



USER EXPERIENCE STARTS WITH “WHY”

How curiosity helps organisations challenge assumptions, avoid apathy, and renew services over time.

By: Cameron Stephens, Head of Pre-Sales Consultancy

A CONVERSATION I NEVER FORGOT

One of the conversations that has stayed with me longest in IT happened years ago while I was working for the NHS in North Devon.

Our team was involved with Project SEARCH, a supported internship programme that gave young people with a learning disability or autism the opportunity to gain meaningful workplace experience through work placements. I enjoyed our involvement with it, and it's a genuinely good programme. Bringing someone into the team who was embarking on their career created a different kind of interaction. Things that had become completely ordinary to us were new to them, and naturally they asked questions.

I remember one conversation particularly well.

We were talking through some of the technology we used and mentioned our antivirus product.

"Why do you use that?"

We explained what antivirus was for, the threats it helped protect against, and why protecting hospital devices and information mattered.

"Why do you use that one?"

So, we talked about the product itself, what it gave us, and why it had been selected.

Then came another question.

"Why do you have to use it?"

That one caused a slight pause. Not because there was no answer, but because the question had moved. We were no longer explaining what a piece of technology did. We were starting to explain why the organisation required that capability in the first place.

The conversation continued in much the same way. We talked about the technology we used to manage devices. Why did we use that? We talked about our operating-system configuration. Why did we configure it that way? We would answer one question, and another would follow, usually taking us one layer further down.

I remember enjoying the slight surprise of it. You would answer, think you had reached the bottom of the subject, and then need to stop and consider the next question. I enjoyed trying to maintain pace with that curiosity.

Around me were experienced technology professionals who knew the environment deeply. Every so often, though, the next "why?" made one of us pause.

That was what made the exchange interesting.

We carried years of context about how the environment had evolved. We knew how one decision had led to another, how different technologies depended on each other, and why particular controls and configurations had become established practice.

The student did not carry that history.

Where we saw an environment, they saw a series of choices.

And they kept asking why we had made them.



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EXPERIENCE HAS NO FINISH LINE

I increasingly think about that conversation when I think about user experience.

Much of enterprise technology used to lend itself to relatively clear exchanges. Implement the system. Complete the project. Resolve the incident. Sign the contract. Renew it later.

Increasingly, that is not how technology is experienced anymore. Instead, we operate persistent services.

Cloud platforms change continuously. Managed workplace services evolve while people are using them. Security controls adapt. New capabilities arrive without waiting for the next transformation programme. AI is accelerating that further. The organisation changes, the workforce changes and user expectations change while the service itself remains in operation. There is no clean finish line.

That matters because a service can continue functioning exactly as designed while gradually becoming less appropriate for the people using it. Nothing necessarily fails. Availability remains good. Processes continue. Controls operate. Reports are produced. The service simply ages.

This is where I think user experience becomes particularly important.

Experience is not only a way of asking whether somebody likes a service; it gives us another means of testing whether the assumptions beneath that service remain valid as the world around it changes.

That requires us to keep asking questions.

"A service can continue functioning exactly as designed while gradually becoming less appropriate for the people using it."



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TWO THREATS TO GOOD EXPERIENCE -

1. ASSUMPTION

Expertise depends on assumptions.

We could not operate effectively if we had to rediscover every answer from first principles. We recognise patterns, apply previous experience, and build on decisions that have already proved useful.

The problem comes when an assumption stops being treated as an assumption.

Users will adapt. Self-service is better. This security control is necessary. This is the standard configuration. People need more training. The documented process reflects the way the work happens.

Any of those statements may be reasonable. Some may be entirely correct.

However, over time, the reasoning behind a decision can disappear while the decision itself survives.

That is dangerous for user experience because we begin explaining behaviour instead of investigating it.

Someone keeps a spreadsheet beside an enterprise application, so they must be resistant to change. People continue calling the service desk, so they need more encouragement to use self-service. Users bypass a process, so they need reminding of the policy ... Perhaps.

But perhaps the spreadsheet contains something the application does not. Perhaps self-service takes longer than making the call. Perhaps the process makes perfect sense from the perspective of the organisation but considerably less sense from the perspective of the person trying to complete their work.

The user is not automatically right. Their preferred route is not automatically the correct one, and sometimes training genuinely is the answer.

Still, their behaviour is evidence.

Curiosity is what stops an assumption becoming the conclusion before we have examined that evidence.



TWO THREATS TO GOOD EXPERIENCE -

2. APATHY

Apathy is harder because the word suggests that people simply do not care – that's rarely what I mean by it.

Organisational apathy can exist while almost everyone involved is conscientious. The project delivered, the control is compliant, the service is within target, the platform is available, and the customer renewed. People have fulfilled the responsibilities they were given.

And that is precisely where the problem can hide.

The project team owns delivery. Security owns the control. Operations owns availability. A supplier owns its contractual scope. Each can perform well, while the experience problem sits somewhere between them. Nobody has failed individually, but the gap exists in the joins.

Technology then accumulates around those boundaries. A temporary workaround becomes the normal process. An exception creates another control. A report is introduced to evidence that control. Another activity appears to support the report. The requirement changes, but the machinery around it remains.

Eventually, organisations can become extremely proficient at performing activities whose original purpose is difficult to remember.

Nothing is sufficiently broken to force a rethink, and no single accountability necessarily owns the reason to start one.

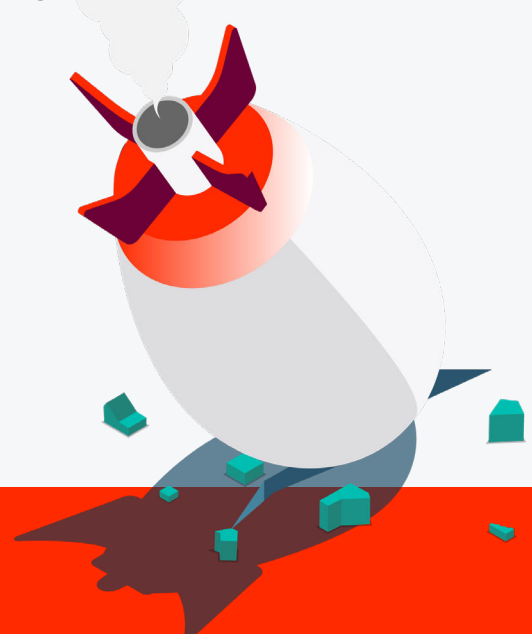
That is why persistent services need more than maintenance; they need renewal.

If a service survives for five or ten years, it should not simply accumulate every decision made during those years. Something must create the pressure to reconsider what still belongs.

User experience can provide that pressure.

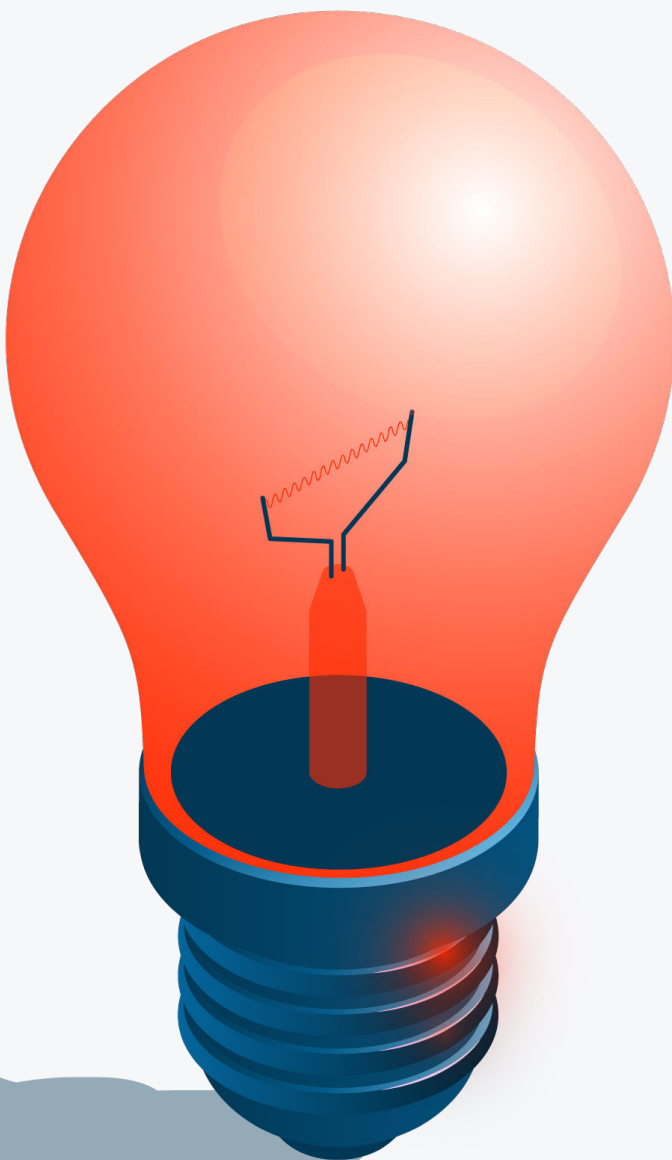
Repeated friction tells us something. Avoidance tells us something. A workaround tells us something. Equally, a genuinely effortless experience tells us that something is working and may deserve protecting.

The mistake is treating any of those signals as the end of the analysis rather than the beginning of a question.



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEXT “WHY?”

This is where I come back to that conversation in North Devon.



It wasn't the first “why?” that mattered. Most of us can answer the first why. It was the willingness to ask the next one, then another.

Antivirus became product choice. Product choice became requirement. Requirement led into device management, operating-system configuration, controls and eventually the decisions beneath them.

Each question deconstructed something we had come to see as complete.

I have carried that thinking into pre-sales. One of the things I enjoy about new business is that it naturally gives you permission to re-evaluate what is required. You have to consider what an organisation needs now, where it is going next, which parts of its existing model should survive, and which belong to an environment that is disappearing.

The harder challenge is maintaining that curiosity after the sale.

If a customer bought a service three years ago, the justification for continuing to provide precisely the same service cannot simply be that another renewal date has arrived. Existing services should have to keep demonstrating their why: what value are they creating now, what has changed around them, what should disappear, what needs to evolve, and which assumptions behind the original design remain true.

That, to me, is where experience becomes strategically useful. It provides a reason to keep interrogating a service that appears to be working.

A FRAMEWORK FOR RENEWAL



DECONSTRUCT 1

Deconstruct what we have inherited. Separate the technology, process, control, measure, and hand-off, and ask why each still exists.

2 SHED

Shed what no longer earns its place: an inherited assumption, a redundant report, a workaround that became policy, a measure that once represented value but now records activity, or a process designed around a constraint that disappeared years ago.

3 RENEW

Renew what remains. Sometimes renewal means introducing new technology and sometimes it means simplifying what is already there, changing ownership or removing a step. Sometimes it means connecting parts of a service.



At times, of course, all this questioning leads back to the original answer, however the control is still necessary even if the technology remains appropriate.

The process still works because there is a meaningful difference between something that survives because nobody questioned it and something that survives because it has been deliberately revalidated.

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KEEPING THE QUESTION ALIVE

The more I work with experience frameworks, the less I think their greatest contribution is simply better measurement.

The measures matter, experience data matters, the ability to understand what people are actually encountering matters, but the deeper value is that experience gives us a reason to remain curious about services we believe we already understand.

Years ago, I found myself trying to keep pace with a student who simply kept asking why. I remember enjoying the surprise of having to stop, reconsider, and find a better answer. I appreciate that interaction even more now.

Innovation does not only require discovering what is new. Sometimes it requires deconstructing what we already have, shedding what is no longer useful and renewing what remains.

Assumptions and apathy allow services to age. Curiosity is what keeps them alive.

The question for technology leaders is whether that curiosity depends on the occasional individual willing to keep asking “why”, or whether we design our services, measures, and organisations so that the question never disappears.

User experience is often discussed in terms of satisfaction scores, surveys, and service metrics. The bigger opportunity is using experience to uncover hidden assumptions, reveal friction, and identify where services need to evolve.

If you'd like to explore how experience-led thinking can help strengthen your digital workplace, improve service outcomes, and support long-term renewal, we'd love to start a conversation.

Get in touch with the Littlefish Group team to discuss the role user experience can play in creating services people genuinely want to use.

