

Clay Christensen's Jobs To Be Done Innovation Theory Challenges Common Innovation And Marketing Methods

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The recent passing of Harvard Business School professor and innovation expert Clay Christensen provides good reason to revisit one of the key business concepts he introduced. The "jobs to be done" theory of innovation presents an approach to how companies introduce successful new products and services that remains as counter-intuitive—and relevant—today as it was when Christensen first shared the idea back in 2005.



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What Is Jobs To Be Done

Jobs to be done (JTBD) is a framework for understanding customers and their motivations for adopting a new product or service. “Customers...often buy things because they find themselves with a problem they would like to solve,” the [Christensen Institute](#) explains. “With an understanding of the ‘job’ for which customers find themselves ‘hiring’ a product or service, companies can more accurately develop and market products well-tailored to what customers are already trying to do.”

Conventional thinking on developing and marketing innovations, Christensen observed, focuses on knowing more and more about customers, which may or may not lead to productive insights about the products they actually would be interested in. JTBD instead builds on Theodore Levitt’s insight, “People don’t want to buy a quarter-inch drill. They want a quarter-inch hole!”—and provides a more reliable path to new product success by seeking to understand what the customer is trying to do.

JTBD challenges prevalent notions in business today—such as the use of personas and Minimum Viable Products (MVP)—and provides instruction on how to improve the predictability and profitability of innovations:

Demand for data. With access to data and tools readily available today, companies are consumed with the quest for more and more data. They double down on market research, amass enormous amounts of customer data, and spend on advanced analytics in an effort to understand *who* customers are. Christensen [argued](#), however, that “the job, not the customer, is the fundamental unit of analysis for a marketer who hopes to develop products that customers will buy.” Truly useful products are designed through the lens of a customer’s circumstances. Companies don’t need more data; they need different insights.

Prevalent personas. Companies regularly use target customer personas. Personas help designers understand and empathize with customers and design better products when they have specific, not generic, users in mind. But when these archetypes are derived from demographic information and existing behaviors and product usage, they may *describe* but they don’t *prescribe*. That is, personas may provide a rich understanding of what someone is doing today, but they don’t reveal what trade-offs or work-arounds they are accepting because there is no alternative—nor what that person really wants to do and the value of accomplishing it.

Use of use cases. Like personas, use cases can be very helpful in the design process because they can identify and clarify a user’s requirements. But also like personas, use cases are derived from a customer’s current state. Use cases identify scenarios, while JTBD identifies needs. The former can indicate how a product should be designed to be useful to customers while the latter points to how to give them an entirely new option for accomplishing their goal. As Christensen wrote, “New growth markets are created when innovating companies design a product and position its brand on a job for which no optimal product yet exists.”

Sentiments vs. semiotics. Companies use sentiment analysis to understand what customers are saying about them, how they feel about them, what aspects of their offering customers care about, etc. To generate truly unique customer insights and predict their behavior, companies should also use semiotic analysis. Semiotics is the study of signs and their meaning—it decodes underlying messages and meanings. A [recent article](#) by Christensen described how selfies are signs, providing clues that bridge the gap between what customers say and what they actually do. A selfie, he explained, “depicts how that person *wants* to be seen by others.” As such using semiotic analysis on selfies would reveal why someone is doing something and what progress they seek, thus suggesting how they might perceive a new product and its value.

Popularity of purpose. Having a meaningful purpose beyond making a profit has become a popular notion among business leaders. It makes sense for companies to espouse lofty goals and ideals that appeal to today’s more conscientious customers, employees, and other stakeholders. But over 15 years ago, Christensen proposed a more practical, and perhaps more attainable, concept of purpose. He called products that are tightly associated with the jobs for which they are meant to be hired “purpose brands.” For example, he described how FedEx designed its service to fill the “I-need-to-send-this-from-here-to-there-with-perfect-certainty-as-fast-as-possible” job and as a result, “FedEx became a purpose brand—in fact, it became a verb in the international language of business that is inextricably linked with that specific job.” Before a company sets its sights on fulfilling a higher purpose, it should first create something that fills an unmet customer need and does it well.

MVP without a POV. The minimum viable product (MVP) approach to innovation emphasizes learning from customers during the product development process. By getting prototypes into the hands of users early on, companies can get valuable feedback that will help them develop products that customers want and will buy. No doubt, this approach has saved countless companies time and money and prevented many failed innovations. But fielding an MVP should not involve letting customers determine the purpose of it. Christensen believed companies should signal to customers when they should and should not buy the product. If they don’t, people might hire the product to do a job it wasn’t intended to do which leads to customer disappointment and company misdirection.

Unlimited appeal. Christensen suggested that when a company communicates the job a product is designed to do, it is also communicating what jobs the product should *not* be hired to do. “Focusing a product and its brand on a job creates differentiation,” he explained. But he observed, “Focus is scary,” and companies tend to market their products without ties to a job, in “the myopic hope” that they will appeal to as many people as possible. He cautioned not to ignore the evidence that products that do specific jobs well—and are marketed with that precise target—command premium pricing and compete in

markets much larger than those defined by product categories. Now that differentiation is increasingly difficult to establish, much less maintain, adhering to his advice is even more important.

Christensen astutely observed, "Customers make the choices they make to bring a product or service into their lives not because they're dying to purchase something." Given the nearly universal access and proliferation of choices available to customers today, the JTBD theory of innovation makes sense now more than ever.