CHAPTER SIX

What Job Did You Hire That Milkshake For?

Many products fail because companies develop them from the wrong perspective. Companies focus too much on what they want to sell their customers, rather than what those customers really need. What's missing is empathy: a deep understanding of what problems customers are trying to solve. The same is true in our relationships: we go into them thinking about what we want rather than what is important to the other person. Changing your perspective is a powerful way to deepen your relationships.

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Doing the Job Right

Almost everyone has heard of the discount furniture store IKEA. It's been incredibly successful: the Swedish company

has been rolling out its stores all over the world for the last forty years, and has global revenues in excess of 25 billion euros. The company's owner, Ingvar Kamprad, is one of the world's richest people. Not bad for a chain that sells inexpensive furniture you have to assemble yourself.

It's fascinating that in forty years, *nobody* has copied IKEA. Think about that for a second. Here is a business that has been immensely profitable for decades. IKEA doesn't have any big business secrets—any would-be competitor can walk through its stores, reverse-engineer its products, or copy its catalog . . . and yet nobody has done it.

Why is that?

IKEA's entire business model—the shopping experience, the layout of the store, the design of the products and the way they are packaged—is very different from the standard furniture store. Most retailers are organized around a customer segment, or a type of product. The customer base can then be divided up into target demographics, such as age, gender, education, or income level. In furniture retailing, over the years there have been stores such as Levitz Furniture, known for selling low-cost furniture to lower-income people. Or Ethan Allen, which made its name selling colonial-style furniture to wealthy people. And there are a host of other examples: stores organized around modern furniture for urban dwellers, stores that specialize in furniture for businesses, and so on.

IKEA has taken a totally different approach. Rather than organizing themselves around the characterization of partic-

ular customers or products, IKEA is structured around a job that customers periodically need to get done.

A job?

Through my research on innovation for the past two decades, my colleagues and I have developed a theory about this approach to marketing and product development, which we call "the job to be done." The insight behind this way of thinking is that what *causes* us to buy a product or service is that we actually hire products to do jobs for us.

What do I mean by that? We don't go through life conforming to particular demographic segments: nobody buys a product because he is an eighteen- to thirty-five-year-old white male getting a college degree. That may be *correlated* with a decision to buy this product instead of that one, but it doesn't *cause* us to buy anything. Instead, periodically we find that some job has arisen in our lives that we need to do, and we then find some way to get it done. If a company has developed a product or service to do the job well, we buy, or "hire" it, to do the job. If there isn't an existing product that does the job well, however, then we typically make something we already have, get it done as best we can, or develop a work-around. The mechanism that *causes* us to buy a product is "I have a job I need to get done, and this is going to help me do it."

My son Michael recently hired IKEA to do a job that had arisen in his life—which helped me understand why the company has been so successful. He was starting with a new employer in a new city after having lived on a student's budget for several years, and called me with a problem: "Dad,

I'm moving into my apartment tomorrow, and I need to get it furnished."

At this point, a name just jumped into our minds simultaneously: IKEA.

IKEA doesn't focus on selling a particular type of furniture to any particular demographically defined group of consumers. Rather, it focuses on a job that many consumers confront quite often as they establish themselves and their families in new surroundings: *I've got to get this place furnished tomorrow, because the next day I have to show up at work.* Competitors can copy IKEA's products. Competitors can even copy IKEA's layout. But what nobody has done is copy the way IKEA has integrated its products and its layout.

This thoughtful combination allows shoppers to quickly get everything done at once. It would seem counterintuitive to have the stores half an hour away, but this decision actually makes it much easier for people to get everything they need in one trip. It lets IKEA build a bigger store to ensure its furniture is always in stock. It has the space to build a supervised play area to keep the kids occupied—which is important because having a child tugging at your sleeve might cause you to forget something or rush through a decision. In case you get hungry, IKEA has a restaurant in the building so you don't have to leave. Its products are all flat-packed so that you can get them home quickly and easily in your own car. If you happen to buy so much that you can't fit it all in your car, IKEA has same-day delivery. And so on.

In fact, because IKEA does the job so well, many of its

customers have developed an intense loyalty to its products. My son Michael, for example, is one of IKEA's most enthusiastic customers because whenever he needs to furnish a new apartment or a room, he has learned that IKEA does the job perfectly. Whenever friends or family have the same job to do, Michael will cite chapter and verse on why IKEA does the job better than anyone else.

When a company understands the jobs that arise in people's lives, and then develops products and the accompanying experiences required in purchasing and using the product to do the job perfectly, it causes customers to instinctively "pull" the product into their lives whenever the job arises. But when a company simply makes a product that other companies also can make—and is a product that can do lots of jobs but none of them well—it will find that customers are rarely loyal to one product versus another. They will switch in a heartbeat when an alternative goes on sale.

Cheaper? Chocolatier? Chunkier?

The job-to-be-done theory began to coalesce in a project that I worked on with some friends for one of the big fast-food restaurants. The company was trying to ramp up the sales of their milkshakes. The company had spent months studying the issue. They had brought customers in who fit the profile of the quintessential milkshake consumer and peppered them with questions: "Can you tell us how we can improve our milkshake so you'd buy more of them? Do you want it chocolatier?

Cheaper? Chunkier?" The company would take all this feedback, then go off and improve the milkshake on those dimensions. They worked and worked on making the milkshake better as a result—but these improvements had no impact on sales or profits whatsoever. The company was stumped.

My colleague Bob Moesta then offered to bring a completely different perspective to the milkshake problem: "I wonder what job arises in people's lives that causes them to come to this restaurant to 'hire' a milkshake?"

That was an interesting way to think about the problem. So they stood in a restaurant hours on end, taking very careful data: What time did people buy these milkshakes? What were they wearing? Were they alone? Did they buy other food with it? Did they eat it in the restaurant or drive off with it?

Surprisingly, it turned out that nearly half of the milkshakes were sold in the early morning. The people who bought those morning milkshakes were almost always alone; it was the only thing they bought; and almost all of them got in a car and drove off with it.

To figure out what job they were hiring that milkshake to do, we came back another morning and stood outside the restaurant so that we could confront these folks as they left, milkshake in hand. As they emerged and, in language that they could understand, we essentially asked each of them, "Excuse me. Can you help me understand what job you are trying to do with that milkshake?" When they'd struggle to answer this question, we'd help them by asking, "Well, think about the last time you were in this same situation, needing

to get the same job done—but you didn't come here to hire that milkshake. What did you hire?" The answers were enlightening: Bananas. Doughnuts. Bagels. Candy bars. But the milkshake was clearly their favorite.

As we put all the answers together, it became clear that the early-morning customers all had the same job to do: they had a long and boring ride to work. They needed something to do while driving to keep the commute interesting. They weren't really hungry yet, but they knew that in a couple of hours, they'd face a midmorning stomach rumbling. "What else do I hire to do this job?" one mused. "I hire bananas sometimes. But take my word for it: don't do bananas. They are gone too quickly—and you'll be hungry again by midmorning." Some people complained that doughnuts were too crumbly and left their fingers sticky, making a mess on their clothes and the steering wheel as they tried to eat and drive. A common complaint about hiring bagels for this job was that they were dry and tasteless—forcing people to drive their cars with their knees while they spread cream cheese and jam on the bagels. Another commuter used our language and confessed, "One time I hired a Snickers bar. But I felt so guilty about eating candy for breakfast that I never did it again."

But a milkshake? It was the best of the lot. It took a long time to finish a thick milkshake with that thin straw. And it was substantial enough to ward off the looming midmorning hunger attack. One commuter effused, "This milkshake. It is so thick! It easily takes me twenty minutes to suck it up through that little straw. Who cares what the ingredients

are—I don't. All I know is that I'm full all morning. And it fits right here in my cup holder"—as he held up his empty hand.

It turns out that the milkshake does the job better than any of the competitors—which, in the customers' minds, are not just milkshakes from other chains but bananas, bagels, doughnuts, breakfast bars, smoothies, coffee, and so on.

That was a breakthrough insight for the fast-food chain—but the breakthroughs were not over yet. We discovered that in the afternoon and evening, the same product was hired for a fundamentally different job. Instead of commuters, the people who were coming in to buy milkshakes in the afternoon and evening were typically fathers—fathers who had had to say "no" to their children about any number of things all week long. No new toy. No, they can't stay up late. No, they can't have a puppy.

I recognized that I had been one of those dads, more times than I could remember, and I had the same job to do when I was in that situation. I'd been looking for something innocuous to which I could say "yes," to make me feel like a kind and loving father. So I'm standing there in line with my son and I order my meal. Then my son Spencer orders his meal—and he pauses to look up at me like only a son can, and asks, "Dad, can I have a milkshake, too?" And the moment has arrived when I can say "yes" to my son and feel good about myself. I reach down, put my hand on his shoulder, and say, "Of course, Spence, you can have a milkshake."

Turns out, the milkshakes didn't do that particular job at all well. When we watched those father-son tables, the dads,

like me, finished their meal first. The son would then finish his. And then he would pick up that thick milkshake—and it took him forever to suck it up that thin little straw.

Dads didn't hire the milkshake to keep their son entertained for a long time; they hired it to be nice. They'd patiently wait while their son struggled to make progress on the shake. But after a while, they'd grow impatient. "Look, son, I'm sorry, but we don't have all night . . ." They'd clean up their table and the milkshake would get thrown away half finished.

If our fast-food chain asked me, "So, Clay . . . how can we improve the milkshake so that you'll buy more of them? Thicker? Sweeter? Bigger?" I wouldn't know what to say, because I hire it for two fundamentally different jobs. Then, when they averaged up the responses of the key forty-five- to sixty-five-year-old demographic segment that has the highest proclivity to buy milkshakes, it would guide them to develop a one-size-fits-none product that doesn't do either job well.

On the other hand, if you understand that there are two different jobs that the milkshake is being hired to do, it becomes obvious how to improve the shake. The morning job needs a more viscous milkshake, which takes even longer to suck up. You might add in chunks of fruit—but not to make it healthy, because that's not the reason it's being hired. It's being hired by morning customers to keep their commute interesting. The unexpected pieces of fruit would do just that. And, finally, you'd wheel the dispensing machine out from behind the counter to the front, and install a prepaid swipe-

card, so that commuters could run in, gas up, and go—and never get caught in a line.

The afternoon make-me-feel-good-about-being-a-parent job is fundamentally different. Maybe the afternoon milkshake should come in half sizes; be less thick so it could be finished more quickly; and so on.

There is no one right answer for all circumstances. You have to start by understanding the job the customer is trying to have done.

The Job of Keeping Mom and Dad Happy

Not long ago, an inventor approached a New Hampshire company called the Big Idea Group with an idea for a card game he had created. The chief executive of BIG, Mike Collins, didn't think the game would sell. But instead of sending the inventor packing, he asked him, "What caused you to develop this game?" Rather than justifying the game he developed, the inventor's answer identified a problem that arose repeatedly in his life: "I have three young children and a demanding job. By the time I get home from work and we finish dinner, it's eight o'clock and the kids need to go to bed. But we haven't had any fun together. What am I going to do? Set up Monopoly or Risk? I need some fun games that we can set up, play, and put away in fifteen minutes."

Aha! This job arose in this man's life at least five days a week.

Though Collins felt that the father's game was only mediocre, the valuable insight was the job itself. Millions of busy

parents think about the same thing every evening. The identification of the job the inventor was trying to do led to a very successful line called "12 Minute Games." It was only through living with a real problem that the dad had the insight to create a line of games that do a job important to millions of people.

Every successful product or service, either explicitly or implicitly, was structured around a job to be done. Addressing a job is the causal mechanism behind a purchase. If someone develops a product that is interesting, but which doesn't intuitively map in customers' minds on a job that they are trying to do, that product will struggle to succeed—unless the product is adapted and repositioned on an important job.

The makers of V8 vegetable juice used this theory of jobs to grow their business in a stunning way, as recounted by one of their executives who attended one of our executive education programs about four years ago. For years, the advertising campaign for V8, a juice that promises the nutrients of eight different vegetables, had used the refrain, "Wow, I could've had a V8!" It was sold as an alternative to refreshing drinks, like apple juice, soft drinks, Gatorade, and so on. But only a smattering of customers actually preferred V8, when compared to these other products.

After reading one of the papers my colleagues and I had written about the virtues of defining products and market segments in terms of jobs to be done, they realized that there was another job in their part of the world, in which the V8 was far better equipped to compete: providing vegetables' nutrients. Most of us promised our mothers when we left

home that we would eat vegetables in order to maintain our health. But hiring fresh vegetables to do the job entails peeling, slicing, cubing, and shredding, and then boiling, baking, or otherwise preparing vegetables—all so that we can eat a food that most of us don't really like.

"Or," the executive recalled, "the customers could say, 'I could drink a V8, and get all the nutrition that I promised Mom that I'd get, but with a fraction of the effort and time!'" Once the makers of V8 had that realization, the ad campaign changed to focus on how the drink provided the required daily vegetable servings. It worked. The executive recounted that V8 quadrupled its revenues within a year of their decision to position it on a different job, allowing it to compete against its inconvenient competitors: vegetables.

Hiring School for a Job

Without realizing it, we use this job-to-be-done mind-set in our interactions with people all the time. To illustrate, I'll summarize a study we did to understand why our schools in America struggle to improve—a study that culminated in our book *Disrupting Class*. One of the primary puzzles in the research was why so many of our schoolchildren just seem unmotivated to learn. We bring technology, special education, amusement, field trips, and many other improvements in the way we teach, and little seems to make a difference.

What's going on? The answer lies in understanding what jobs arise in the lives of students that schools might be hired to solve.

The conclusion we reached was that going to school is not a job that children are trying to get done. It is something that a child might hire to do the job, but it isn't *the* job itself. The two fundamental jobs that children need to do are to feel successful and to have friends—every day. Sure, they could hire school to get these jobs done. Some achieve success and friends in the classroom, the band, the math club, or the basketball team. But to feel successful and have friends, they could also drop out of school and join a gang, or buy a car and cruise the streets. Viewed from the perspective of jobs, it becomes very clear that schools don't often do these jobs well at all—in fact, all too often, schools are structured to help most students feel like failures. We had assumed going in that those who succeed at school do so because they are motivated. But we concluded that all students are similarly motivated—to succeed. The problem is, only a fraction of students feel successful through school.

Indeed, we learned that just as the fast-food restaurant had been improving the milkshake on dimensions of improvement irrelevant to the jobs that customers were trying to do, our schools were improving themselves on dimensions of improvement irrelevant to the job that students are trying to do. There is no way that we can motivate children to work harder in class by *convincing* them that they *should* do this. Rather, we need to offer children experiences in school that help them do these jobs—to feel successful and do it with friends.

Schools that have designed their curriculum so that students feel success every day see rates of dropping out and absenteeism fall to nearly zero. When structured to do the

job of success, students eagerly master difficult material—because in doing so, they are getting the job done.

What Job Are You Being Hired For?

If you work to understand what job you are being hired to do, both professionally and in your personal life, the payoff will be enormous. In fact, it is here that this theory yields the most insight, simply because one of the most important jobs you'll ever be hired to do is to be a spouse. Getting this right, I believe, is critical to sustaining a happy marriage.

Just as we learned in our research about the jobs that school students are trying to do, I'll describe in the subsequent pages how this framing can impact our marriages and relationships. To economize on words, I've framed the first person with masculine pronouns and adjectives, and used feminine words for the spouse. But they can be swapped around without changing the meaning at all—the concepts apply equally to everyone.

Like those milkshake buyers, you and your wife can't always articulate what the fundamental jobs are that *you each* are personally trying to do, let alone articulate the fundamental jobs that your wife has, for which she might hire a husband to get done. Understanding the job requires the critical ingredients of intuition and empathy. You have to be able to put yourself not just in her shoes, but her chair—and indeed, her life. More important, the jobs that your spouse is trying to do are often *very* different from the jobs that you *think* she should want to do.

Ironically, it is for this reason that many unhappy marriages are often built upon selflessness. But the selflessness is based on the partners giving each other things that they want to give, and which they have decided that their partner ought to want—as in, "Honey, believe me, you are going to love this Iridium wireless telephone!"

It's easy for any of us to make assumptions about what our spouse might want, rather than work hard to understand the job to be done in our spouse's life. Let me share an example from Scott, a friend of mine with three children under the age of five. One day recently, Scott came home from work to find a highly unusual scene—the breakfast dishes still on the table and dinner not started. His instant reaction was that his wife, Barbara, had had a tough day and needed a hand. Without a word, he rolled up his sleeves, cleaned up the breakfast dishes, and started dinner. Partway through, Barbara disappeared. But Scott kept on, making dinner for the kids. He had just started feeding them when he suddenly wondered, where's Barbara? Tired, but feeling pretty good about himself, he went upstairs to try to figure out where she was. He found her alone in their bedroom. He expected to be thanked for doing all that at the end of an exhausting day at work. But instead Barbara was *very* upset—at him.

He was shocked. He had just done all this for *her.* What had he done wrong?

"How could you ignore me after I've had such a difficult day?" Barbara asked.

"You think that I've ignored you?" Scott responded. "I finished the breakfast dishes, cleaned up the kitchen, fixed

dinner, and am partway through feeding our children. How in the world can you think I've ignored you?"

Just then, it became clear to Scott what had happened. Indeed, what he did was important to get done, and he was trying to be selfless in giving Barbara exactly what *he* thought she needed. Barbara explained, however, that the day hadn't been difficult because of the chores. It was difficult because she had spent hours and hours with small, demanding children, and she hadn't spoken to another adult all day. What she needed most at that time was a real conversation with an adult who cared about her. By doing what he did, he only made Barbara feel guilty and angry about her frustration.

Interactions like those between Scott and Barbara occur thousands of times every day in households around the world. We project what we want and assume that it's also what our spouse wants. Scott probably wished he had helping hands to get through his tough day at work, so that's what he offered Barbara when he got home. It's so easy to mean well but get it wrong. A husband may be convinced that he is the selfless one, and also convinced that his wife is being self-centered because she doesn't even notice everything he is giving her—and vice versa. This is exactly the interaction between the customers and the marketers of so many companies, too.

Yes, we can do all kinds of things for our spouse, but if we are not focused on the jobs she most needs doing, we will reap frustration and confusion in our search for happiness in that relationship. Our effort is misplaced—we are just making a chocolatier milkshake. This may be the single hardest

thing to get right in a marriage. Even with good intentions and deep love, we can fundamentally misunderstand each other. We get caught up in the day-to-day chores of our lives. Our communication ends up focusing only on who is doing what. We assume things.

I suspect that if we studied marriage from the job-to-be-done lens, we would find that the husbands and wives who are most loyal to each other are those who have figured out the jobs that their partner needs to be done—and then they do the job reliably and well. I know for me, this has a profound effect. By working to truly understand the job she needs done, and doing it well, I can cause myself to fall more deeply in love with my spouse, and, I hope, her with me. Divorce, on the other hand, often has its roots when one frames marriage only in terms of whether she is giving me what I want. If she isn't, then I dispense with her, and find someone else who will.

Sacrifice and Commitment

This may sound counterintuitive, but I deeply believe that the path to happiness in a relationship is not just about finding someone who you think is going to make you happy. Rather, the reverse is equally true: the path to happiness is about finding someone who you want to make happy, someone whose happiness is worth devoting yourself to. If what causes us to fall deeply in love is mutually understanding and then doing each other's job to be done, then I have observed that what *cements* that commitment is the extent to which I sacrifice myself to help *her* succeed and for *her* to be happy.

This principle—that sacrifice deepens our commitment—doesn't just work in marriages. It applies to members of our family and close friends, as well as organizations and even cultures and nations.

For illustration, let me offer you the example of the U.S. Marines, who achieve a deep sense of attachment to the organization, to their peers, and to their country. But not because it is fun—surviving Marine Corps training alone may be one of the hardest challenges of many young Marines' lives to that point. The job almost kills them. They sacrifice so much for the corps and their fellow Marines. But you can routinely see "Semper Fi"—Always Faithful—bumper stickers on cars all over America.

Our daughter, Annie, also experienced this while serving as a missionary for our church in Mongolia. When she first found out that she was going there, her younger brother, Spence, got her a travel guide. It offered a bleak picture: "This is a great country. But we don't think you should go in the winter, because it gets down to 65 degrees below zero. And, actually, we don't think you should go in the summer, either: it gets up to 125 degrees Fahrenheit. But especially don't go in the spring: sand storms erupt on the Gobi Desert. If you get caught in one, it will strip the paint off your car and the skin off your body. Other than this, though, you will love your time in this beautiful nation!"

That didn't look too promising, but we shipped her off to Mongolia nonetheless. As the book predicted, it was a brutal experience at times; we now understand why Genghis Khan was so eager to migrate south. It is one tough place. Because

of the climate, there are just a few places where grains and vegetables can grow. As a result the diet—even snacks—is composed almost entirely of animal products, from horses, sheep, yaks, and goats. Yet Annie persisted for the full eighteen months of her assignment there, teaching and trying to help everyone whom she met there become a better person. It was one of the hardest things she's done in her life.

But you know what? Annie left half of her heart with the Mongolian people forever—and it greatly strengthened her commitment to our church.

I feel exactly the same way about Korea and the remarkable Korean people because I served as a young missionary in Korea back when it was one of the poorest countries in Asia. Neither Annie nor I feel this intense attachment to the people of those countries or to our church because our work there was easy—it's the opposite. We feel this way because we gave so much of ourselves.

Given that sacrifice deepens our commitment, it's important to ensure that what we sacrifice for is *worthy* of that commitment, as the church was for me and Annie. Perhaps nothing deserves sacrifice more than family—and not just that others should sacrifice for you, but that you should sacrifice for your family, too. I believe it is an essential foundation to deep friendships and fulfilling, happy families and marriages.

One of the first times I observed this was in the family of Edward and Joan Quinn, my parents-in-law. My wife, Christine, is the oldest of twelve children, raised in a family in which there was little money, a lot of love, and a compelling

need to help each other succeed. They had to give up a lot for each other; there was no space for selfishness. I know innumerable families, but I have never known any whose loyalty for each other surpasses this family. If anything ever begins to go amiss in the life of any member of this now even larger family, everyone—literally everyone—is standing in line the next day, not simply offering help, but actively searching for ways to help.

I have experienced this within my own life, too. I was a student in England when my father learned that he had cancer—and within a couple of months, it was clear that he wasn't getting better. I returned home to help my mother and siblings take care of him. I didn't think twice about doing this; it was just what needed to be done.

My dad had worked in the same department store, ZCMI, for most of his life. When we were kids, every Saturday we would go down to the store and help him do his job—or at least he made us feel as though we were helping him by stocking shelves, turning the labels carefully forward, and weighing small bags of nuts and spices, even if we only slowed him down. From helping him over the years, we learned a lot about his job.

When my dad eventually got so sick that he couldn't keep working, I offered to go to work in his place. One week, I was a student at Oxford having a heady academic experience. The next, I was back home stocking department store shelves with Christmas holiday merchandise.

Now you might think that, in hindsight, I could have resented what happened. And yet I consider those months to be

among the happiest times I ever spent with my dad and my family. As I reflect back on why, it's *because* I put my whole life on hold for them.

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It's natural to want the people you love to be happy. What can often be difficult is understanding what your *role is in that. Thinking about your relationships from the perspective of the* job to be done *is the best way to understand what's important to the people who mean the most to you. It allows you to develop true empathy. Asking yourself "What job does my spouse most need me to do?" gives you the ability to think about it in the right unit of analysis. When you approach your relationships from this perspective, the answers will become much more clear than they would by simply speculating about what might be the right thing to do.*

But you have to go beyond understanding what job your spouse needs you to do. You have to do that job. You'll have to devote your time and energy to the effort, be willing to suppress your own priorities and desires, and focus on doing what is required to make the other person happy. Nor should we be timid in giving our children and our spouses the same opportunities to give of themselves to others. You might think this approach would actually cause resentment in relationships because one person is so clearly giving up something for the other. But I have found that it has the opposite effect. In sacrificing for something worthwhile, you deeply strengthen your commitment to it.