Ethics Assessment

Why does this worksheet exist?

Before we start designing a product or service, it's important to ask ourselves the right questions so we can anticipate potential consequences – both intended and unintended.

This worksheet is aimed at helping you evaluate your products for any potential harms and prioritize next steps, whether that's doing more research or holding brainstorms to address the results you uncovered.

We chose to define this worksheet from a user's perspective, rather than a practitioner's perspective. Regardless of which specific challenges your team is more likely to grapple with, we believe the practice of assessing your work's impact on others should be centered on those affected by it.

Because we attempt to cover the various ways users may be impacted, you might find that certain scenarios are more relevant to your work than others. Feel free to zoom in when that happens, but remember to keep an open mind and consider the unexpected.

We created this worksheet to provide a self-service resource for our teammates at Spotify to explore a subject that can sometimes be intimidating or overwhelming. The hope is that anyone can dive in with no prep needed. This isn't a be-all, end-all approach to auditing your product, but rather a starting point for conversation and investigation.

How to do an assessment

Please ***print or make a copy*** of this worksheet.

You'll fill out columns B-D outlined below with your team. Don't feel the need to fill out the whole sheet — certain scenarios may not apply to your product. At the same time, keep an open mind! Some scenarios may be relevant in ways you haven't yet considered.

A. **Potential effects**
   A list of potential negative effects, broken down harm into 3 categories: physical, emotional, and societal. Overlap between categories is likely, but the key is to become more aware of your product's potential consequences.

B. **Examples of how your product might encourage or cause this effect**
   This is a space for your team to list examples and take notes. Look beyond the user you're specifically designing for – your product can impact even those who don't use it.

C. **Chance of effect (1-5)**
   A 5-point scale that describes the degree of confidence your team has that your product produces a certain effect

   Tip: Make sure to focus on rating the chance of effect based on the presented scale, and leave questions around priority and level of effort for later.

   ○ **5: Highly probable** – There is quantitative evidence and/or a body of pre-existing research which shows that this product or similar products have this effect.

   ○ **4: Probable** – There is some evidence from internal research that suggests this product or similar products have this effect. It may be worth validating with additional research or testing.

   ○ **3: Possible** – There is anecdotal evidence or the team has voiced concerns over the possibility of an effect. Worth doing additional research or testing.

   ○ **2: Improbable** – It is unlikely that the product is uniquely encouraging or causing this effect. It may be worth looking into whether specific populations are affected.

- 1: Highly improbable – There is quantitative evidence and/or a body of pre-existing research that shows this product does *not* have this effect, or the product is completely unrelated from this effect.

D. **Level of concern (1-5)**
A 5-point scale that describes the level of concern your team has about this particular harm, where **5 = Greatest concern** and **1 = Least concern**. It's less cut-and-dried than "chance of effect" – you'll have to use your intuition and common sense to agree upon the potential impact of each harm. Don't worry about getting it perfect. This number might change as you work through next steps.

Thought starters

Before jumping into this assessment, consider using one or more of the below questions, borrowed from Artefact Group's Tarot Cards of Tech, as a warm-up:

- How could a bad actor use this product? What is your team doing to prepare for that?
- What about your product model would concern the people using it the most?
- What's the worst headline about your product you can imagine?
- How might a community change if 80% of residents used your product?

Ethics assessment

Physical harm

Potential effects	Examples of how your product might encourage or cause this	Chance of effect (1-5)	Level of concern (1-5)
Accidents due to distraction			
Death			
Exploitation of workers			
Exposure of personal data			
Financial insecurity			
Inactivity			
Muscle strain or other injuries			
Neglect of basic self-care			
Sleep deprivation			
Violence			

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Emotional harm

Potential effects	Examples of how your product might encourage or cause this	Chance of effect (1-5)	Level of concern (1-5)
Addiction			
Anxiety			
Betrayal of trust or privacy			
Depression			
Exclusion			
Harm to relationships			
Negative self-image			
Psychological harm to children			
Verbal abuse			

Societal harm

Potential effects	Examples of how your product might encourage or cause this	Chance of effect (1-5)	Level of concern (1-5)
Exclusion of a group of people			
Harm to the environment			
Over or under-representation			
Political polarization			
Reinforcing stereotypes			
Unequal opportunity			
Unequal quality of service			

Defining next steps

Using the guide below, write out next steps for each harm in a separate document based on the "**chance of effect**."

- **5: Highly probable** – Conduct a brainstorm to address the specific harm with your team. For example, you could hold a session around the prompt: *"How might we help keep peoples' private interests private?"*
- **4: Probable** or **3: Possible** – Validate your concerns with additional research or testing to understand how big a problem the harm might be, and for whom.
- **2: Improbable**: Although the harm is improbable, remember that edge cases can still affect a specific population. Pose questions like: *"Could this negatively impact a specific group? How might this play out in the long term if it goes unaddressed? What's the best and worst headline we can imagine about this -- and do we feel comfortable with rolling it out as is?"*
- **1: Highly improbable** – No further steps at this time

Here's an example of what this might look like for a product that helps people shop for local foods, where the team is assessing a new feature that puts paid search results at the top:

Betrayal of trust — Users won't know which is a recommendation and which is a promotion, and will trust recommendations less.

- *Chance of effect: 3.*
- *Next steps: Conduct user research around whether users can tell the difference between what is a recommendation or a promotion.*

Unequal opportunity — Small business owners won't be able to compete with larger businesses who can afford to promote more.

- *Chance of effect: 5*
- *Next steps: Conduct a brainstorm around making the feature more accessible to smaller businesses.*

Prioritization

Below your next steps, rank the harms and next steps from above from highest priority to address to lowest priority to address. Consider **both "chance of effect"** and **"level of concern"**, like in the example below:

Priority 1: Unequal opportunity — Small business owners won't be able to compete with larger businesses who can afford to promote more.

- *Chance of effect: 5*
- *Level of concern: 4*

Priority 2: Betrayal of trust — Users won't know which is a recommendation and which is a promotion, and will trust recommendations less.

- *Chance of effect: 3*
- *Level of concern: 3*

Once you have a ranked list of priorities, work with your team to get high-priority next steps onto your roadmap and add lower priority ones to your backlog so they don't get forgotten. It's a good idea to revisit backlog items and this exercise in general each quarter.

Additional resources

Congrats on assessing your product or feature! 😃 🙌

Check out this [blog post](#) if you're interested in learning more about ethical design. If you have questions or feedback on the assessment, feel free to drop us a note [here](#).