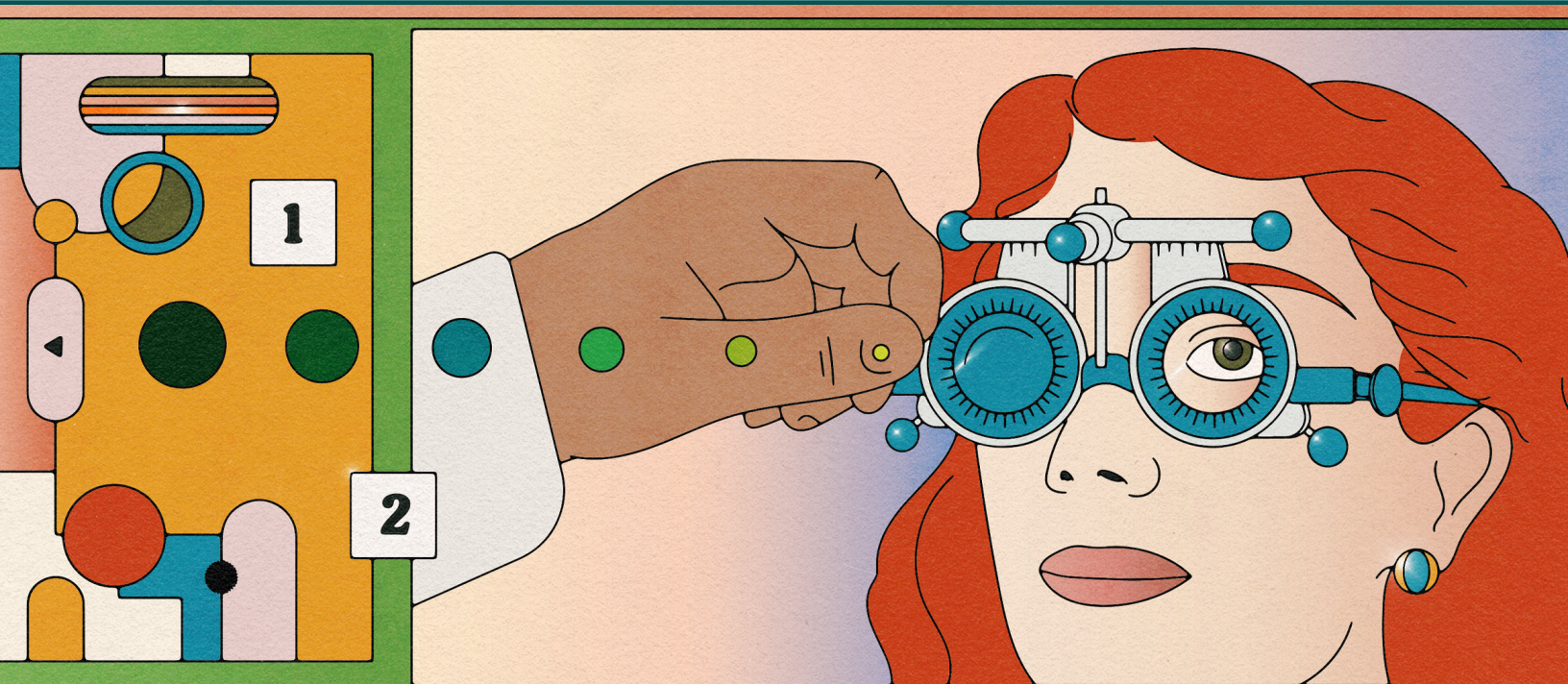The People Nerds' Guide:

Convert Usability Testing into Clear Action Items

Ensure your goals align with stakeholders' before running the research. Learn how to set expectations, analyze more effectively, and assign next-steps to clearly connect your insights to impact.

By Cori Widen

Usability testing is one of the most powerful research methodologies, executed by everyone from researchers to designers to product managers.

There is a lot of guidance out there about how to write and execute your test according to best practices—but I find that the *analysis and conversion of tests into actionable insights* is often rushed or done in a way that doesn't maximize the value of usability testing.

As a user research lead with tight timelines, I totally understand the temptation to watch a few sessions and hastily jump to solutions. The ideal process for this part of usability testing is murky, and who doesn't want to shorten their timeline?!

Here's the thing: when we don't follow an actual systematic process for extracting action items from our usability testing, we often end up focusing on recent hot topics or the insights that validate what we had already been thinking (recency and confirmation bias, anyone?).

This is a surefire way to miss opportunities for product iterations that could improve your user experience and affect your target KPIs. So exactly how do you analyze usability tests properly? How do you take that analysis and convert it into actionable insights?

Let's dive in.

Tips for effective usability testing analysis

Before you turn all of your insights into action items, take a few minutes to reflect on how you're generally approaching the analysis phase of your usability tests. Here are some best practices to make sure that your analysis is a good lead in to the part of the process where you're taking action on your findings.

✔ Don't skip any sessions (even if you find saturation early on)

It can be tempting not to finish your moderated usability sessions if you notice patterns early on, or to skip watching the full amount of unmoderated recordings that you have for the same reason. **Here are a few reasons why this is problematic:**

Even if users experience the same problem, they often try to solve it in different ways

For example, if users don't click the correct CTA to complete an action, where do they click? How do they explain their choice? Many times, there is variation in the details that will help you bring forward more nuanced insights.

The few users who get something right or wrong offer important insights

If you've watched 10 out of 15 sessions and so far, all of your participants have struggled with an important task, you've probably got yourself an opportunity for improvement. But even if only one or two of your remaining testers managed to complete the task successfully, understand the context of those users. Are they more experienced? Have they used a competitor with a similar flow? These clues can give you more information.

Sometimes, the pattern changes

This one is hard to explain, so let's chalk it up to the mysteries of the universe. But we've all had the experience where the first chunk of participants yield certain results in a usability test, and then the trend changes as you make your way through the sessions. Seeing a pattern in the first two thirds of your sessions doesn't guarantee that you'll see the same pattern all the way through.

✔ Glance over your research goals again before you analyze

When you were planning your usability test, it's likely that you wrote out your research goals. Make sure to refamiliarize yourself with exactly what you and your colleagues wanted to learn *before* you start the time consuming work of analyzing your sessions. If not, you may miss something and have to watch them again—not very timeline friendly!

✔ Ask a colleague to co-analyze

While it may seem like a big ask, I always recommend that you find someone else to watch your usability sessions in addition to yourself. That way, you can come together and compare insights.

This is for the simple reason that each of us comes to the analysis stage with our own perspective. Adding a perspective increases the chances that you'll pick up on potentially actionable insights, even if they fall outside of the realm of what interests you particularly, or what you're primed to notice in the first place.

Step-by-step:
How to convert your usability insights into action items

Now you and your colleague have watched and analyzed all of your sessions and have a list of insights that are aligned with your original research goals, what's next? How do you make sure that the *right insights* become actionable insights?

Here's my method, tried and true.

✔ Step 1: Divide your insights into wins and opportunities

Most usability tests include positive insights about the user experience in addition to problems or opportunities for improvement. Sit with your list of insights and divide them into these two sections.

Soon, you'll be sharing your insights with others, and it's important to acknowledge the wins as well. Not only because it feels good, but also because we can learn from our successes as well as our failures.

Pro Tip:

Sometimes we get stuck on whether a problem or opportunity is worth mentioning if only a small subset of our testers experienced it. This is tricky with qualitative methodology like usability testing.

My method for making the call is to ask myself whether the small number of users could potentially represent a key user group.

For example, if I have a SaaS marketing platform and the two user types are Marketing Managers and Sales Reps, my testing sample probably includes both. Perhaps only 3 of my 15 testers experienced the problem, but if they're all sales reps, that may alert me to a key problem for an important user type.

In these cases, it's the critical thinking about the context rather than the number that helps us make the call.

Once you've divided your insights into wins and opportunities, move on to the next step.

✔ Step 2: Prioritize the opportunities based on your key KPIs for the feature or flow

For this, you may have to go back to your Product Requirements Document (PRD) or whatever documentation your organization uses when they conceive of a feature or flow. What were the main goals of what you tested? Was it to increase conversion rate? Increase exports? Decrease drop-off?

Whatever your primary goals were, order your insights by how relevant they are to your key KPIs. For example, if the main goal of the feature you tested was to decrease user drop-off at a particular part in the flow, put the opportunities for improvement that may affect this metric toward the top of your list.

After ordering your insights by their relevance to your main KPI(s), create sections for problems to solve at high, medium, and low priority. This helps since we often waste time brainstorming solutions for UX issues that have limited impact. Once you've completed step two, you know where to put your immediate focus.

✔ Step 3: Consult with relevant stakeholders to problem solve high priority issues

Make a list of who you need to consult with for each of your high priority issues. It's tempting to look at it from whatever our limited perspective is—such as a researcher, PM, or designer—but in all likelihood, a high-stakes problem warrants getting together all of the above to come up with a plan for a product iteration that addresses these key issues.

Here are some discussion topics that will help you get to the root of the problem. You can brainstorm solutions with your colleagues who may not have watched your usability sessions:

- Why does this problem potentially affect a main KPI?
- When users struggled to do X, what did they do instead?
- What are your working hypotheses around *why* users struggled with this action?

From here, you and your colleagues can discuss potential changes to the feature or flow in question.

✔ Step 4: Make decisions and assign owners

You and your colleagues brainstormed solutions to key issues. At this point, it's time for the decision maker to decide which path to pursue. Once that's done, assign owners for each solution and voila! You have your precise action items for the most critical issues observed in your usability test.

When it comes to the lower priority insights that need less urgent problem solving, it's important to assign owners to each.

Make sure that each insight is given to someone on the product team to either begin working on, or to shelve for a later date. This way, they aren't forgotten when they prove useful for future product initiatives.

Solid analysis + goal-based prioritization = actionable insights

When people say that they struggle to turn their usability insights into action items, the problem is rarely the ability to find solutions to UX problems. After all, that's what product teams do best.

Usually, this challenge stems from the fact that the executors of the usability testing either
A) Didn't do a thorough and proper analysis and only have half-baked insight, or
B) They collected a mishmosh of random problems to solve—and no one is sure which are most important and where to go from there.

If you follow our guide to scrupulous analysis and go through each of the steps for turning usability insights into action items, you'll be well-positioned to make sure that your usability testing results in product team action.

Benefits of usability testing with dscout

dscout can help you gather the in-the-moment insights you need on your timeline. See how we can support your usability testing needs.

A centralized experience keeps you focused

With built-in operations like recruitment, screeners, incentive processing, and a singleview research activity builder, usability is more accessible and nimble.

A platform approach extends insight impact

Why stop at a single usability test? dscout's suite of moderated and unmoderated tools offer more variety for usability testing: follow-up interviews, pre-session trend spotting, or a rolling iterative approach are all possible from the same product.

A partner to augment your team

dscout's staff of trained researchers can help translate research briefs, advise on analysis approaches, or help with field management. This support goes beyond just tech help: our team becomes an extension of your own, critical in these lean times.

A balanced approach to automation

Thoughtfully integrated automation like response quality checks, expressiveness filtering, full session transcriptions, and usability-specific analysis (e.g., time on task) keep momentum and open time for deeper work where you need it most.

A way to engage stakeholders

Make the insights stick by bringing collaborators and decision-makers into the process, whether that's through easy-access viewer status, one-click data share links, or customized video playlists. Usability with dscout makes research a team sport.

Dive into usability testing with confidence (and support)

With dscout you can recruit the right participants, choose from an array of question and task types, analyze with ease, collaborate with your team, and get ideas or advice from one of our designated research advisors.

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You're fascinated by the why. We break down the hows.

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