideas in my head – then I googled to see what already existed. Multiple good apps on this exact thing came back. It turned out that though all these doctors were telling me this was a big issue, it wasn't big enough of an issue for them to spend 30 seconds googling for a possible solution.

The answer you want to hear is that they are already trying to fix the problem. That they are taking action with the resources available to them but want to do better.

When I led software teams at investment banks we'd know something was important because the bankers had already tried to do it in Excel with lots of complicated macros. They got us involved when it now didn't work well enough or couldn't scale, so they needed a bespoke software solution.

Why now?

We suggest a reason to delay solving the problem. How they respond tells us how much they care and why.

This is similar to the 'couldn't you just' question. It seems like we're trying to put them off, but really we're looking to find out why it matters.

For my upgraded clinical guidelines app I was told multiple reasons why it needed to happen now. One was that there had been a 'never' event in the hospital, a clinical error that should

never happen, and a lack of good clinical guidance for the doctors was seen as a factor. There was pressure from the senior management in the hospital to fix this. So this definitely mattered to them.

Better Future

With these questions we're looking to find out about the better future they're attracted to. What success would look like to them?

The description of the better future often comes as part of asking about their pain. The conversation flows naturally onto what they want to happen after describing what they want to avoid.

Asking overtly vs asking subtly

If we haven't naturally got onto the better future we can lead the conversation there with some straightforward questions:

- Where are you trying to get to?
- How could this be made better?
- What does success look like?

We can also ask questions to allow them to reveal their better future. In some cases they may need to reveal the better future to themselves, as they've been so focussed on removing the pain they haven't considered what the better future looks like.

Tell me about a time it went really well?

You can only answer this question by telling a story, and that story is the better future they are attracted to. They want every day to be like this.

It is really cool if we can get them to tell us about their better future in terms of a story, as stories reveal the truth.

Pay attention to any emotional cues they give you. How they feel when it goes well is important, which we'll talk about in the next chapter.

If you could wave a magic wand and everything was perfect, what would that look like?

We're asking them to imagine the perfect future, not limited by what might be possible.

I like asking this question later on in an interview after they've got themselves up to speed with the problem by describing it in detail. If someone has an answer to this question it is often the essential core element they need.

A few years ago I was working on a communications app for a maternity department in a hospital. The app aimed to improve how the midwives and doctors communicated. When I was doing the user interviews I asked the senior midwife this question. She told me that she wanted everyone to be able to know the current situation with the patient. It was that simple. We could use that as a guiding star during the development.

Concerns and Anxieties

Everyone has concerns and anxieties about adopting something new. It could be cost, difficulty to learn, what their boss will think, previous experiences, or a thousand other things. All these concerns sit there as little trip wires you need to avoid or address. You want to design your solution to avoid these problems, but how do you find them out?

You could build your thing as you think is best, then after you've finished, ask the potential client for feedback. But, you'll be making a lot of mistakes you could have avoided. Why spend all your time and money on building something that misses the mark? Why not get the feedback first, and build something close to what will work?

Creating first then getting feedback also gets you poor feedback. People are generally nice and don't want conflict so they will try to only say positive things about your idea. Even if they hate what you've done, their easiest option is to say something nice and move on with their life. All the things they say make you feel good but aren't that useful when you're struggling for customers and not sure why.

Have you used anything like this? What did you like? What didn't you like?

People will freely discuss the pros and cons of other products and experiences with you - there's no danger of them hurting your feelings with their feedback, so they'll be happy to share what they liked and disliked. Here's the thing, the concerns and anxieties they expose about other products may be true for you

too. You can design your product off the successes and failures of other people's products.

While writing this book I made a course covering the main ideas and ran it as a beta test with the people who'd told me they were interested. Before I ran the course I spoke to everyone who had signed up and I asked them about their best and worst experiences with online courses. I knew that what they told me about those other courses was going to be true about mine.

Kayla told me all about the importance of good examples. Specific examples allowed the knowledge to stick in her head better. Without them something seems perfectly understandable when taught, but when you try to apply it to your own stuff you're lost. So I made sure to include lots of real world examples.

If you've asked the pain question 'what have you already tried?' then asking what they liked and didn't like flows naturally.

Is there anything you chose not to use?

There is a lot to learn from a product they explored but didn't buy, or a technique they chose not to try. Asking why exposes their concerns and anxieties.

Say you had an online training course to sell and asked me about online courses I'd researched but didn't buy. My feedback to you would be about self-study vs tutor-led courses; I much prefer to engage in instructor-led courses where I get to go through them with a cohort of other students and there are deadlines to produce work.

I'd tell you I won't buy any standard course on a training platform. The ones where you pay your money and get access to all the material. I've tried the 'learn at your own pace' type and I know it doesn't work for me. I'll pay, do a few lessons, but will never get to the end and never get the improvement I want. Leaving me disappointed in myself and a negative feeling about the provider.

If you want to sell me a course this is important information to know.

What did you think this was going to be like, and what was it like?

The book 'Out On The Wire' by Jessica Abel, contains the lessons she learned from the masters of nonfiction storytelling on radio and podcasts. There is lots of great information in the book about interviewing, which includes this:

> ...if you're thrown into an interview situation underprepared one question that always works is: 'What did you think this was going to be like, and then what was it really like?' This will almost always yield a great answer, because it evokes two stories, and it evokes a lesson.

These questions are good for getting people to talk about their experience with other products or services. Even better, you can get people to tell you about their experience with yours. On that point...

What did you think this book was going to be like, and how has it turned out? I'd love to know what you hoped to gain from it,

and whether it delivered. Drop me an email to john@johnholcroft.co.uk and let me know.

What questions will you ask your clients?

You'll only need to ask a few of these questions. What questions would you ask your clients and how would you word them?

Download printable versions of these worksheets at johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

YOUR QUESTIONS FOR YOUR CLIENT

Build your own questions, for your own clients

Questions to undercover the pain they want relief from

E.g. Why did you sign up for my dog training class?

Asking about their better future

E.g. Where are you hoping to get to?

Questions to undercover concerns and objections

E.g. What did you like and not like about other solutions you tried?

Questions about habit?

E.g. What have you already tried? Why now?

6

FEELINGS ARE VITAL

All decisions are emotional

We like to think when weighing up a decision we look at the pros and cons and then make a logical choice. Science has shown us this isn't true. We make a decision quickly based on how the choice makes us feel, and then look for the evidence to back up what we've already decided.

As the researcher and author Antonio Damasio describes in his book 'Descartes' Error', we need emotions to make decisions. Damasio showed that patients with damage to the part of the brain that processes emotions struggle with making decisions. We can use the logical part of our brains to weigh up options, but actually making a choice is always emotional.

The idea that emotions form the basis of our actions and choices is important to know as we try to understand our clients better. There are emotions behind the pain they want relief

from and the better future they're attracted to. When I'm interviewing clients I'm looking to find out what these emotions are.

Clients will judge us not so much on what we've done but instead on how we've changed how they feel. Replacing negative emotions with positive ones is our true goal.

Customers buy solutions to internal problems

A few chapters ago I talked about the peeling paint on the front of my house. I wanted relief from the pain of how bad it looked and was attracted to the better future of it looking good. There was a deeper emotional level to my desires. I felt shame at how bad the front of my house looked and wanted to feel pride. Whatever solution I chose had to remove or reduce the shame I felt, and ideally make me proud of how smart my house looked. If I felt pride I would be happy, and if I was happy then I'd buy again and tell all my friends.

Donald Miller is the author of 'Building a StoryBrand - Clarify your message so customers will listen'. In the book he describes seven elements of great storytelling and how you can use this to grow your business. The second of the seven principles is:

> Companies tend to sell solutions to external problems, but customers buy solutions to internal problems.

As he describes

> ...people's internal desire to resolve a frustration is a greater motivator than their desire to solve an external problem. This is where most brands make a critical mistake. By assuming our customers only want to resolve external prob-

> lems, we fail to engage the deeper story they're actually living.

My external problem was the peeling paintwork on the front of my house, my internal problem was the shame I felt about it.

A person's internal problem is the deeper story underneath their experience.

I know it isn't enough for me to solve my client's external problems – they won't be truly satisfied unless I make them feel better. I need to help remove the negative emotions around the pain, and start to add the positive emotions about their better future.

As Daniel Priestley says in his best selling marketing book 'Oversubscribed':

> If a person leaves your business in the same or worse emotional state than they arrived, you didn't deliver.

Getting clients to share their internal problem

How do you find out the emotions behind a person's situation? You answer these two questions:

- How do they feel now?
- How do they want to feel?

I don't ask these questions directly, instead I'm constantly alert for clues for what emotions are behind their situation, then I help the person I'm talking to share how they are feeling.

Chris Voss is a former FBI hostage negotiator. In his book 'Never Split The Difference' Chris reveals nine principles that allow him and his colleagues to successfully negotiate in any situation, even when people's lives are at stake.

One of Chris' nine principles is about uncovering people's emotional motivations. He calls the process tactical empathy and uses a technique of labelling emotions.

Tactical empathy is putting yourself in the shoes of the person you are talking to and imagining how they are feeling. Chris describes observing the older police officers in Kansas City and how successful they were in calming down angry and violent people.

> They were able to think from another person's point of view while they were talking with that person and quickly assess what was driving them.

Hopefully our clients aren't angry and violent, but we do need to know what is driving them and we need to find out while talking to them. This is being empathetic and there is a way to make it easier. As Chris says:

> Empathy is a classic "soft" communication skill, but it has a physical basis. When we closely observe a person's face, gestures, and tone of voice, our brain begins to align with theirs in a process called neural resonance, and that lets us know more fully what they think and feel.

So properly listen to the other person. Pay attention to what they are saying and how they are saying it. Don't distract yourself by thinking of the next thing to say, be completely present

in what they are saying. The neural resonance will lead us to knowing how they think and feel.

We find out if we're right by labelling. Labelling is spotting feelings and turning them into words. We might say 'it sounds like a frustrating experience', or 'it seems that it causes you anxiety'. Then we pause and wait for them to respond.

You might think you'd get resistance to this, but the opposite is true. It shows you're listening and that you care. It's a shortcut to intimacy.

Don't interrupt the silence – it's normal to need a moment to respond. They may agree or disagree, and both are fine. The normal response to labelling someone's emotions is a longer response. They'll explain the nuance of how that is right or what is really going on.

Summary

There are always emotions behind the problem. Removing the negative emotions and adding the positive ones are how we'll be judged. If we achieve this then they will be happy, they'll tell their friends and buy again. If we don't improve how they feel, even if we do exactly what we said, then they won't feel they've succeeded. In which case probably the best review we could expect from them is 'it didn't work for me'.

Taking the time to find out the feelings behind the situation shows you care and builds empathy. One way to do this is to pay attention while they talk and then respond by labelling, by suggesting an emotion you think they might be feeling. They

won't mind, and will respond with either agreement or a longer description of how they really feel.

What is your client's internal problem?

Making a positive change to how your client feels about 'the problem' is ultimately how the client will judge whether your solution worked for them or not.

How do you think your clients feel now, before the problem is addressed? How do they want to feel?

Download printable versions of these worksheets at johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

YOUR CLIENT'S INTERNAL PROBLEM

How do they feel now?

How do they want to feel?

7

LEARNING TO LISTEN

Interviewing is a skill. We need to get people to open up and share what matters, and that comes from being a good listener. We all know what a bad listener is like, someone who dominates a conversation or ignores what you say. Being submissive isn't good listening either. Being too quiet doesn't work as people won't feel comfortable talking unless you're supporting them to do so.

Almost everyone's life could be improved by becoming a better listener. In learning and practicing to be a better listener we become a better partner, a better parent, a better friend, a better teammate.

To master user interviewing we need to practice listening. In this chapter I'll show you how to do this with your family and friends. They are great people to practise on, and I promise you two things:

1. They won't notice

2. It will strengthen your relationship

What we're learning is how to be selfless in a conversation.

But first...

The weirdest conversation I ever had

I was at university and was going to meet up with my girlfriend and her friend Laura. At the meeting point myself and Laura got there first and started talking whilst we waited.

To the casual observer you wouldn't have noticed anything was weird, just two people speaking to each other. But if you paid attention you'd see this had devolved into warring monologues.

I'd talk for a bit on a topic, then when I handed the conversational baton over to Laura she'd completely ignore everything I'd said. This was her turn to talk and so she did, on a completely different topic with no relation to what I'd been talking about. There wasn't even a segue like 'that reminds me', or 'that's like'.

After a while of realising it didn't matter what I said in this conversation, I decided to see how far this would go – so I did the same back. I'd look engaged then when it was my turn to talk I talked about something completely different. If she was talking about motorbikes I'd talk about pizza. It didn't matter what, just something completely different. I saw no reaction she noticed, she just started talking again on whatever was on her mind.

I was sure she'd notice eventually as this was absurd – but no, lots of talking but absolutely no listening.

Have you ever been in a conversation where you felt you weren't being listened to? It's far more common than it should be.

Kate Murphy is a journalist and writes for the New York Times. She wrote the book 'You're Not Listening - What You're Missing And Why It Matters'. She describes why she wrote the book:

> As a journalist, I listen for a living, and, increasingly, I noticed that people I interviewed seemed surprised, almost taken aback, that I was actually paying attention to what they said. They began telling me profoundly personal things, wholly unrelated to the stories I was writing, as if they'd been long waiting for the opportunity. And these were very successful, well-connected people—not lacking for company, but apparently lacking for listeners. They would always thank me for listening, and also often apologize for unloading.

If we're interviewing people for our business, and we do a good job listening, then we'll have a similar experience. We'll learn more than we could have imagined. But though this is good to do with strangers, isn't it more valuable to do with those close to us, our friends and family?

Learn to interview on family and friends - without them noticing

People like it when you properly listen to them. It isn't something people experience all that often and it builds a strong bond.

Here's how you practise on friends and family. You don't warn them. When you are talking, in the car, kitchen, wherever, get them to tell you in detail about some aspect of their life.

You will be talking too, but only to get them to share. You don't get to tell your own stories or offer advice. For bonus marks you'll be asking relevant questions based on what they've said.

Let's start at the beginning and get them to open up and share details.

Basics: How, What, and Mirroring

At this level we just want them to go into detail. We do that by asking how and what questions, with a smattering of mirroring. Mirroring is where you repeat the last few words they say back as a question.

You can ask 'why' questions, but don't use the word why. Asking someone why they did something is normally taken as asking them to justify their decision – making them defensive even if the intent is pure. Instead translate why into a what or how question, like 'what led to that?' or 'how did that come about?'

This is a conversation I had with my 16 year old daughter after she came back from a college open day. She had done a full 6 hour day and I wanted to find out how it went. My daughter can be chatty at times, but not today.

> *Me: How was your day at the college?*
> *Her: Yeah, it was good.*

Not everyone is naturally chatty, or they might not start off being comfortable chatting to you. If they aren't comfortable it's

often as they are feeling pressure to give good answers, or aren't sure what you're looking for. This is where I get people to walk me through an experience. It's simple and gives lots of opportunities to ask questions to get them to open up and elaborate. I use this technique a lot with my teenage kids. It works great.

Me: You got there at 9 AM. What did you do first?
Her: We got put into our tutor groups and met our tutor.
Me: You met your tutor? (Mirroring)
Her: Yes, Jo. She's a history teacher. Apparently you call the teachers by their first name at college. It feels really weird.
Me: What time did that take you up to? (What)
Her: About 10
Me: So what did you do after that? (What)
Her: We had three taster sessions of lessons before lunch.
Me: What did you do? (What)
Her: I did Biology, Maths and Physics
Me: How did that work? (How)
Her: We did biology first. Do you know what a Daphnia is?
Me: A type of flower?
Her: No. It's a water flea. We did this experiment where we sucked one up in a pipette and put it on cotton wool, which stopped it from moving, then we looked at it under a microscope. You can see through them, so you can see the heart beating. We counted the heart rate then we experimented by dropping caffeine on them and seeing how that affected their heart rate, then how alcohol

affected it. We could have put nicotine on as well but I didn't get to that.

Her: Ooo, what was really cool was you could see three generations of flea in the one flea?

Me: Three generations? (mirroring)

Her: Yeah. Each flea is born pregnant with the next generation, and that next generation is also pregnant. You can see this all under the microscope.

Me: Cool. Do they breed sexually or asexually? (relevant question)

Her: Yeah, I asked the teacher that. We had to look it up. Apparently both.

... And so on.

You can see that after a tough start we managed to get into a place where my daughter was happy to go into detail on her day.

Advanced: Drilling into emotions

In the last chapter we talked about why it's important to understand the emotions behind situations. If someone shares an emotion during your interview then you've hit the jackpot – exactly the thing to drill down on and learn more about. In business this is where the truth about what matters is revealed. In a personal conversation this is where you strengthen a bond.

Here is a bit more of that conversation with my daughter.

Me: So how was physics?

Her: Urgh! I'm not going to be doing physics. (Disgust)

Me: Why not?
Her: It was boring.

... Then we drill into why physics was boring.

If during a conversation they share something that makes them frustrated, angry, happy, excited, whatever, drill down into it. This is where you really learn what motivates them.

If you've asked a friend to share more about an emotion then listen, don't interrupt. Ask them to tell you more about why they feel this way. Don't be looking for your turn to talk, or to share your opinion. Just understand where they are at.

With kids there is a real temptation to deny their emotions. Take my daughter and her dislike of physics. That bothered me. I did physics at school and loved it. So I had to hold myself back when my daughter said it was boring. When I asked her to explain why I had the urge to interrupt and dispute her arguments, but that would have been denying her emotions. What I had to do was listen, then at the end, if needed, I could describe what I got out of physics and why I enjoyed it.

To practise this look out for emotional signals. If you spot one get them to tell you more, and support them telling you more with your how, what and why questions. Then don't interrupt, this is about them, not you.

Tying this back to business

These same skills work in a business interview. Asking how, what, and mirroring are how we get someone to elaborate. We often want to know why something happens but we don't directly ask 'why' as that tends to make people defensive.

Instead we disguise the why question as 'how did that come about?' or 'what led to that?'.

We need to ease people into a conversation and make them comfortable telling us stories. In a business context I've found a great opening is 'how did you end up working here?' or some variation like 'what got you into dog training?' That's an easy question to answer and it involves telling me a story. It shows I'm interested in them, and it's easy for me to ask relevant questions and get them to elaborate. I've never heard an answer to this question that I didn't find fascinating, and we're building a bond right at the start of the interview.

The 'walk me through that' line of questioning is great in a business context. You'll notice me doing that in the next chapter where I describe the interviews for a real project. I get the doctors and midwives to tell me about their day, along with good and bad experiences. I learn a lot from real stories of what happened, the good and the bad, including why they are good and why they are bad.

The best response is always someone sharing an emotion. Drilling into this is a lot easier in a business context than it is personally. The mistake of denying someone's emotion or trying to fix it for them isn't a thing in a business interview. The only mistake is someone telling you that something is the worst part of their day and not asking them why.

Summary

The core of a good client interview is being a good listener. To be a good listener we have to be selfless in a conversation. We get them to talk, to open up, to elaborate. We bite our tongue

when we have the urge to talk about ourselves – and we're not waiting for our turn to talk.

The basics in any conversation are asking lots of 'how' and 'what' questions, along with mirroring things they have said to us back as questions. We ask 'why' questions, but we disguise them as 'what' or 'how' questions, like 'What led to that?' or 'How did that come about?'

We help people open up by asking them to talk us through an experience. Asking about the timeline and walking them through it helps them share what matters to them.

Then finally, we don't shy away from emotions. Any emotions they share are vitally important and we support them expressing them. We develop empathy by paying full attention to what they are saying, then support them talking about emotions by labelling them and letting them respond. When talking about emotions we don't interrupt silence. Good responses take a moment.

These skills work in business and in our personal lives. You develop a strong bond with your family and friends when you help them share what matters to them. You don't interrupt, you don't tell your story, you don't try to fix it. Instead you support them talking about how they feel and show empathy.

Exercise: Have a selfless conversation

I want you to have a selfless conversation with a friend or colleague.

If you're wondering what to talk about then a great topic is asking about their backstory. There must be things you don't know about their background. One of my friends used to be into sailing, I could ask him how that came about.

Then fill in the worksheet to reflect on how it went.

Download printable versions of these worksheets at johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

SELFLESS LISTENING REFLECTION

What did you ask about?

How well did it go?

- Was it hard to not talk about yourself?
- Do you think you're closer after having the conversation?

8

WHAT DOES A REAL CLIENT INTERVIEW LOOK LIKE?

I learn best with real-world examples. Before I wrote this book I interviewed people who were interested in the subject – they told me they like real-world examples too. So that's what this chapter is. I'm describing a project I did a few years ago, the people I interviewed, what I asked them, and what I learnt.

In the chapter 'Asking by Email' I'll show exactly how I asked for the interviews.

In this chapter you'll see how talking to clients happens in real life. How we make them feel heard and find out what matters.

Background

Medway hospital is a big hospital south-east of London. It has a maternity department that has a special neonatal department set up to deal with complex births such as very premature births and babies and mothers with difficult health conditions.

They contacted me to develop an app for them. I was told that they were trying to improve their communication between the midwives and the doctors. The midwives were calling the doctors to see unwell babies but the doctors didn't feel they were being given the information they needed.

They'd already done a first pass at addressing this problem and had instigated the LABOUR reporting system. This was using the word as a mnemonic for what the midwives needed to report to the doctors: Location, gestational Age, Birth stage or mode, any Ongoing or obstetric concerns, the Urgency of the call, and any Risk factors associated with the birth. They had signs for this by the phones, and they were getting results with the doctors getting more relevant information.

They wanted to take this up a level and help other hospitals as well. One of the senior doctors had seen an app in another hospital that allowed the user to put in a little detail about the state of the patient and be given a risk score. They were looking to do something similar for their LABOUR reporting tool.

Who to talk to?

I wanted to do the best possible job I could on this project and for me that starts with talking to people. To understand the full situation I had a lot of different types of people to talk to.

In terms of the medical situation I needed to talk to the midwives, junior doctors, and senior doctors. I wanted to get all their perspectives on how things were at the moment, why they were that way, and what they wanted from a better future.

I also knew that I needed to talk to their IT department. They were the ones who were going to be supporting this and controlled it getting rolled out. We'd need to fit in with them.

The IT Department

First of all I talked to Liz who was the head of the IT department. She was amazing and told me all about where the hospital was and where it was trying to get to. She told me that the hospital was currently mostly paper based and used bleeps for communication.

On Bleeps

In case you don't know, a bleep is what the NHS calls a pager, that thing you thought died in the 1990s. Here's how they work. The doctors carry a bleep, a small box with a single line display on it. If you want to get in touch with a doctor you go to a phone, ring the number for the bleep system, type in the number of the bleep you want to contact, followed by the number to ring back, then hangup and wait by the phone. The doctor holding the 'bleep' notices it go off and sees the number come up on its little display. They then have to drop what they're doing, find a phone, ring the number on the bleep, then hopefully the person who answers the phone is the person who bleeped them and can tell them what they want.

If you think this sounds like a productivity disaster you'd be right. Everyone knows they are terrible, but every effort to move from them has failed. Eventually the government had enough. In 2019 they ordered the removal of pagers for non-

> emergency communications by the end of 2021. I'm writing this in 2022, that deadline has been missed.

Liz told me their strategy for the future, where they wanted to be, using what technology, how they were going to phase the roll-out. They wanted to start with electronic observations and move up to electronic patient information systems later. They had already decided to use Samsung Galaxy Tab Active tablets and give them to all the staff that needed them. They were on a path to phase out bleeps but weren't there yet. And the maternity department was currently completely paper based and that wasn't changing soon.

I asked Liz what she thought the purpose of the app I was going to develop was. She said:

- Aid the midwife in the room to make sure they get the right clinical support when they need it
- When it's known that a senior doctor is needed it should go straight to them rather than through a junior doctor
- Allow doctors to review the situation on the way and arrive suitably informed

I now knew what success looks like to Liz and I had constraints for the solution. It would have to be an Android app as they were deploying Android tablets. The environment was also completely paper based, so there was the extra challenge of a business process change. The tablets weren't yet being used, so would be new to everyone, and would have to integrate with the existing paper based system.

The junior doctors

It was a pleasure talking to Rebecca. She was a junior doctor in the hospital, and we started by discussing how she ended up working there. She told me a little of her life history and how this hospital compared to others. We talked about a lot of things, and I got a lot of detail on what her life as junior doctor in the department was like, how the department worked, how often she was called, by whom, and for what.

When I'm talking to someone in a user interview I'm trying to find out what their world is like in this area. I'm trying to get them to tell me stories and give me examples, as that's where all the real detail lies. I also have two main things I want to find out: what does success and failure look like. Though I rarely ask these directly. Instead of 'what does failure look like?' I'll find some other way to ask like 'what causes you stress?' or 'when you arrive in the morning, what situation do you not want to find?'

With Rebecca the juicy detail came when we got on to failure. I asked her what calls from midwives caused her stress. She described the anxiety of going into a room not knowing what to expect and finding an emergency situation with a baby, one as a junior doctor she wasn't equipped to deal with. She was then trying to deal with the serious situation while at the same time calling for senior support. The senior doctors then arrive some time later in the same situation she arrived in, not knowing what they were walking into and then immediately having to deal with an emergency situation.

Rebecca gave me examples of all the types of calls she got, from the trivial, to more important and all the stages up to an emergency.

She described a medium risk call, of a birth where they noticed the babies heart rate dropping. It will probably be fine, but the junior doctor attends, just in case.

A high risk call would be a baby born significantly premature, less than 33 weeks' gestation. In which case they bring a senior doctor, crash trolley and nurse.

Asking people about their frustrations is always fun. This is often where the floodgates open. People get frustrated, but social politeness stops them properly venting to the people around them. I give them permission, I want to hear what frustrates them.

Rebecca got frustrated when her time was wasted. She told me of a time she was bleeped while she was dealing with a patient. She interrupted what she was doing to answer the bleep and was asked to come to the maternity ward, she responded that she would after she'd finished dealing with her current patient. On finishing she started walking over to the ward, and on the way got another bleep from them, so had to go back to where she had come from to answer. It was the ward asking her if she was on the way. Which frustrated Rebecca as her getting to the ward had been slowed down by being chased about going to the ward.

I took that point onboard but also picked up something that wasn't explicitly said: the midwives on the ward are in the dark until the doctor turns up. They don't know when they are

turning up, and don't have any good way to communicate with them or know what is going on.

I asked Rebecca how well the LABOUR reporting system was working. She said that it had been great at the start but now they were having to remind the midwives to use it.

Rebecca even knew why she got 'come to room 5' type messages, missing all the details she needed. She said 'the midwife that wants you is dealing with the baby, so asks someone else to call you. That's when detail is lost.'

She even had a suggestion for the design of the app. She'd like early entry of information by midwives, so that if they need to call the doctors it is there and they can't forget

Rebecca told me the one thing she wanted, that would fix all her issues with the current situation, which was to know what she was walking into. It was that simple to her, just to know the situation she was about to have to deal with.

The midwives

Next I spoke to the midwives. I spoke to a few, but I'll share what the head midwife Alison told me.

We started with easy background questions about herself and her role in the hospital. She told me that she'd been trained for 8 years and now her job was a clinical skills facilitator where she trained the junior midwives. She was at the grade now that she was a manager, so didn't normally see patients except when they were supporting the junior midwives or if the department got busy.

We talked about using the LABOUR mnemonic when calling the doctors. Alison told me that communication was better using it, but there were some challenges. She repeated the point that Rebecca made that the midwife that needs the doctor isn't the one making the call, and told me why. There aren't phones in the delivery rooms and the midwife dealing with the baby can't leave the baby. That's why they get someone else to go out to make the call from the phone at the nurses station.

Then Alison told me something wonderful, she'd done something to fix their problem with the LABOUR reporting system. She'd got stickers made that had the elements of LABOUR listed in a column down the left: location, age, birth type, etc, with space on the right to fill in the details. The midwives dealing with the baby would fill these in, then hand them to the person making the call. They could then make the call with the required information and the sticker would be placed in the patient's notes afterwards.

That was awesome. Alison was trying to make this work, and was being inventive in finding ways to make it happen.

I asked Alison my standard question about what apps or technology they already used in this area. Her answer was none, they had electronic patient monitors and there were computers at the nursing station, but other than that the department was entirely paper based. They had paper notes and recorded everything on paper. What's more the midwives were banned from using their phones on the ward. The reason being that the midwife should never appear to be checking facebook when they were on the ward. This was also a concern if the rule banning mobile devices was lifted, they still wanted to make a

good impression on the patients. So wouldn't want to appear to be distracted on their phones when dealing with patients.

Then we started talking about the idea that the senior doctor had for a risk scoring app. She told me 'I don't think that's going to work for us'. Alison was concerned that the design the doctors were suggesting was good for doctors but not for the midwives.

She could see that risk scoring would allow the doctors to decide to escalate amongst themselves more quickly, but the midwives always called the junior doctor first. Even if it was obvious that the junior doctor was going to refer to a senior doctor.

> "We wouldn't make the decision to call the consultant or registrar, we would tell the SHO and they decide who they need."

However when I told Alison about Rebecca's idea for the app to allow midwives to capture information as they go along, she loved that idea.

At the end of the interview I asked one of my normal final questions: 'is there anything I should have asked or anything you think I need to know?'

Alison did have something extra she wanted to say. She told me what her holy grail for an electronic solution would be. It would be a single place to enter information on a patient, available to all.

It turns out that the computer systems they did have were a pain, as there were lots of different ones and they had to do

repeated entry of the same information in different systems. They mostly had paper notes, and anything recorded on paper was only available to the person holding the piece of paper. She wanted an electronic solution where the midwife could enter information on the patient and it be visible to anyone who needed to see it.

The senior doctor

I met Ghada in her office. After a couple of minutes of small talk we discussed the project. I asked Ghada why she had introduced the LABOUR reporting system. She told me that they had issues with midwives not communicating the problems the baby is facing in a systematic way, so decisions were being made with incomplete information. I asked her if she had examples of the problems or any specific cases she could describe. She told me three:

Under-reporting of importance

The junior doctor got called to theatre with no more information. When they arrived they found it was a planned caesarian section of a pre-term baby. This needed to be escalated and involve the whole team. A lot of wasted time and stress to the team when they could have prepared properly.

Over-reporting of importance

During the night shift, when the hospital has skeleton staffing, there was a call from the delivery suite saying come to room 4. The doctor came immediately to find it was for a non-urgent check that could have been done the next day. This was handed over to the day team.

The serious incident

There was a 34 week baby – that is, born 6 weeks early – in good condition on the post-natal ward. The midwife got concerned, didn't use LABOUR, just called that she wanted a doctor. The doctor saw no immediate concerns but said to be alerted if things changed. The midwives then saw an increase in heart rate and were concerned that the baby had started grunting, which shows difficulty breathing. The doctor was called again by a different midwife who just said 'come and see the baby' without any detail. The same junior doctor went. When they arrived they weren't told any of the concerns the midwife had with the heart rate and breathing, and when they examined the baby those concerns weren't present, so the doctor left. An hour later the baby crashed and required emergency resuscitation. The subsequent investigation highlighted lapses in escalating an unwell baby.

I then asked Ghada if she had an example of the opposite, of what really good communication looks like. She told me about the time when she was the senior doctor on call, and she got a call saying 'I'm a midwife in theatre, we're going to section a 38 week-er whose mother has got risk factors for sepsis, and I'd like you to attend this delivery in the next ten minutes.' To Ghada this was perfect. She knew she was going to have to resuscitate the baby, take it to the neonatal team for screening and start antibiotics. She had time to prepare the neonatal team on her way to theatre.

I asked Ghada what improvements she'd like over the current system and she told me two:

- The midwives can't remember the mnemonic, so she'd

like them to be led through the right information to enter, so they couldn't forget needed detail. In particular the risk factors
- She saw the opportunity for an app to be intelligent and score the risk, so the midwife could be told to call the senior doctor directly

By the end of the conversation we'd come to understand the fundamental purpose of what we were trying to do in terms of the situation it was to be used in and the outcome we were looking for.

The situation was escalating the unwell newborn. The outcome was reducing harm due to poor communication.

The shape of the solution

These interviews told me the shape the solution had to fit in. Much as a square peg doesn't fit into a round hole, any solution I make has to fit into the shape of the organisation and the people that are going to use it. These user interviews gave me a massive boost into knowing what that shape looks like.

- For the IT department it had to be part of their goal for a paperless hospital. They were deploying Android tablets, so that was the platform it was going to have to run on. They were happy to deploy individual tools that helped, but their ultimate goal was to be patient-centric in their IT, like the electronic patient information systems they were looking to roll out.
- The midwives were there with the babies, and saw any situation progress over time. The set-up of the hospital

led them to making simple 'come and see the baby' messages to the doctors. They wanted to communicate better, and they'd love to have a way to record what was happening with a patient that was easily visible to everyone that mattered.
- The junior doctors, and the senior doctors, just wanted to know the situation they were being called to attend.

I got hints for what to design as well:

- Capturing information on the baby as they went along was very popular
- Making that information available to all the relevant parties
- Being led through the needed information sounded good as it led someone to success

I saw two huge risks with this project.

Firstly, if it didn't meet with the IT department's goals then it wasn't going to get rolled out. This risk was manageable as long as I aligned with their goals. This wasn't the one that scared me, the biggest risk I saw was getting the midwives to adopt it.

The midwives were the key to this, they were the primary users and the source of all information, but we had to be aware that we were asking them to make a big change to the way they worked. And it is incredibly hard to get anyone to change how they work. With the initial idea it seemed that the midwives were going to have to do most of the change and do most of the work, but it was the doctors that would see the benefit.

I had the voice of the senior midwife in my head: 'I don't think this is going to work for us'. I feared it would fail because of this. It's normal to rebel when a solution is forced on us, where we don't feel ownership and don't see the benefit. We had to find a way to make this work for the midwives, where their day to day lives would be better through using it. What they said in the interviews had given me some hints.

Summary

At the start of any project you might feel like you're trying to navigate to a destination in the fog at night, without a map. You know the destination is out there but how to get there is a mystery. You could wander in all sorts of directions, wasting valuable time and effort, and may not even get to the right destination. This is exactly why user interviews are so helpful. When I start thinking about any software product, there are so many options and I could spend a fortune in time and money building something beautiful but wrong. If it doesn't help my audience, where they are, then I've failed.

I make my own map by talking to people. I find out about the problems they're facing, the environment they're in, and where they want to get to. I identify the risks and see what is really needed. There will still be challenges on the way but with this map I'm confident I can get there.

For the LABOUR app I started with only the rough goal of improving communication between doctors and midwives, and the idea of a risk scoring app. After the interviews I had the shape of a solution and the main risks I faced. Now I could start designing the solution.

How good is your map?

What gaps in your knowledge about the client and their motivations would you like to fill?

Download printable versions of these worksheets at johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

HOW GOOD IS YOUR MAP?

Who do you need to understand? For an organisation this is normally a few people.

What gaps in your knowledge about these people and their motivations would you like to fill?

9

ASKING BY EMAIL

I've seen people spend weeks trying to construct an email to ask someone for a meeting. Torturing themselves trying to do the impossible of saying everything about their idea so they won't be rejected, but also trying to be short and engaging. That doesn't work, there is a far easier way to ask.

People don't magically make themselves available for user interviews, we have to ask them. Back when I thought talking to people was pitching my idea this used to scare me. Particularly if they were a friend or were a name in the industry. I'd be terrified of burning a relationship.

It got a lot easier when I stopped pitching and replaced it with being there to learn about their world and how to help. I found that being honest about how early I was in the process and how little I knew made people more likely to talk to me. I didn't need to pretend to be further along than I was, or more certain in the right path. Instead of damaging a relationship – each interview built one.

My experience is it's easy to get people to agree to a user interview if you approach them in the right way. People want to help and will talk to you. What will hold them back is they don't want to be pitched or sold to, and they don't want to have someone take up a lot of their time.

Normally we're asking people for an interview by email. This chapter is describing how to do that.

If you can ask someone for an interview in person then do. I sometimes meet someone, realise they'd be great to talk to and ask them for an interview. Unless we talk right there and then, I still send them the email below because it sets us up for success.

Robert Fitzpatrick shares a brilliant template for this email in 'The Mom Test'. I've tweaked this based on my experience and broken it down for you below.

Requesting an interview by email

Here are two examples of real emails I've sent out. These were both for the LABOUR app project.

This is the email I sent to the head of IT, who already knew who I was and what I was working on:

> Hi Liz,
>
> I'm now at the stage of talking to all the stakeholders of the LABOUR app. I'm arranging meetings with the front line staff in the maternity department, both doctors and midwives. I would like to talk to you to make sure that I build something that actually helps, as I know that it is all too easy to develop

> something that technically works but is useless in people's real lives. You can really help me to understand the constraints and goals of IT use in the hospital, so that I can build something that fits.
>
> Would you be able to talk with me in the next week or two?

And this is the one I sent to a junior doctor:

> Hi Rebecca,
>
> Hopefully you have been warned that I was going to get in touch. I'm an app developer and product designer working with Dr Ramadan on a LABOUR app for the next stage of the communication tool.
>
> We are at an early stage and I want to make sure that I build something that actually helps. I'm not a doctor so I really need help to understand how it all works from your perspective. You are on the front line in the maternity department so you could really help me gain some clarity.
>
> Dr Ramadan has given me your details to get in touch. Would you be able to talk with me in the next week or two? Seeing how you work is important to me, so I'll come down to Medway and I expect to need less than half an hour of your time.

These emails are making the same request, but customised for each recipient. The emails I sent to the midwives and the senior doctors followed the same pattern.

I love the format of these emails. They are honest and set the right expectation for them and for me. I am upfront with my

intentions and honest about my ignorance. They have a perspective I don't have and I want to learn about their world so I can make something valuable.

I was hired by the hospital to develop this project so it was easy to get people in the hospital to talk to me. When I've been working on my start-ups I've used emails like these to reach out to senior people who had no reason to agree to talk to me. Everyone said yes.

The checklist

Here are the elements of the email you send out:

- How you know me
- Vision: The problem I'm trying to solve
- Framing: I have nothing to sell, just trying to make something that helps
- Show weakness and state their value
- The ask

Let's take a look at each element of this email in more detail.

How you know me

This is simple. I only send these emails to people I have been introduced to or have been referred to. This is one line explaining how they know me, or that someone they know recommended I talk to them. This solves the 'who's this?' question in their head when they open my email.

Vision: The problem we're trying to solve

This is one line where you lay out what you are trying to do. It could be:

- Making an app for the LABOUR communication tool
- Helping doctors learn to diagnose ear conditions
- Help German chemical companies sell to an English-speaking audience

Keep it simple, remember you aren't pitching. This is you stating your vision of where you're trying to get to.

Framing: I have nothing to sell, just trying to make something that helps

Framing is an honest statement of where we're at, and we set them at ease that we aren't going to sell to them. This doesn't need to be an essay, you can do it in one line. If I was building a new software product I'd say:

- We're just starting out, and don't have anything to sell, but want to make sure we make something that really helps

It's that simple. You'll see I did a version of that in the emails to Liz and Rebecca. The only difference with Liz and Rebecca is I left out 'I've nothing to sell' as that was a given in this context.

Show weakness and state their value

This is where we sincerely state why we need their help – showing weakness – and why they are a great person to help us.

This is the truth of the situation, we need their help as they have a perspective we don't have. They don't want their time wasted, and part of that is realising that they have something important to share.

With Rebecca I showed weakness by saying:

> I'm not a doctor so I need help to understand how it all works from your perspective.

Then stated her value by saying:

> You are on the front line in the maternity department so you could help me gain some clarity.

In those two lines I showed why I needed her help and that she was a great person to help me.

The ask

We have to ask for what we want, which is a meeting.

I tend to do this as a two step process. In this first email I'll say 'Do you have time in the next couple of weeks to meet up for a chat?' I don't put any of the logistical stuff in the first email. Though it's nice to circumvent any planning ping pong I don't want to come across as presumptuous they'll say yes.

After they say yes, then I'll make it as easy as possible to choose a time. They might already have responded by saying some version of 'happy to chat, I tend to be free on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings'. In which case I'll offer a time that I think will work for them. I also send a link to my Calendly page. This lets them choose a slot in my calendar that works for both of us.

My Calendly link for user interviews is https://calendly.-com/john-holcroft/30min I like the positive signalling of having '30 min' in the link. This shows that I'm not going to take up a lot of their time.

Why thirty minutes? I can fit the main parts of a user interview in 30 minutes. When it's going great they'll be enjoying themselves and I'll be learning loads, and it naturally will go longer. In fact I'll have booked a full hour from my calendar. If we get to the end of the 30 minutes and there is more to talk about then I'll ask if they're happy to go longer. If they are then we keep going. If not I thank them for their time and ask them if we can book another time. I always treat them and their time with respect.

With existing clients

In the introduction I described doing an interview with an existing client which resulted in a proposal and whole project of work. I followed a cut-down version of the template above in reaching out to talk to them.

My hospital client mentioned the challenges they'd had updating a guideline recently, and said that they vaguely remembered me having ideas for making it easier. I saw this as an opening so asked for a meeting:

> I do want to update the app to have the content hosted online, where you can update it freely if you want to (Vision). There are a lot of ways I could do this, but I need to do what works best for you (Framing). I'd love to talk to you to share my ideas and find out what would work best for you (Stating their value). Do you have time in the next week or so to catch up? (The ask)

Reaching out to people you don't know

Barry was on my first 'Be A Client Whisperer' course. He asked about sending interview requests to cold leads, that is people who don't know us and we've not been referred to.

I'd first say that you have plenty of warm leads if you think about it. You have a network of friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and they can all recommend other people to talk to, who then become warm leads too.

Secondly, on the calls with people we do know we'll ask for recommendations of anyone else to talk to. When you find someone who cares about what you're doing this feels like hitting a rich seam as they recommend so many more good people.

I've not tried it myself but I have been told a technique for approaching cold leads. Instead of 'how you know me' say 'feel free to ignore this'. For example:

- You probably don't have time to read or respond to this and that's ok
- If you don't have time to respond to this then delete it and no worries

We're being super polite and recognising that we're interrupting them and they owe us nothing.

Summary

Asking someone for an interview is easy if you follow this simple email formula. You don't need to go into detail on your idea, in fact you only need to say the rough goal you're going for.

These are the parts:

How you know me

- I only send these to people I've met or been referred to

Vision: The problem I'm trying to solve

- Not saying what you're doing, only where we're trying to get to. Like 'I want to improve the recovery process for runners' or 'I want to help fathers with teenage daughters'

Framing: I have nothing to sell, I'm just trying to make something that helps

- A standard concern is that this is a disguised sales call – assure them it isn't

Show weakness and state their value

- Why they are an important person to talk to. They are

an expert in an area you are weak in and can really help you.

The ask

- Ask for the meeting and let them know it will be short, say 30 minutes, as another standard concern is that you're going to take up a lot of their time.

At the time of writing every single person I've asked for an interview has said yes. Use these tips and framework to get potential clients saying yes to you too.

Write your own email template

Use the worksheet to build up the elements of your own email, then put it together and save it as a template.

Download printable versions of these worksheets at johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

ASKING BY EMAIL

Let's build up the parts of your own email.

Vision: What's your one line vision for the problem you're trying to solve?

Framing: In one line, set their mind at ease by saying what your motivation is, and isn't, for reaching out.

Why them: Why are they an important person to talk to? Show weakness and state their value. Normally they are an expert in an area you are weak in.

Make the ask: Ask for a meeting and let them know you won't take up a lot of their time.

Put it all together and save it as a template.

10

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Who to ask?

If you're reaching out to an existing client then this is easy, you ask to talk to them. If you're working on a project then you'll need to consider who to ask to talk to. The simple answer is to ask as many different types of people as matter. People who have different perspectives.

For my app for the hospital I needed to talk to the midwives, junior doctors, senior doctors, and the IT department.

My friend Michael Cohen came on my first 'Be A Client Whisperer' course. He does acupuncture therapy and was looking to set up his own business targeting runners. I suggested that he sought out different types of runners such as yoga moms, 40 year old marathon runners, and competitive athletes. The people we expect to have different perspectives.

How many people should I ask?

The official answer is to keep talking to people until you stop hearing anything new.

I find the 80/20 rule applies here, and I can learn 80% of what I want from talking to one or two people from a group. What one 40 year old marathon runner cares about is likely similar to another 40 year old marathon runner. You might happen to talk to someone with outlandish opinions, but that's unlikely. When you talk to two different people who say the same things then you can trust their perspective.

What if you don't know your audience segments?

For a broad audience I find that I discover the types, or segments, as I talk to them. Once you're clear on the interviewee's goals, you can reverse engineer your categories by looking for the patterns. This should give you the types of people who care – the ones you want to talk more to – and the types of people who don't care.

Michael was talking about finding his minimum viable audience, the smallest number of people he could start his business with, or the niche to start with. I suggested that he could hone in on this by talking to people, to start broad and then follow the signals to become more specific. He eventually found out about the CrossFit market. People who were very serious about fitness and had a sense of personal identity in belonging to the CrossFit community. They were a perfect minimum viable audience.

Talking to people doesn't cost anything, nor does it commit you to a path.

Prepare your questions

Look over the questions I've suggested in Chapter 5 and make your own cheat sheet of what questions you'd like to ask them. In this cheat sheet include the opening and closing questions I describe in the next chapter.

Keep this page beside you during the interview. I never follow it exactly, instead it's there to make sure I don't forget anything important and allow me to relax. I think up the good questions beforehand so I can be fully present during the interview.

The best question is the one that scares you

This is the question where the answer could tell you this idea isn't going to work. It's scary as hell to ask the question that might mean this is all pointless, but you'd rather know now it isn't going to work than after you've built it. Learning now is research, learning later is failure.

For me it's normally the 'what are you currently doing to fix it?' question. If someone has a problem but can't see it or isn't doing anything to fix it, then it is going to be an uphill battle to promote a solution and achieve adoption.

I went through a start-up accelerator with an idea for an otoscope simulator. An otoscope being the thing doctors use to look in your ears. This simulator would train doctors on how to diagnose ear conditions. We thought family doctors would be the main audience, as they need to do this every day but aren't well trained in it. We spoke to lots of doctors who all confirmed how much of a struggle it was to diagnose ear conditions and how they had to do it all the time. But

when we asked them what they were doing to fix this problem they all looked a bit sheepish and admitted they weren't doing anything. They weren't learning from a book, or on the internet, or going on a course. This was the ultimate reason I gave up on that idea. We worked hard on it for a while but hadn't found a strong signal for who cared. It isn't impossible that a success could have been made out of it but I couldn't see a path. I decided to cut my losses and try another idea.

Ask about the challenges in their lives, diagnose your own solution

> There is a problem trying to figure out what people want by canvassing them. I mean, if Henry Ford canvassed people on whether or not he should build a motor car, they'd probably tell him what they really wanted was a faster horse.
>
> — JOHN MCNEECE

If Henry Ford had asked people what to build they would have asked for a faster horse, but we aren't asking people what to build, we're asking them about their life and the challenges in it.

Instead, if Henry Ford had asked if they had a transportation problem and how it affected them he'd have got valuable information. He'd have heard about all the challenges they have with horses: how they get tired, can't carry that much weight, and require a lot of care. He'd have heard about the things they were doing to fix the problems, like having multiple horses for different tasks and employing people to look after them. From

that he'd know that there was an opportunity for a new transportation solution.

Who are you going to talk to?

Fill out the worksheet on what types of people you'd like to talk to, then who specifically you would ask.

Download printable versions of these worksheets at johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

WHO TO TALK TO

Are all your clients and potential clients the same? Probably not. List the types of people you'd like to talk to.

Who specifically would you ask? If you don't know, how would you find them?

11

DURING THE INTERVIEW

There are two core things I'd like to share about interviews:

- People share more detail with loose acquaintances or strangers than close friends.
- When people feel known and appreciated they are more willing to share

The first is amazing. You can learn more about a person than they've shared with their partner or close friends or colleagues. You aren't even prying, it's just no-one has asked before, or cared to hear. We've given them permission to talk about themselves and shown that we care. When we do that people open up.

That ties into the second point: when people feel known and appreciated they are more willing to share. This is why the start of the interview is important, as this is where we let them feel

known and appreciated, and give them permission to talk about themselves.

Setting them at ease

Repeat time constraint and message from the email

We've allayed their concerns in the email we sent out. I start by repeating the same message: I'm not going to take up a lot of your time, I'm not trying to sell you something, I'm trying to build something that helps, and you have a perspective I don't have and can help me a lot.

If giving a demo

If the initial call goes well we'll ask them if we can come back and show them what we've done to get their feedback. It might be an outline for a course, or landing page, or rough designs. If we're on that second call it is a similar structure to the first one. The main addition to the start of the conversation is to say that I'm testing the design, not them. I just want them to talk out loud about the things I show them.

Ask to record, and set the ground rules for trust

We have to record the interview. Primarily because our memory isn't good enough, but also so we can be fully present in the conversation. You can't take notes fast enough or properly listen while you are taking them. We'll take notes from the recording afterwards.

This is the perfect opportunity to set ground rules for trust. We ask permission to record and say that it will be private. I often explain that it is because I can't take notes fast enough and want to properly listen to them.

Asking permission sends an important message that you care about them and their concerns.

You can also say 'If I ask you any questions that make you uncomfortable, just say and we'll move on'. That isn't relevant in most interviews, but it builds up trust where it is.

Ask about their back story

We're about to get into the main body of the interview and want to get them comfortable telling us stories. My go to option here is to ask them to tell me their back story. I ask 'How did you end up working here?' or 'How did you get into running?' Those questions are easy for them to answer and can only be answered with a story.

More than that, us being interested shows that we care about them and helps them feel known.

Show authority figures you've done your homework

You might be meeting a big name in the industry. A good way to get them to relax around you is to show you've done your homework on them. If they've written papers, blogs, or been on podcasts, they will have written or talked about the things that interest them. Bring that up. Say what you read or listened to, and what interested you. It can be great if you ask a question that shows you've gone deep or are acting on their advice.

My friend Carol Clark is a successful dog trainer and author of books on the subject, but she started out as a doctor. She told me a story about the end of her GP training.

> When I was training in general practice and preparing for my Royal College of General Practitioner final exams, I read GP

magazine cover to cover each month. One contributor I enjoyed reading had his picture as part of his byline. Arriving for my oral exam, my examiner turned out to be none other than the chap. He started by introducing himself and I replied "I know who you are and I love reading your column in GP magazine." He visibly preened himself and from then on we had a lovely chat, with him almost helping me out with the answers to the questions! I was given a distinction overall and I always think that oral was the main reason.

Ask your questions

This is the main body of the interview where you ask your questions and they tell you their stories. These are my main points.

Fully listen

Listen to what they are saying and react accordingly. Show you are listening and engaged by asking for clarification or asking a relevant follow-up question.

It's OK to interrupt for explanation

In fact it's more than OK to interrupt for an explanation. The person you're talking to will be fine to explain and will respect you for asking.

Ask about anything you don't understand. Never worry about looking stupid for asking.

Don't be scared of pauses

Let them think before responding, the deeper the response the more thought it will take.

Pausing after they've spoken is a sign of attentiveness.

It's OK to interrupt politely if they are rambling

I say 'that's very interesting and I'd like to know more, but we don't have much time'.

Running out of time

I say my interviews will take 30 minutes, and they can take that long, but if it is going brilliantly then it can go longer. This is why I always book an hour out of my calendar for the call.

I do respect their time, so if I see we're approaching 30 minutes and are going to go over I ask for permission to go longer. If they've got nothing else booked and they're having fun then they'll say yes. If they can't then I wrap up the interview here, and maybe ask if we could schedule another call.

Ending the interview

You'll get to the end of your questions or you'll approach the end of your time together. There's a few specific questions I ask at the end to make sure I haven't missed something important, to get a good summary from them, and to find out if they really care.

Summarise what you've heard, is there anything else?

Towards the end of the call I say that I'm going to summarise what they've told me and to please correct me if I haven't got it quite right. I tend to do this in the forces for change format, so I'll talk about the pain they want relief from, the better future

they're attracted to, concerns they have, and why the current solution is or is not good enough.

I've had interviewees get emotional as I've done this, as it shows I've properly listened to what they said, and that's pretty rare.

If you're recording the interview then this summary is the cheat sheet for the entire call. It's hard to work with the entire recording or transcript of a conversation, but this summary will normally cover all the main points.

I then ask 'is there anything else?'. There might not be, but I've found this question brings out a summary of what's most important to them.

Is there anything I should have asked? Or something I need to know?

This is the seat-belt question. It doesn't matter most of the time, but is vital when it does.

There may be a massive red flag in the head of the person you're talking to, but you haven't asked about it so they haven't told you. This gives them the chance to say it.

If you could wave a magic wand to fix this, what would that look like?

I only ask this at the end, as I'm not asking them to design the product. Where this has been most valuable is similar to the 'is there anything else?' question above. I found the answer to this can be the summary of a perfect solution.

When I asked a midwife the same questions she said 'I want everyone who has to deal with the patient to know the current

situation'. An incredibly simple summary of what we were doing.

Commitment, including 'Who else should I talk to?'

During the interview people will be nice and polite and say encouraging things. It makes the encounter pleasant and if they aren't a believer it is also the easiest way to get rid of you.

To find out if someone really cares, ask them for a commitment. The main two for me are a time commitment and a reputation commitment.

Ask for a time commitment by saying something like 'Can I come back and talk to you again when I've got some initial designs?'.

For a reputation commitment ask 'Is there anyone you can think of who I should talk to? Could you introduce me?'.

I want both these things. I'd like feedback on the next stage, be that a course outline, a landing page, or a paper design for a piece of software. I'd also like them to help me find who else I should talk to.

The reason this uncovers whether they are a believer or not is that both of these have a real cost to them, they have to invest their time or their reputation. They'll be happy to make these commitments if they believe in what you're doing, they won't if they don't.

It doesn't matter how many nice things someone said in the interview, if they aren't prepared to make a commitment then they don't care, they were just being nice.

If they did agree to spend more time with you, or to introduce you to someone, then you've got a fan.

Build your own cheat sheet

Let's build your own cheat sheet to use during the interview. We'll be covering these three parts:

- How you'll open
- The main questions you want to ask
- How you'll close

You can download an example cheat sheet and a printable copy of this worksheet from johnholcroft.co.uk/bookresources

INTERVIEW CHEAT SHEET

Opening

What will you say to frame the conversation?

How will you set them at ease? What will be your first easy question?

Main Questions

What are the main questions you want to ask?

Ending

How will you end the interview?

Write down the things you don't want to forget to do or ask, like giving a summary and asking for commitment.

12

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

You've said your goodbyes, ended the interview, and now Zoom is spending the next 10 minutes saving the video. You're going to need a break and to come back to this later.

It's been emotional

You can't help but have an emotional reaction to this call, and you'll have been in an emotional place during it. Your mind probably fixated on something they said, or on a feeling they gave you. This means your memory of it is flawed.

In the books they say that at least two people should go to an interview as they'll hear completely different things. One person could think it went brilliantly while the other thought it was a disaster. The truth is probably somewhere else.

Taking notes

When I did user interviews in a corporate environment we had the researcher in one room with the person being interviewed, and in a parallel room there were three or four of us watching on a monitor and taking notes. We had a piece of large paper from a flip board stuck to the wall for this person, and everyone had a pad of post-its in their hand. We were taking notes for anything interesting they said or things we learned, then we stood up and stuck them on their piece of paper.

We were working flat out in that side room. It took that many people, writing as fast as they could, to capture what was going on. We even had a sign on the door saying 'No spectators allowed - you're welcome to come in, but everyone has to take notes'.

You don't have a team, you have yourself, that's why having a recording is vital.

Just your memory of the interview isn't that useful, as it is mostly a feeling and you can't remember the details. A full recording or transcript isn't that useful either, as you won't go through something that long. You need good succinct notes.

I listen to the recording the next day and take notes. This allows me to hear what they actually said, not what I imagined, and to make good notes. I start with a description of them and what they're doing. Then the main content is a summary of main bullet points from the conversation.

They often have brilliant ways of describing something simply. I capture those.

At the end of the call I will have summarised to them what I heard, and they will have given their feedback on the summary. If you have no time to listen to the entire recording and take notes then at least take a note of this. This is often the most useful note you can make.

My notes at the end of the interview are who I talked to, the summary from the end of the interview, then a list of bullet points for the interesting and relevant things they said.

At the moment I find YouTube a great aid for taking notes. I upload the video as private then a few hours later it is available with a transcription. The transcription is available through the three dots under the video. That allows me to listen to the recording and see exactly what was said. Very handy for note taking and scanning through to specific points in the conversation.

Say thank you

For a gold star, send a thank you email the next day. Thank them for their time and say how much you enjoyed talking to them.

INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Who did you talk to?

Summarise what you learned

Extra notes. Interesting things they said, etc.

13

OF COURSE YOU'RE SCARED… DO IT ANYWAY

It's normal that when you start trying to interview people you aren't as good as you would like to be. When I started I felt my interviews were clunky and not the smooth flowing conversation I was hoping for. I might have talked too much, or fallen back into pitching, or more than once I got off the call and realised I had missed important questions.

And you know what? It didn't matter that much. The person I was talking to didn't notice and even enjoyed the interview. People like it when you pay attention to them, and they like to feel helpful. I learnt a huge amount I couldn't have discovered working on my own, and it gave me a sense of direction and certainty in what to do.

One of my curses is perfectionism. Or even worse where my superman syndrome joins forces with my perfectionism. Superman syndrome being where you believe that everything you do should be amazing and wonderful. Match that with perfectionism and you don't get amazing work, you get crip-

pling procrastination. A brain full of ideas with impossible standards leads me to inaction and as I'm stuck there the depression starts to build.

This hit me when I was getting started with this book. This book is important to me and I wanted to do a great job. I truly believe in helping your client where they are, and not making the standard mistake of building what you think they need. For a book that means holding back on the urge to write what I think the reader needs to know and instead to find out where they are, the challenges they are facing, and take them on a journey where they end in success.

In writing this book I decided to practice what I preach.

- Get out the landing page early - a single web page that described the book and allowed people to sign up to learn more
- Recruit beta readers
- Do the user research to make the product that matters

The procrastination snuck up on me. I was proud of the landing page I built for the book and I'd managed to get a few beta readers onto my mailing list. Then it was time to start interviewing them.

I've done lots of user interviews for clients. I'm good at it and love it. Yet the more important and personal the work is to me the larger the resistance. For this book the resistance was huge.

I told myself there were things I needed to do first to be ready and I'd start sending out the invitations tomorrow. Those tomorrows kept happening every day until 6 weeks had passed.

I finally cracked. I wasn't getting ready, I was putting it off as I was scared.

I was scared as I didn't want to show anything less than a perfect face for something this important to me. Yet I knew the chances were that my first interview was going to be rough.

In writing a book there is always a shitty first draft. In life there seems to be a shitty first everything. You just have to get it out of the way, learn from it and move on.

I put on my big boy pants and sent out two invitations. I was speaking to people interested in my book within days.

My first interview was no better than acceptable in terms of technique, but amazing in terms of what I learnt. I found out what motivated them, what they wanted and didn't want. They told me things I couldn't have found out any other way than talking to them, and I hadn't started writing the book yet.

I'll give you two examples.

This is what I heard about the pain they were looking to avoid when developing a new product or service.

> I'm happy to fail early. What I don't want to do is invest 18 months and then realize that after all of this, it's never going to sell in the way we want. And now I have this dog of a product and some customers that have bought it and I now have to service for a year or whatever it is, but it's not going to be a real thing. So I want to either be in or out as quickly as I possibly can.

I also learnt about what they wanted from the book through their criticism of other books in the same area. In particular non-fiction books that are motivational but lack specifics.

> Those kinds of resources are great to get you motivated, but they don't actually give you anything to actually use and do. I'd love to be able to walk away from a chapter and know what to do, not just have some great ideas about don't quit.

Everything I learned from those two interviews, and the more that followed, all went into shaping the book. I also had a group of people keen to be beta readers when it was ready.

Now it's your turn.

I've said a lot about the questions to ask and specific things to say at the start and end of an interview. That's all great but don't let it put you off. Don't make it so big that you don't start. A few good questions will get you most of the way there. You can even start with just one. Asking about the challenges they're facing and getting them to give you examples, that's all you need to start.

So send out those invitations. Talk to your clients.

It's normal to be scared, do it anyway.

THIS BOOK HAS ENDED

The main content of this book has finished – if you've learned all you wanted to learn then you need not read any further.

What's left?

Further Reading – Where I recommend my top three books on product development and communications skills.

Can I Help You? – How to go further with the ideas in this book and how to get in touch with me.

I Weep For The Cartoons – There are no cartoons in this book, until this chapter.

Acknowledgements – Where I thank the many people who helped get this book into world.

FURTHER READING

I'd like to highlight three books I recommend to anyone trying to improve their offering to clients, or improve their communication skills.

Badass: Making Users Awesome - Kathy Sierra

How you win in business by making your users awesome at something. The point isn't to make an awesome product or service, it's to make the user awesome at the thing they are trying to achieve.

Here are some of the notes I took:

What is the experience of your users, or clients, after being with you and your product or service?

- *What can they now do?*
- *What can they now show others?*
- *What will they say to others?*

Design for your user's users. What will our user's friends, families and peers think of our user. Are we helping them show off and look awesome?

The Mom Test: How to Talk to Customers & Learn If Your Business Is a Good Idea When Everyone Is Lying to You - Rob Fitzpatrick

I was recommended this book when I went through a start-up accelerator. This is the book that got me started on holding worthwhile client interviews. Here's a quote:

> The questions to ask are about your customers' lives: their problems, cares, constraints, and goals. You humbly and honestly gather as much information about them as you can and then take your own visionary leap to a solution.

The book is aimed at people doing new product development, primarily start-ups, but useful for anyone looking to make something new.

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High - Joseph Grenny et al

How to have the hard conversations, and how to have them without conflict.

Some of my notes:

Good teams are quick to share concerns and work through issues, and do so through a respectful dialog. Bad communication is sitting on an issue for ages, often through believing the false choice that you either have to stay quiet or damage a relationship.

Fools' choice: telling the truth or keeping a friend.

People good at having important conversations look to have both at the same time, to be 100% candid and completely respectful. They look for a way to get to dialog.

CAN I HELP YOU?

What does success look like for you?

Have I delivered what you needed from this book? What do you want to achieve now? I'd love to know. Please drop an email to john@johnholcroft.co.uk and tell me.

Do you want to experience a user interview in action?

If you email me then I'll offer you the opportunity to get on a call with me. On this call I'll demonstrate a user interview by having a short one with you. I want to know about you and where you are with your business.

This call should work for both of us. You get to experience a user interview in action. I get to do market research and find out how I can better help my audience.

I won't try to sell you anything. I want to learn about you and see where I can help. If there is any advice I can give to help you

then I'll gladly offer it.

Regular tips on my mailing list

I have a mailing list I use to share bite-sized articles I write. For example:

- Arrivederci Frog! What Kermit and the Cookie Monster can teach us about client motivation
- How to use doctors' questions to grow your business
- What to do if the person you are talking to is defensive

Sign up at johnholcroft.co.uk

A safe place to practice

I expect lots of my audience will like the ideas in this book but would rather practice the skills first, rather than their first time being in front of a client.

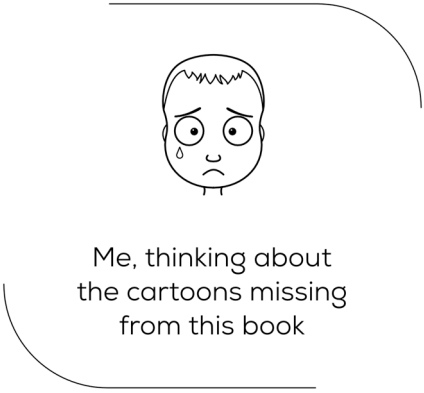
I'll be offering courses and workshops where you can practice with other friendly people trying to learn the same skills. Look on my website johnholcroft.co.uk to see what's available, or sign up to my mailing list to be notified when they happen.

Get in touch

Email me at john@johnholcroft.co.uk or find me on LinkedIn.

At the time of writing I host the 9am to 11am GoGoDone focus sessions on Monday, Wednesday and Friday London time. Productivity is a team sport, so if the times work for you then join us and get stuff done.

I WEEP FOR THE CARTOONS



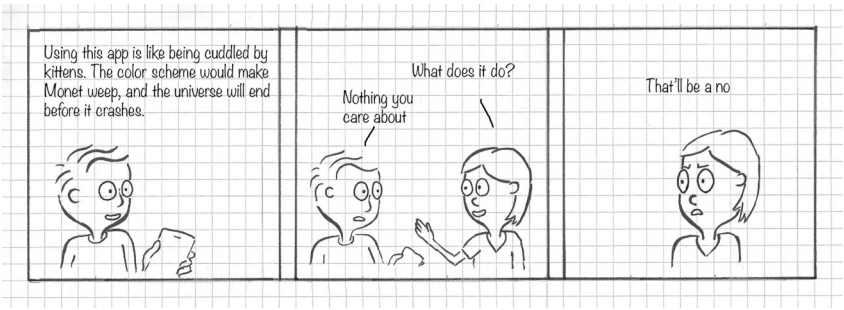
I hoped to have a lot of cartoons in this book. I thought they would be great, make the content a lot more memorable, and make this book uniquely 'me'. However, they were taking too long so I had to scrap them to get this book shipped. What's worse, the ones I did have in the book I had to take out as they didn't work in isolation.

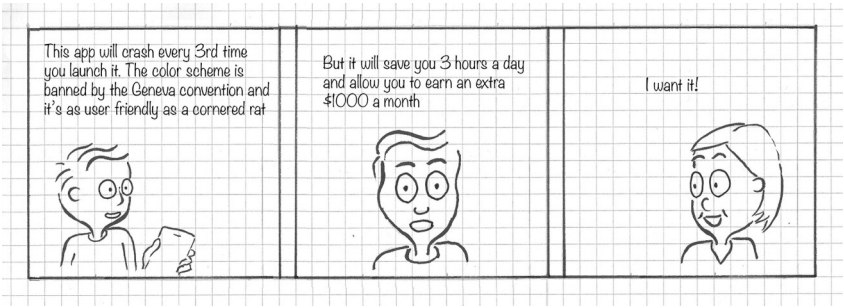
In writing a book you get the advice that you sometimes have to kill your darlings. This means there can be bits you love, but they no longer fit in the whole so have to go. There is a folder on my computer labelled 'Darlings, Killed'. Here is a little something from there.

Delivering the right kind of quality

The trap a lot of entrepreneurs fall into is to focus their attention on the quality of their deliverable - in their terms. Polishing it and making it perfect by some measure of perfect to them, and only giving scant regard to the value the customer gets.

Let's imagine taking this to extremes, either maximising quality of 'the thing', or maximising how useful it is to the customer.





The quality that matters is doing something useful your audience cares about.

Maybe next time

The acknowledgements are coming up, but I'd like to get one in now for Sarah Silva, who read an early version of this book and gave me lots of ideas for cartoons. Sorry they aren't here Sarah. Maybe in the second edition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

You know the popular quote 'I'm sorry for sending you such a long letter but I didn't have time to write a short one'. Well, this is a short book, and it took me forking ages to write. If I'm honest with myself, I started 4 years ago, so I have lots of people to thank.

I'd like to start with all the staff I met at **Medway Hospital**. Chapter 8 is all about them and they are wonderful people doing amazing work. This book started because of my experience on the LABOUR app project.

The entire **Akimbo community**. What's Akimbo? It's the group of people who've been through Seth Godin courses. Then wonderful people keep the energy alive and set up their own communities where I've met most of the people I mention below. This is where GoGoSprint, GoGoDone, Java Writing Circle, and Write Now! came from.

I fleshed out the main ideas of the book in my first GoGoSprint, got a landing page up, and did my first user interviews. Thanks in particular to **Patrick Lewis**, **Rémi Hinggai**, **Mark Modesti**, **Tom Trainer**, and **Andrew Whitehouse**.

Heather Chavin for creating GoGoSprint and GoGoDone, and letting me meet such wonderful people. A lot of this book was

written in GoGoDone calls. Plus she helped me reach an audience for my first beta course.

Thank you to everyone I interviewed in the course of developing this book: **Crystal Wong Kruger, Kwin Peterson, Michelle Ang, Abbie Pierce, Peter Nakamura, Samuel Villegas, Jannetje van Leeuwen, Chris Ujimoto, Miriam Simon, Romy Lynch**

I ran a course covering the main ideas in this book, to find out what worked and what people cared about. Thank you to **Kayla Barnes**, **Michael Cohen**, and **Barry Paterson** for taking that course. Our discussions and everything you shared helped shape this book.

If you've been on a GoGoDone call with me then this book is also for you. We've gone from strangers across the world to friends.

Rachael Cumberland-Dodd for going above and beyond as a beta reader. Rachael suggested some of the toughest edits, like 'what is this chapter trying to say?' Tough, but made the book so much better. And thank you for getting on our calls and helping me fix parts of the book I knew weren't working but couldn't see a way forward. Find Rachael at feedmarketing.gg

Vicky Fraser and the Moxie books crew. Vicky is the author of 'How The Hell Do You Write A Book' and I've spent many hours writing this book on her Power Hour calls. Through Vicky I met the following wonderful people who I either interviewed, were beta readers, or both: **Carol Clark**, **Sarah Silva**, **Julia Roebuck**, **Mike Gardner**, **Anne Treanor** and **Stephanie Benfield**

Everyone in the Java Writing Circle who helped me become a better writer: **Tamara**, **Leanne**, **Rachel**, **Ashlee**, **Courtney**, **Kristin**, **Mark**, **Kelly**, **Ted**, **Steven**, and **Angus**.

I'm delighted I found **Kenda Macdonald**. I first encountered Kenda years ago when I filled in her worksheet on 'Clarifying Your Audience'. It asked deceptively simple questions like 'What do they want?', 'How does the problem show itself?' and 'How do they feel now, and what do they want to feel?' Amazing questions I got a lot from answering, but were hard to answer. Noticing the value – and the difficulty – was part of the genesis for this book. Kenda has gone on to write 'Hack The Buyer Brain' and I'm a member of her 'Marketing Automation Academy'.

Thank you **Natalie Merida** for getting on calls with me and letting me help you get your email out to the big name in the industry.

My last corporate job was at **Marks & Spencers**. I joined their app development team after giving up on my first start-up. They showed me professional researchers running a user experience lab. Amazing to have that experience – to see how the professionals talked to the visitors – and led me to think 'this doesn't need a team'.

I went through the **Bethnal Green Ventures** start-up accelerator with the otoscope simulator I mention in 'Before The Interview'. I learned more, and experienced more, in those six months than I could have imagined – and I got to work with a great partner in **Michael George**. Plus, they introduced me to 'The Mom Test'.

People I've never met who made a positive impact on this book

Thank you **Rob Fitzpatrick** for writing 'The Mom Test', and then for 'Write a Useful Book'. Rob doesn't know me, but 'The Mom Test' was a big influence on me, and shaped a lot of my thinking and practice that led to this book. I only recently discovered 'Write a Useful Book'. Fortunately I had already applied most of his ideas around testing the content of the book before you write it. Maybe because I'd been through start-ups and was a believer in 'The Mom Test'. I still made this book better by his suggestions. You'll see his fingerprints all over the contents page and the introduction.

Louise Karch and I did the inaugural altMBA together. She is generous with the support she gives to the community. I'll always try to start a presentation with a 'ho hum crasher', and her guide on naming books has been an inspiration.

Thank you to **Jonathan Stark** and **Rochelle Mouton** for the 'Business of Authority' podcast. I listen to every episode and it's made quite an impact on my life. In my business I'm putting into practice Rochelle's advice in her book 'The Authority Code', and Jonathan is in this book in three different places:

• In 'Marketing is Hard, Ignorance Makes It Harder' I use signing up for Jonathan's mailing list as an example of what good looks like

• Jonathan's 'Why' questions have made it into my bank of questions for clients

• The success story I describe in chapter 1 is also a success story for Jonathan's proposal template and value pricing

My family

My wife, **Dr Emma Holcroft**, for setting me on the medical path in my business, making me use apostrophes correctly, and not forcing me to get a real job.

My kids Sophie and Luke for being pleasantly surprised at how readable the book is, and for a range of great suggestions for improvements.

Luke for:

• Introducing the only use of the semicolon in the book by making me write TL;DR correctly

• Pointing out my overuse of the tricolon, 'it's like exclamation marks - once is emphasis, three in a row is too much'

• And 'there are other punctuation choices than the comma' – leading to a fascinating discussion and investigation into the hyphen, en dash, em dash, and using them correctly

Sophie for:

• Helping me fix my overuse of pronouns – or as she puts it 'don't make the reader play the pronoun game'

• Being a great sounding board for artistic decisions, and helping me make peace with removing the cartoons

• Suggesting the worksheets at the end of chapters. It's a better book and more 'me' with them in

Finally, Sophie again for starring in 'Learning to Listen'. When she first read it she left me a note saying it made her cry. When I asked why she said that she wasn't expecting to be in the book and it showed 'my daddy loves me'.

Sophie, I didn't use your cartoon idea on the book cover, but here it is, I've drawn it just for you.