



Contextual inquiry: Driving IT innovation with empathy

by **Hannah Rudin**, Strategist

Imagine looking at your organization through the lens of a camera. If you are an IT leader, the tools and technology may look sharp and defined, while the people in the foreground using those products are more blurry. Bringing the people into focus requires building empathy.

We know you think about your users. You have processes for getting feedback on your products. However, take a moment to reflect: Would you say your IT department feels *empathy* — a deep understanding rooted in compassion — for your users? Put another way, have you spent time in their shoes?

Build empathy to unlock human-centered innovation

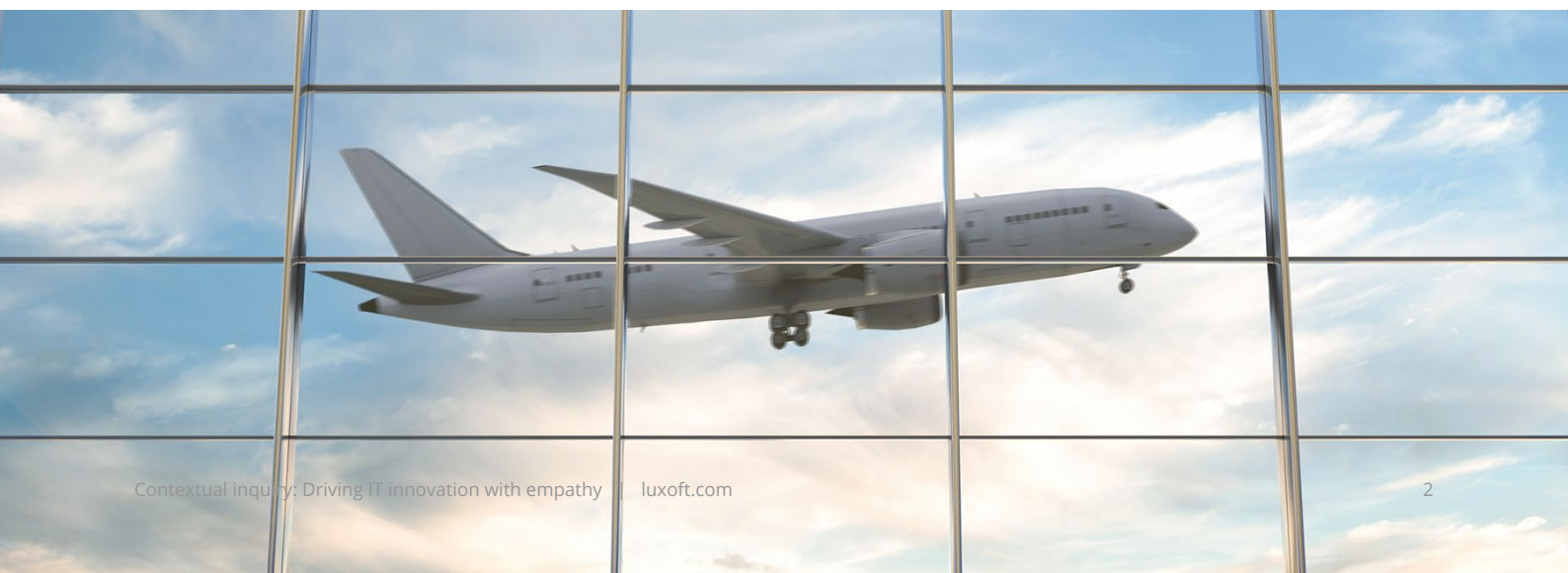
Empathy is a key element of human-centered product innovation. Building empathy transforms IT departments from product architects into advocates for the employees they serve. In turn, this better enables employees to adopt the technology developed by IT departments and deliver critical feedback to IT teams to improve products. It enables IT departments to become partners to the employees they serve, working together toward successful business outcomes.

On a recent project for a major airline, Smashing Ideas launched the process of building empathy between IT leadership and frontline employees.

Assess the role of technology in business processes

The client's IT department was responsible for a suite of software tools that enabled frontline airport employees to execute the airplane turn process — all of the activities that must happen from when an airplane arrives at the gate to when it is pushed from the gate. The IT department recognized the role of technology in improving the efficiency of the overall turn process, but knew it required systematic improvements. Previously, the department had relied on implementing piecemeal solutions to specific problems on individual pieces of technology. While trying to innovate and improve these tools, they found themselves encountering a major blind spot: They were not sure how these tools aided or hindered turn efficiency for the frontline employees they were intending to serve.

To help them bring the frontline employee experience into focus, we asked the airline to put us on the ground.





Immerse in on-the-ground research

We used a contextual inquiry research approach which combined on-the-ground observation with interviews. Our client invited us to one of their major hub airports and were gracious partners throughout our preparation and time on the ground. We spent an immersive week observing and engaging with more than 20 frontline staff (representing five of the teams involved in the airplane turn process) as they went about their work. We gave them license to vent to us, brag to us and tell us what enables them to do their work the best they can.

Observe: Things might look very different

This kind of on-the-ground observation enabled us to see things differently from how they were first described by product owners in the IT department. For example, employees had developed myriad workarounds for common problems; they had grown so accustomed to their individual ways of working that they didn't

always notice what was or was not a workaround. In some cases, tech features existed that made certain workarounds redundant, but even employees who had been in their roles for many years were unaware of those features.

From our week on the ground, we were able to compile learnings and insights about the people, processes, and technology that enable the airplane turn process. The experience highlighted the barriers to efficiency that existed in the system, as well as the opportunities for improvement. On the ground, we developed the compassion and understanding requisite for empathy for turn team members. We saw how the teams and technologies interacted and how intended usage differed in practice. Ultimately, this enabled us to deliver specific, practical recommendations to IT leadership around what each role in the turn process required to be successful, as well as prioritized use cases for each core application. Without executing a contextual inquiry on the ground, we could not have gathered those insights and fostered deeper empathy in the IT department for the turn frontline employees.

Conduct a contextual inquiry

Imagine again that you are looking through a camera lens at your business operations. If your technology is in focus while the people are blurry, consider conducting a contextual inquiry to sharpen the image. Here are some practices to get you started:

1) Build a strong foundation of knowledge

- Take time in advance to research, interview stakeholders and gain an understanding of the world in which you will be immersed
- Gain an initial sense of the language used by the people you will be shadowing, as well as their tasks, motivations, and the technologies they use
- Note the accuracy or inaccuracy of your foundational knowledge; this can dispel incorrect assumptions and bias

2) Partner with trusted figures

- Identify trusted figures in advance who can open the door to conversations with frontline employees and provide their own perspectives
- Do your part as well: Being friendly and building rapport is part of the process

3) Take time to reflect: daily, weekly, regularly

- Remain flexible and adaptable, but reserve time to reflect on your observations and process findings at least once per day
- Commit to learning and improving as you go
- Allocate time at the end of the process or other regular intervals for an extended learnings download and process debrief

4) Be systematic and determined — it's a lot of information

- Trust that some of your best insights will likely be revealed near the end of the process
- Find a systematic approach that enables you to stay consistent and do your due diligence when synthesizing the raw information you have gathered
- Starting anywhere will get you somewhere — be wary of falling into “analysis paralysis”

After exploring the data, focus on deliverables and insights that are impactful for achieving initial project goals.

Shifting focus from technology to the people using it can be difficult or even uncomfortable. That's okay. It helps to be mindful and intentional during the different stages of your process about whether you are considering the people or the technology. Each time you find yourself thinking about the technology, guide yourself back to thinking about the people. Deliberately centering this process on people will result in the most actionable and impactful insights that can then be translated into innovating the technology.



Innovate with empathy

Contextual inquiry can be a transformative process for both the researchers and the employees with whom they interact. It provides valuable insights that can only be gleaned by recognizing how technology is used, well, in context. For IT teams in particular, this research method can help to reframe your innovation from improving technology to better supporting the employees who are using the technology to achieve business goals. It is an important step in the process of building empathy between technology architects and the people they are intending to serve, fostering partnerships toward business outcomes.

If you'd like to learn more about this vital step in the digital transformation process, visit <https://www.luxoft.com/smashingideas/> or contact one of our experts. Discover for yourself the potential partnerships and exceptional business outcomes that empathy-driven innovation can deliver for your organization.

About **the author**



Hannah Rudin

Hannah Rudin is a Strategist in Luxoft's Smashing Ideas team, specializing in human-centered research and systems thinking. Hannah's diverse background includes design, organizational development and experiential education. She holds a master's degree in human-centered design, research and strategy from the Products of Design program at the School of Visual Arts, as well as a bachelor's in Mechanical Engineering from Cornell University.

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Luxoft is the design, data and development arm of DXC Technology, providing bespoke, end-to-end technology solutions for mission-critical systems, products and services. We help create data-fueled organizations, solving complex operational, technological and strategic challenges. Our passion is building resilient businesses, while generating new business channels and revenue streams, exceptional user experiences and modernized operations at scale.

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