

Chatbot design supported by specialized platforms and frameworks

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Contents

1	Research question	5
1.1	Approach	5
1.2	Metrics	5
2	General chatbot design	6
2.1	Choosing a chatbot solution	6
2.1.1	Introduction	6
2.1.2	Use case 1: Food delivery	6
2.1.3	Use case 2: Banking industry	7
2.1.4	Use case 3: E-commerce	7
2.1.5	Conclusion	7
2.2	Comparison of existing chatbots	9
2.2.1	Dom, Domino's ordering assistant bot	9
2.2.2	Bol.com, Customer support bot	9
2.3	Best practices	9
2.3.1	Creating a personality	9
2.3.2	Making the conversation flow	9
2.3.3	Predicting failure and user behavior	10
3	Case study overview	11
3.1	Conversational state diagram	11
4	Microsoft Bot Framework	13
4.1	Business Model	13
4.2	Technical implementation	14
4.2.1	Developer environment	14
4.2.2	Testing	15
4.3	Building the bot	15
4.3.1	Initialization	15
4.3.2	Event types	17
4.4	Constructing a conversational flow	17
4.4.1	Waterfall	17
4.4.2	User actions	18
5	Google Dialogflow	20
5.1	Business Model	20
5.2	Technical implementation	20
5.2.1	Developer environment	20
5.2.2	Testing	20
5.3	Building the bot	20
5.4	Constructing a conversational flow	20
	Appendix A Botframework developer build script	25

Glossary

ECMAScript scripting-language specification standardized by Ecma International. 14

ES5 ECMAScript 5, the 5th edition of the language specification. 14

SDK Software Development Kit, set of software tools. 14

Research question

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to perform research into chatbots and investigate how they are built. What actually goes into building a chatbot that feels intuitive but is also functional?

1.1 Approach

This thesis will start with some use cases for chatbots, to find out when it would be a good idea to build a chatbot as a solution for a concrete problem.

Already existing chatbots will be presented and compared to paint a picture of what professional chatbots currently look like. Some general research into chatbot best practices will also be conducted based on real life cases

Finally, different platforms and frameworks to create a fully-fledged chatbot will be compared by building food ordering chatbot.

1.2 Metrics

The metrics for the comparison will be based on a number of different factors. Their general business model will be researched, followed by their learning curve and quality of documentation. Finally source code readability and scalability will be compared.

General chatbot design

2.1 Choosing a chatbot solution

2.1.1 Introduction

Why choose a chatbot as a solution to a problem? To find the answer to that question there should be a concrete description of the problem and research should be conducted into how that problem is currently handled.

2.1.2 Use case 1: Food delivery

Food delivery chatbots are some of the most common chatbots out there. That's because a basic chatbot for ordering food is easy to make and maintain. Most of the time they don't require complex language recognition and they will go through the same steps every time someone wants to order something.

A great example of this is Domino's[1]. They own one of the most popular facebook messenger chatbots even though the bot itself is really simple.

Let's take a look at the perspective of a new imaginary pizza place in town. This pizza place has a set menu with set formulas. They want to innovate and make it possible to receive and process online orders but don't want to lose the familiarity of their brand.

This is a perfect case for a chatbot. If they already have a facebook page, they can easily integrate a chatbot into it and promote it to their current customers. All they need on top of that is an admin panel for the company to maintain their menu and process orders.

Building a chatbot this way also opens up several possibilities for expansion in the future. They can easily start tracking customer's habits and improve their suggestions for specific customers.

However there are some downsides to this solution as well. Creating a chatbot from scratch for this purpose would cost a lot of money. That's why there are already solutions like Chato-book [2] popping up. This is an all-in-one solution that provides a restaurant with a messenger bot and an admin panel to manage promotion, reservations and the menu. You can also find templates for these kinds of bots that integrate with Google Sheets/Excel. [3]

The rise of general delivery services like Ubereats [4] and Deliveroo [5] also complicates this matter. If those companies manage to integrate full ordering services into their platforms using chatbots -which they will most likely succeed in at one point- that would simplify everything. But that also comes with a cost. The imaginary pizza restaurant would lose its unique identity as the chatbot's identity would be replaced with Uber's or Deliveroo's identity.

2.1.3 Use case 2: Banking industry

Next case relates to the banking industry. Lately there has been an influx of integrating AI-powered chatbots into this sector. This is because people like to engage with their bank and get answers that feel human, instantly. It establishes a kind of trust. This type of communication is also very attractive to the banks themselves, because it allows them to quickly provide answers to repetitive questions.

There are lots of specific chatbot banking use cases out there. One of them is basic banking services. Checking account balance, transferring funds, analyzing expenditures. Chatbots can also hugely improve a bank's customer support, which should be available 24/7. They can help out people instantly, without long wait times which a lot of customer support services are currently struggling with. Further more, there's also the opportunity for intranet-based chatbots [6]. These chatbots communicate with the employees to improve their productivity and give them access to the right information in mere seconds. As seen in figure 2.1.5 customer service within a company is one of the business functions that can benefit the most from a chatbot.

Another use case is providing customer-focused marketing. Using a chatbot, it's possible to promote personalized banking services as if the customer is talking to a real life employee.

Overall, integrating a chatbot into a banking environment has a lot of benefits. That's why more and more banks are starting to invest in them.

2.1.4 Use case 3: E-commerce

Lastly there's the quickly growing industry of E-commerce. This ties into both of the use cases above as the main focus is customer interaction and engagement, support and personalized marketing.

Online web-stores are one of the fastest growing industries, they are popping up everywhere. This is because more and more people are starting to buy online. It's convenient, fast and reliable (in most cases). However there is one key benefit missing compared to in-store shopping: interaction.

Here's where the shopping assistant chatbot comes in. It can do everything a normal store employee can and even more. Like instantly retrieving your past orders to help you out quicker and more efficiently. It has access to every single product the web-shop offers and can instantly recommend one or more products that fit your needs. It can seamlessly provide post-purchase customer support. All of this whilst not losing the brand identity of the web-store itself.

As seen in the first figure 2.1.5, E-commerce is projected to be the industry that will benefit the most from chatbots. Anything involving the sale of goods or services online can be considered E-commerce. If a business corresponds to that description, experimenting with a chatbot could be interesting.

2.1.5 Conclusion

Chatbots are an obvious answer to lots of companies that are willing to innovate and are ready to experiment. It allows them to establish their brand in a familiar and human way, whilst also increasing their in-company productivity and overall efficiency.

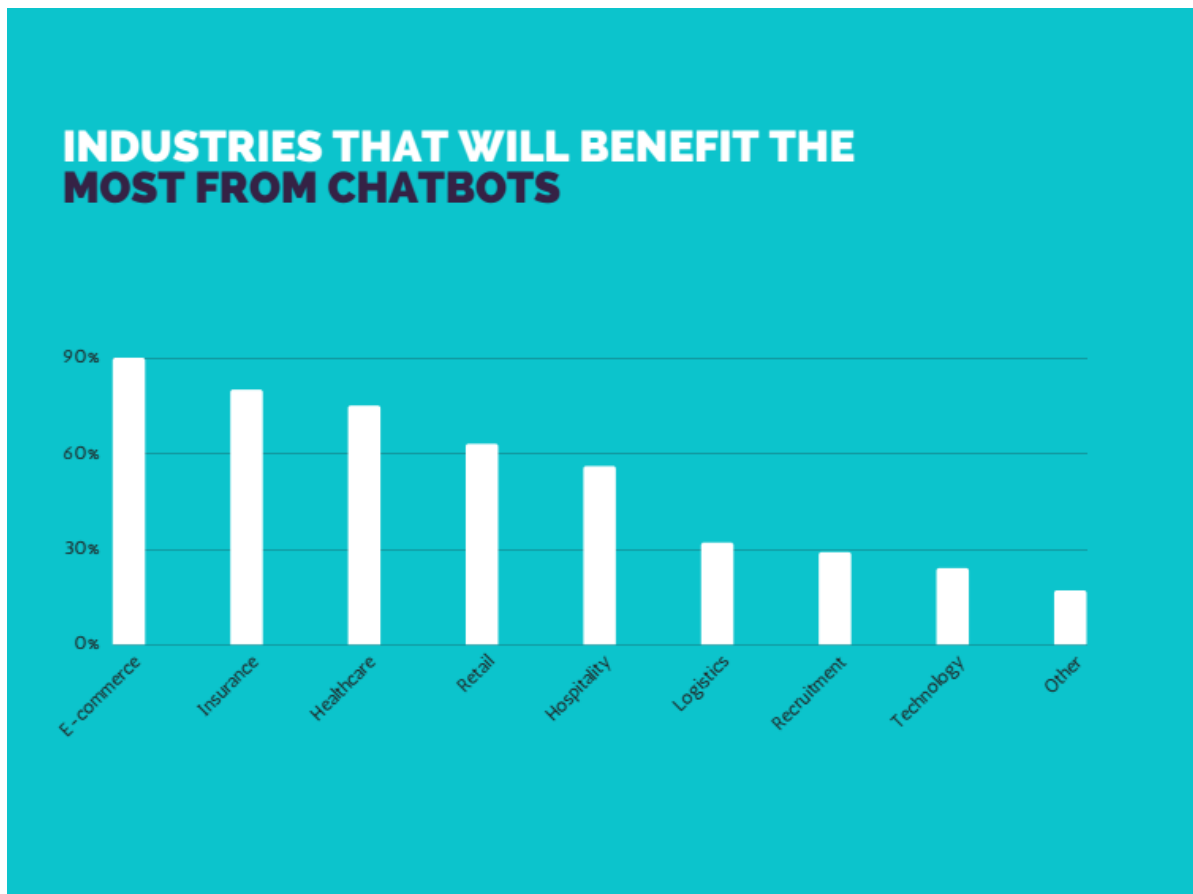


Figure 2.1: Industries projected to benefit from chatbots [7]

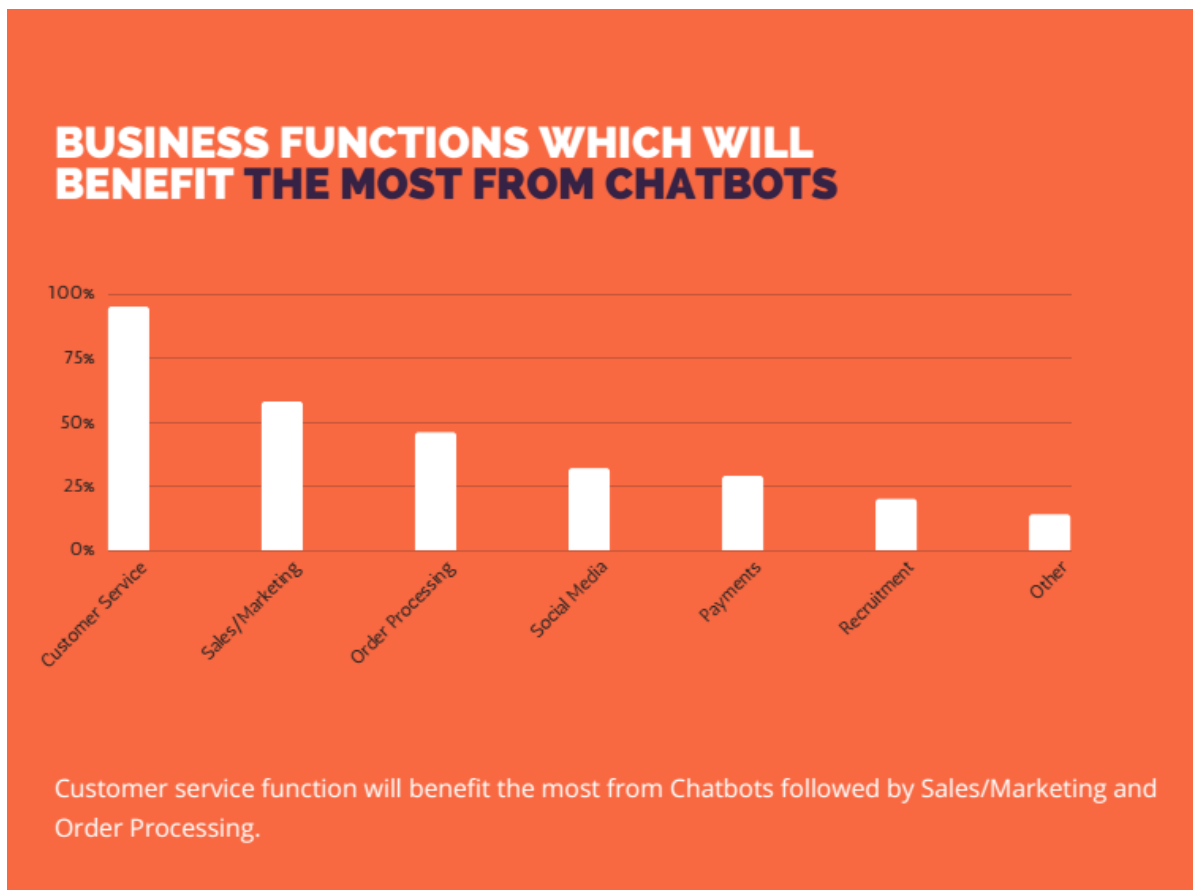


Figure 2.2: Business functions inside a company projected to benefit from chatbots [7]

2.2 Comparison of existing chatbots

Today there are plenty of well-implemented solutions already. There's food-ordering services like Domino's that offer an ordering service. But also stores, ranging from specific ones (H&M) to big, fully fledged web-stores like Bol.com, a Dutch-Belgian web-store.

2.2.1 Dom, Domino's ordering assistant bot

This is a facebook messenger bot for ordering food from Domino's, a fast food chain. Something that can immediately be noticed is the use of tappable quick reply answers. The bot starts with some simple questions in order to know the user's intent and asks some information about the user, such as the address and what store he or she wants to order from.

Once this has been established, the user can choose what he wants to order and checkout.

In conclusion, the bot isn't very smart. It simply takes orders and passes them through to the store. The user needs to follow the steps clearly and in the right order. It doesn't mimic a real life conversation. Some improvements would be building a profile of the user using past orders and providing recommendations. It could also keep you updated on new items being released. This would make the user feel more at home and establish a sort of familiarity with the bot, like he would with a normal employee.

2.2.2 Bol.com, Customer support bot

This bot's main focus lies in customer service. It replaces the long list of frequently asked questions that most customers really don't want to go through to find their answer. The bot also keeps your past and current orders in mind and integrates them into the conversation.

The bot keeps a very friendly and familiar tone towards the user throughout the entire conversation.

The language recognition seems to be focused on single word recognition to link the question to an answer. It also keeps spelling errors into account.

2.3 Best practices

2.3.1 Creating a personality

One of the most important factors in creating a chatbot is to develop a personality for it. This makes the bot a lot more engaging to the users and makes it harder for the user to get frustrated.

If there is already a company personality in place, the chatbot should get its traits there. If that's not the case, adding a name or a face, which doesn't necessarily have to be human, to it can already be a huge help.

2.3.2 Making the conversation flow

Conversations with a chatbot aren't as straight forward as they seem to be. Users can easily get distracted, overwhelmed or annoyed by a chatbot.

It is clear that a lot of research and testing should be performed into the conversational flow. A bad example of this is not having any wait time between messages. This overwhelms the

user as he doesn't have time to read the previous message. Adding typing bubbles between messages not only gives the user time to read the previous message, but it also humanizes the bot.

2.3.3 Predicting failure and user behavior

Predicting failure and user behavior is hard in any user interface. But there are some common mistakes in chatbots that can be avoided even before testing.

There are several ways to handle unexpected user input. One of them is revisiting the previous state of the conversation, another one is restarting the conversation, or asking the user politely what he's trying to accomplish.

Conversations that end up in this path should also be logged for evaluation afterwards to avoid future dead ends.

When using buttons in a bot, for example to visit a website, or start the conversation, they should be functional at all times.

Facebook's messenger platform supports 2 main buttons in their platform. General buttons, and quick replies. Regular buttons will always be clickable multiple times. Quick replies are bound to the message they are meant to follow up on, and disappear as soon as they are clicked.

Of course this best practice goes hand in hand with actual user testing and applies to every user interface, not just to chatbots.

Case study overview

To compare some existing frameworks, a simple chatbot will be designed and created employing the best practices from before. The chatbot will be a food ordering chatbot that offers the user a menu and takes in orders, similar to Domino's bot.

3.1 Conversational state diagram

To shape the bot, a conversational diagram needs to be created first. This diagram explains the main flow of the conversation, with the steps to reach the eventual purpose of the bot. In this case ordering food.

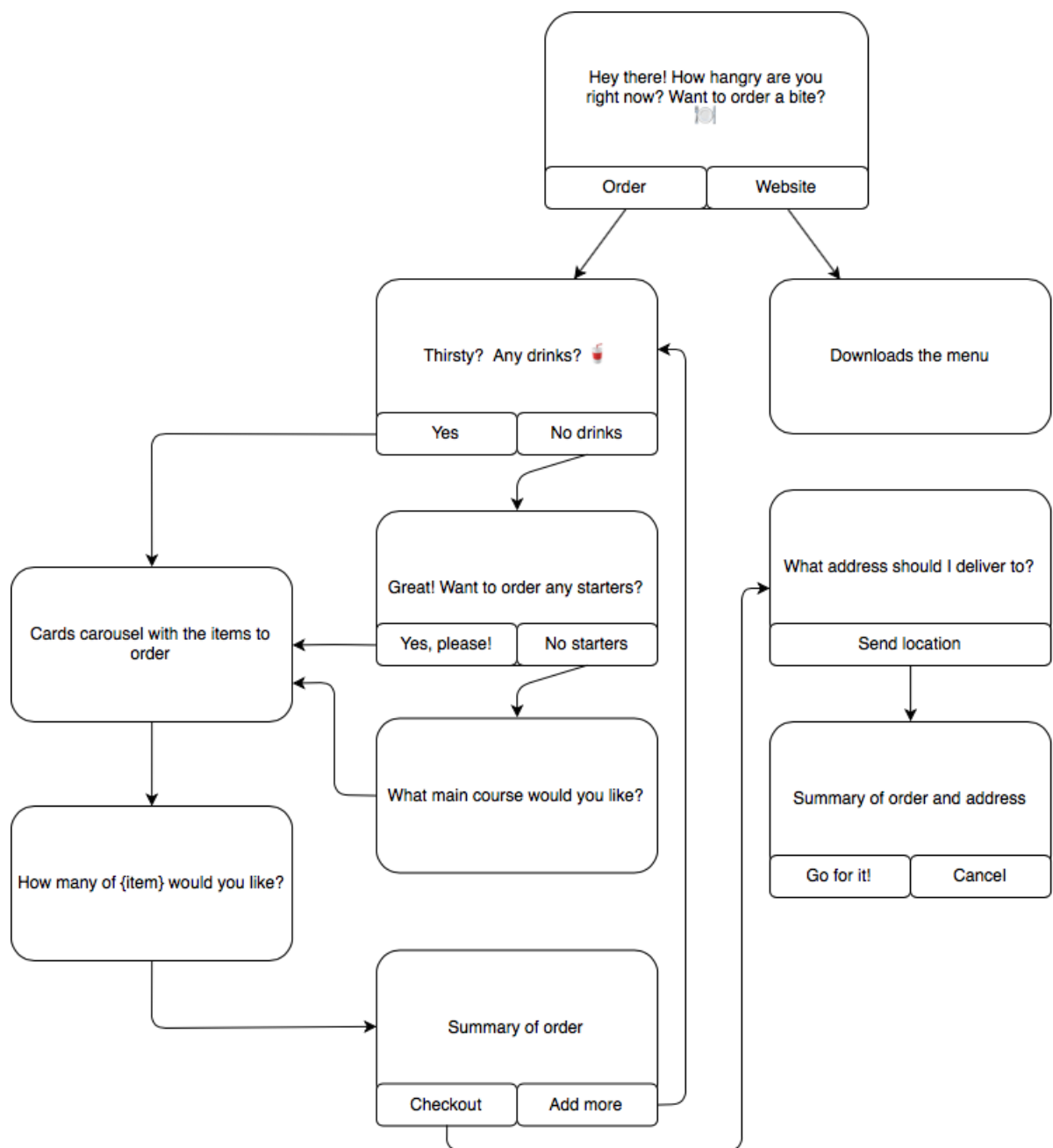


Figure 3.1: Conversational flow diagram the case study bot

Microsoft Bot Framework

The BotBuilder SDK is an open-source solution developed by Microsoft to write a chatbot once and make it possible to connect that same chatbot to multiple channels without rewriting the code. Examples are Skype, Slack, Facebook Messenger, etc.

4.1 Business Model

The Microsoft Bot Framework can be used in several ways. The base platform can be hosted on a server of choice. But to access the extra services, like spell checking, or recognizing user intents using Microsoft's LUIS (Language Understanding), an Azure subscription plan is required.

Azure is Microsoft's Cloud service that can be tailored to the customer's need. The customer can decide what modules or extra features he wants to add and calculate the price.

The screenshot displays the 'Your Estimate' section of the Microsoft Azure Pricing Calculator. It lists four services with their respective configurations and prices:

Service	Configuration	Price
Azure Bot Service	S1 tier, 1000000 messages in Premium Channels	\$500.00
Application Insights	50 GB Logs collected, 0 Multi-step Web Tests	\$134.55
Log Analytics	5 VMs monitored, 0 GB average log size, 0 additional ...	\$0.00
App Service	1 instance(s) x 730 Hours, Size: B1, Basic tier, 0 SNI co...	\$54.75

Below the services list, the 'Support' section shows 'Professional Direct' selected, with a price of \$1,000.00. The 'Programs and Offers' section shows 'Microsoft Online Services Program (MOSP)' selected. A toggle for 'SHOW DEV/TEST PRICING' is currently turned off. The 'Estimated monthly cost' is displayed as \$1,689.30. At the bottom, there are buttons for 'Export', 'Save', and 'Share', and a currency selector set to 'US Dollar (\$)'. A note at the bottom says 'Please [log in](#) to share your estimate.'

Figure 4.1: Microsoft's Azure Pricing Calculator [8]

4.2 Technical implementation

Microsoft provides the bot framework for 2 languages: Node.JS[9] and C#. If C# is used however, development can only be done inside of a Windows environment, or the limited online code editor.

One solution would be to use Node.JS in a code editor of choice. Preferably Visual Studio Code[10], Microsoft's cross-platform code editor. This way everything can be tailored and configured to the developer's needs.

4.2.1 Developer environment

Setting up a developer environment can be configured from scratch to be as complicated and complex as needed by the company or developer. Node.JS is an open-source, cross-platform JavaScript environment that can be run on a server. And in the end that's what a chatbot is, a server API that responds to requests (messages or events from the user).

It's important to note that JavaScript or also called ECMAScript is a language that is advancing very quickly and is rolling out yearly iterations. Currently the most recent iteration is called ES8. Node.JS is playing catch-up with these iterations and trying to support all of the additions.

The documentation involving the Bot Framework is written in ES5. But it's still possible to write everything in the most recent version of ECMAScript if you compile your code down. This process will turn your unsupported code into code that is supported by Node.JS, depending on the configuration.

Finding documentation on setting up an environment like this is not as easy as one would think. Microsoft does not provide any instructions or boilerplates on how to set up an efficient environment. This gives the developer more freedom but increases the learning curve for a someone who wants to start coding a bot using newer ECMAScript features or the option to hot-reload his code.

Project structure

Structuring the project is straight forward. Just like most production JavaScript projects there is a source folder containing all of the actual source code. Developers can decide to divide the test files into a separate folder but generally it's recommended to keep the test files close to the source file they refer to.

The `node_modules` folder is a dependency folder, it contains any dependencies the project uses. There are two types of dependencies: First there are developer-dependencies, these are dependencies needed to build the project and participate in development. An example is ESLint[11], a configurable linter to make sure the source code follows specific language rules. There are also regular dependencies, these are external libraries the project might use to do calculations, or wrappers for certain technologies. The Microsoft Bot Framework functions using their botbuilder SDK as a dependency.

Next up are the configuration files, these are the workhorses of the developer's environment. They are used by Webpack[12]. Webpack is a very powerful, well documented build tool and allows for easy customization. It is commonly used for front-end development but supports Node.JS development as well. The development config A starts a server that hot-reloads any changes made to the source files. This way it's easy for the developer to seamlessly check his changes instead of manually recompiling and restarting the server. The production config B

compiles the code down to its most efficient format, which makes it unreadable to a developer, but very efficient for the production server to execute.

Further more there is support for environment variables using the dotenv[13] dependency. Variables can be securely stored in the env file, this file is not versioned to git and will contain any API keys used in the project.

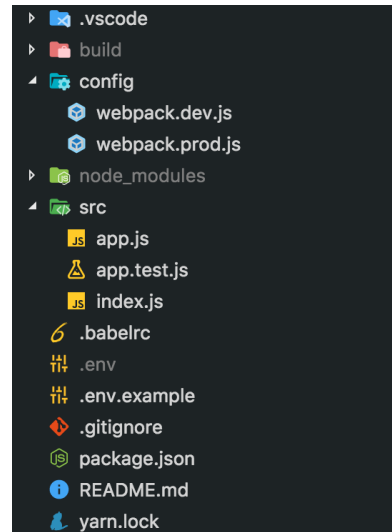


Figure 4.2: Project structure

4.2.2 Testing

The bot can be tested locally or remotely on any platform using Microsoft’s own Bot Emulator 4.2.2, which is also open-source. This provides the developer with a live testing interface and detailed information about the bot it’s connected to.

Speech Recognition is supported for speech enabled bots. Sending system activities is another useful feature allowing the developer to emulate certain user actions like for example a user joining the conversation. Lastly, payment processing is supported to emulate a transaction.

A new iteration of the emulator makes it possible to write transcripts of a conversation in a simple format and load them into the emulator.

4.3 Building the bot

4.3.1 Initialization

Initializing a bot is straightforward, the official documentation recommends restify[15] as the server. During initialization it’s possible to define a default message the bot will always use as a reply if no other reply options match.

```
1 import restify from 'restify';
2 import * as builder from 'botbuilder';
3
4 // Setup Restify Server
5 const server = restify.createServer();
6 server.listen(process.env.port || process.env.PORT || 3978, () => {
7   console.log('%s listening to %s', server.name, server.url);
8 });
```

```

9
10 // Create chat connector for communicating with the Bot Framework Service
11 const connector = new builder.ChatConnector({
12     appId: process.env.MicrosoftAppId,
13     appPassword: process.env.MicrosoftAppPassword
14 });
15
16 // Listen for messages from users
17 server.post('/api/messages', connector.listen());
18
19 const bot = new builder.UniversalBot(connector, (session) => {
20     session.send(
21         "Sorry, I didn't get that. Type 'help' if you need assistance or try a
           different sentence.",
22         session.message.text,
23     );
24 }).set('storage', inMemoryStorage);

```

Listing 4.1: Initialization of a chatbot

To make the bot start the conversation certain events can be used. In this case a 'conversationUpdate' event will be used to trigger the root dialog.

```

1 bot.on('conversationUpdate', (message) => {
2     if (message.membersAdded) {
3         message.membersAdded.forEach((identity) => {
4             if (identity.id === message.address.bot.id) {
5                 bot.beginDialog(message.address, '/welcome');
6             }
7         });
8     }
9 });

```

Listing 4.2: The root event of a bot

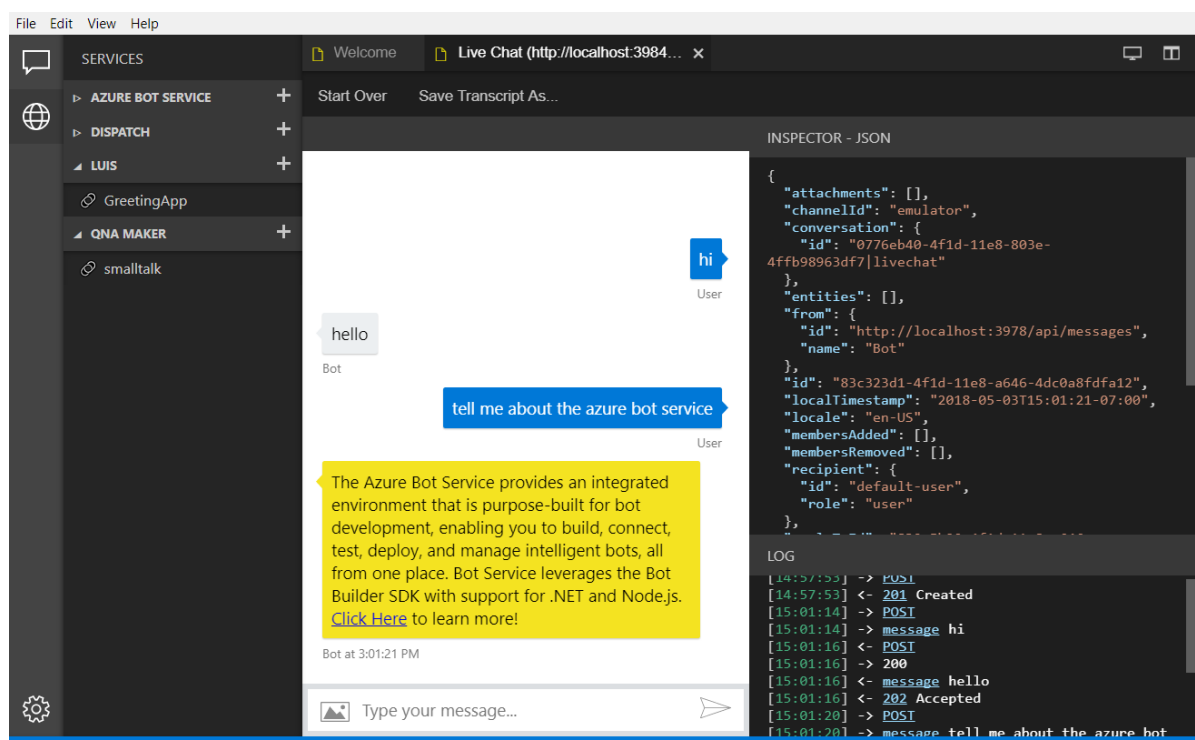


Figure 4.3: Microsoft's Bot Emulator [14]

4.3.2 Event types

- message
- conversationUpdate
- contactRelationUpdate
- typing
- ping
- deleteUserData
- endOfConversation
- event
- invoke
- messageReaction

During a regular conversation there are several different events that will be triggered. A message event simply represents any communication between bot and user. The conversationUpdate event is triggered when any members are added/removed from the conversation, including the bot. Or when conversation metadata has changed. The contactRelationUpdate event indicates that the bot was added to or removed from a user's contact list. These are the most common events, the other events are pretty self-explanatory.

Most of these events can be manually triggered using the bot emulator or defined in code, enabling unit testing.

```
1 const event = {
2   address: { bot: { id: '0' }, user: { id: 0 } },
3   agent: 'botbuilder',
4   source: 'facebook',
5   sourceEvent: '',
6   type: 'conversationUpdate',
7   membersAdded: [{ id: '0', isGroup: false, name: 'test' }],
8   user: { id: '0', isGroup: false, name: 'test' },
9 };
10
11 connector.processEvent(event);
```

Listing 4.3: Sending a mock event to the bot

4.4 Constructing a conversational flow

One of the key concepts in the Bot Builder SKD are dialogs. Dialogs help the developer manage the conversational logic and is a fundamental part of developing a chatbot in the bot framework.

A dialog can be compared to a function. It can perform a specific task and be called at any point in time. Dialogs can also contain other dialogs to advance and branch off a conversation.

4.4.1 Waterfall

A waterfall is a type of dialog that guides the user through a set of steps or tasks. After each step, the bot will wait for the user to respond and pass the reply to the next step. A great example of this is ordering food. First the user will be asked for drinks, followed by the

amount, again followed by the question for what starter the user wants, and so on. There is a clear structure the bot goes through, hence the name waterfall.

A waterfall is defined by creating an array of consecutive functions or waterfall steps inside of a dialog.

Prompts

To help the bot wait for a reply Microsoft provides developers with so called ‘Prompts’. These already contain some extra functionality to validate the user’s reply. A prompt should be used whenever the bot expects a reply from the user.

Types

- text
- confirm
- number
- time
- choice
- attachment

When used inside of a waterfall, the reply of the user will be passed to the next step using the ‘results’ object. Another argument called ‘next’ can be used as a method to skip to the next step of the waterfall.

```
1 bot.dialog('orderButtonClick', [  
2   (session) => {  
3     builder.Prompts.choice(session, 'Thirsty? Want to order any drinks?', 'Yes  
4       |No drinks', {  
5         listStyle: builder.ListStyle.button,  
6       });  
7   },  
8   (session, results, next) => {  
9     if (results.response.entity === 'Yes') {  
10      session.beginDialog('orderDrink');  
11    } else {  
12      next();  
13    }  
14  }]);
```

Listing 4.4: 2-step waterfall using a prompt

4.4.2 User actions

There are multiple ways to handle user input other than the usage of prompts. One way of doing so is by using actions.

Triggeraction

The most common action is a ‘triggerAction’. This can be connected to a dialog to invoke it whenever the user inputs a matched term. Whenever this is triggered, the dialog stack is cleared and the invoked dialog will be the new first dialog on the stack.

This behavior isn't always desired when the conversation needs to be temporarily redirected and resumed later on. That's where the 'onSelectAction' option comes in, to add the matched dialog to the existing stack.

BeginActionDialog

A specific dialog can also be attached to a dialog using the 'beginActionDialog' action. This can be useful to send the user to a contextual action. An example of this is when the user asks for specific help in a dialog context.

ReloadAction

The reloadAction is somewhat self-explanatory. Binding this to a dialog means it will restart the dialog whenever the action is invoked. It's also possible to pass arguments to this action for the dialog to receive.

CancelAction

This action cancels the dialog it is bound to when triggered. The parent dialog will also receive an indication the child dialog was canceled.

EndConversationAction

Similar to the cancelAction action, the endConversation action will end the entire conversation when triggered. This clears the entire dialog stack and persisted state data.

CustomAction

Unlike all the other actions, a customAction does not have any default action defined. It's up to the developer to define what it should do. The main benefit of using these is providing quick answers to a user without manipulating the dialog stack at all.

Further more a customAction does not bind to a dialog, instead it binds to the bot itself.

Important to note

Important to note is the fact that some of these actions are quite interruptive to the conversation's flow. To make sure the user really wants to clear the entire dialog stack and start over, a confirmation prompt can also be added to these actions.

Google Dialogflow

5.1 Business Model

5.2 Technical implementation

5.2.1 Developer environment

5.2.2 Testing

5.3 Building the bot

5.4 Constructing a conversational flow

List of Figures

2.1	Industries projected to benefit from chatbots [7]	8
2.2	Business functions inside a company projected to benefit from chatbots [7] . . .	8
3.1	Conversational flow diagram the case study bot	12
4.1	Microsoft's Azure Pricing Calculator [8]	13
4.2	Project structure	15
4.3	Microsoft's Bot Emulator [14]	16

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Appendices

Botframework developer build script

```
1  const webpack = require('webpack')
2  const path = require('path')
3  const nodeExternals = require('webpack-node-externals')
4  const StartServerPlugin = require('start-server-webpack-plugin')
5  const Dotenv = require('dotenv-webpack')
6
7  module.exports = {
8    mode: 'development',
9    entry: [
10      'webpack/hot/poll?1000',
11      './src/index'
12    ],
13    watch: true,
14    target: 'node',
15    externals: [nodeExternals({
16      whitelist: ['webpack/hot/poll?1000']
17    })],
18    module: {
19      rules: [{
20        test: /\textbackslash.js?\$/ ,
21        use: 'babel-loader',
22        exclude: /node_modules/
23      }]
24    },
25    plugins: [
26      new StartServerPlugin('server.js'),
27      new Dotenv(),
28      new webpack.NamedModulesPlugin(),
29      new webpack.HotModuleReplacementPlugin(),
30      new webpack.NoEmitOnErrorsPlugin(),
31    ],
32    output: {
33      path: path.resolve('./build'),
34      filename: 'server.js'
35    }
36  }
```

Botframework production build script

```
1  const webpack = require('webpack')
2  const path = require('path')
3  const nodeExternals = require('webpack-node-externals')
4
5  module.exports = {
6    mode: 'production',
7    entry: [
8      './src/index'
9    ],
10   target: 'node',
11   externals: [nodeExternals()],
12   module: {
13     rules: [{
14       test: /\.js?$/,
15       use: 'babel-loader',
16       exclude: /node_modules/
17     }]
18   },
19   plugins: [
20     new webpack.NamedModulesPlugin(),
21     new webpack.NoEmitOnErrorsPlugin(),
22   ],
23   output: {
24     path: path.resolve('./build'),
25     filename: 'server.js'
26   }
27 }
```