Inception Playbook

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EQUAL EXPERTS

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Foreword

I am really proud that we were able to produce this compilation of inception good practices based on the experience of many Equal Experts people who worked over the years with hundreds of customers. It is a great example of the power of the Equal Experts network.

When I founded Equal Experts, I had a main driver. I wanted to create a haven where both IT expert practitioners and customers could work together in harmony, focusing on long-term mutual value instead of one-sided short-term gain.

I wanted to create an organisation of “grown-ups” - a working environment with fewer politics, less hierarchy and more autonomy. I wanted to create a space where it is easy for consultants and customers to have genuine relationships built on trust.

To make this happen, we pioneered a new business model. All our consultants have around 10 years’ experience or more in the industry. At Equal Experts, they can still be “makers” and practice their craft instead of moving into management positions, and they can keep learning from people as experienced as them.

One of our shared principles is that we value a passion for learning over knowing all the answers. We don’t pretend to know all the answers – but we are confident in our ability to find them.

We do not hire very experienced people because they know everything, but rather because they are better at knowing how and where to look for the answers. We trade on our ability to learn and share knowledge, rather than protecting or ‘guarding’ it. At its core, Equal Experts is a haven where this sharing happens freely and happily, between like-minded practitioners.

This is why we felt compelled to open-source this inception playbook, so that this knowledge can be shared as widely as possible.

I hope you find this playbook useful.

Thomas de Cad’oro Granier
Equal Experts Founder

The Equal Experts network

Founded in 2007 to challenge the traditional consulting model, Equal Experts is now made up of 1,500+ expert consultants delivering custom software and helping with digital transformation for our clients – globally. As strategic partners, we use industry leading strategy, design and delivery techniques to help customers disrupt their markets, create innovative products, accelerate delivery, and build world-class solutions.

Equal Experts has pioneered an innovative business model where all consultants have around 10 years' experience or more in the industry. At Equal Experts, consultants can still be "makers" and practice their craft instead of moving into management positions, and they can keep learning from people as experienced as them.

Equal Experts operates an associate-based model, with only one third of its workforce permanent, the remainder is made up of long-standing associates (independent senior consultants). Associates are in majority recruited through recommendations from other members of the network and selected based on a set of values shared by all the Equal Experts' consultants. This model provides Equal Experts the flexibility to build the right shaped team with people who have actively chosen to meet the outcome and address the specific challenges that are unique to each engagement.

You can contact any of our offices around the globe or via hello@equalexperts.com

EQUAL EXPERTS

Neha Datt

Neha loves understanding problems, learning new things and working with good people.

Her background in digital delivery has been varied (strategy, product, design, delivery, coach, trainer) across a range of industries and organisations ranging from startups to enterprises.

It has been her privilege to work with talented colleagues, gracious clients and nurturing mentors. These influences have made her a strong advocate for people-centricity in everything she does, lean approaches to tackling opportunities and having fun on the way.

She's currently a director at Mercurial Phoenix (a new venture studio and consultancy) and a member of the Equal Experts network. You can tweet to her @oliphantism. She's always up for a good (i.e. Antipodean) coffee.

Marcel Britsch

Marcel is a Digital Consultant, Product Owner and Business Analyst. He helps deliver good digital products and services. Born in Germany, he lives in London and works wherever his clients are. He has worked with creatively and technically focused agencies and all sorts of clients across a wide variety of industry sectors.

He believes that success is strongly linked to happy teams, solid mental models and structured decision making.

He shares work-related thoughts on his blog www.thedigitalbusinessanalyst.com and podcast www.theburnup.com.

Outside of work he is interested in SciFi and graphic novels, Theravada Buddhist meditation and more recently digital ethics.

He is a member of the Equal Experts network and can best be reached via www.beautifulabstraction.com.

Dave Hewett

Dave Hewett is a Partner at Equal Experts, Engagement Manager and maker of coffee; born in New Zealand he has been living and working in London for 25 years. He started his career in enterprise IT and moved into software consulting, helping create bespoke software for a wide variety of clients across a wide variety of industry sectors including finance, commodities trading, telecoms and retail.

His time at Equal Experts has put him in the privileged position of working with many smart and engaging people. This environment has continually challenged his preconceptions and helped him learn and improve his craft.

He can best be contacted at dhewett@equalexperts.com.

We would like to say a massive “thank you!” to our colleagues and clients: the brilliant hive mind whose wisdom and experiences have made this book possible.

This book is dedicated to you.

We would also like to call out some specific colleagues who have contributed.

Thank you Isabell Britsch for the amazing layout and type-setting and Jon Attaway for your copy-editing skills.

Also: Ali Asad Lotia, Alex Haylock, Andrew Preston, Ashwini Mayakar, Becky Smith, Brian Blignaut, Charlotte Lubbe, Christian Singer, Dan Mitchell, Dana Rodericks, Erica Kucharczyk, Francine Higham, Gary Lamb, Gavin Williams, Jamie Mills, Jonas L. Vasiljevas, Keerthana Jayaram, Lyndsay Prewer, Mairead O’Connor, Matt Stephens, Mark Oliver, Neville Kuyt, Mark Stanley, Palesa Molokeng, Susanne Mayer, Ralf Jeffrey, Richard Holloway, Ryan Bayly, Subhash Gupta, Swathi Poddar, Tarik Johnston, Thomas de Cad’oro Granier, Titi Omo-Adesanya, Todd Anderson, Jochen Trabandt (†2015 RIP).

Introduction

Why run an inception?

BETTER OUTCOMES

We're passionate about building great software.

Collectively, the contributors to this playbook have some 500 years of software delivery experience. But starting something new always has its challenges. We've experienced pain: both when things go pear-shaped and also when things work out.

The common root causes? Misaligned values and expectations, overlooked risks, missed dependencies and unsophisticated approaches to managing uncertainty and complexity.

It's particularly frustrating when that pain could easily have been avoided. The complex interplay of people, processes and technology will always bring change, uncertainty and unknowns. By acknowledging and addressing these factors early, we can reduce the risks we're exposed to, and create safe spaces to experiment and learn together.

This is why we run inceptions. They systematically address the issues that threaten to derail delivery, by reducing risk, creating alignment, building trust and providing us with the best possible starting point.

Of course, knowing why you might want to run an inception is not the same as being able to run an effective one! This is where this playbook comes in.

We believe it's possible to distil the essence of an inception into a blueprint. This document is that blueprint.

By taking away some of the complexity and providing ideas to riff off and make your own, this playbook aims to support beginners and experts alike. Over the pages that follow, you'll find the tools to build better foundations for the initiatives you work on.

> Technology initiatives, if done in the right way, can be successful and fun.

What is an inception?

THE RIGHT PEOPLE, THE RIGHT QUESTIONS, THE RIGHT WAY

An inception is a set of pre-delivery activities run collaboratively with cross-disciplinary teams, to make sure we have enough information to start delivery with the best possible chance of success. If inceptions have just one job to do, it's to **de-risk delivery**.

This range of activities includes (but is not limited to) validating and aligning on expected outcomes; clarifying scope; identifying dependencies; defining ways of working; exploring technical feasibility; and planning the subsequent delivery.

Ambitious initiatives need teams to work together well, and inceptions are often the first opportunity a team has to meet: whether it's the first time a client meets its supplier teams, or a distributed team comes together.

As we all know, successful relationships are built on **empathy** and **trust**. Inceptions are a great way to form the connections that create the foundations of **trusted relationships**.

Most importantly, by getting the right people in the room, and asking the right questions in the right way, we achieve **alignment**. Alignment on what we want to achieve, how we get there, which areas to treat with caution, and what the result will look like.

> The purpose of an inception is to de-risk delivery by making sure you know what you are doing, you are doing it in the right way and have everything in place so you can hit the ground running.

What's the outcome of an inception?

KNOWING WHAT TO DO NEXT AND BEING SET UP TO DO IT

An inception answers the following questions:

- What must we achieve, and why?
- Do we agree that this is a good thing to do?
- How will we achieve this?
- How long will it take and how much will it cost?
- What could possibly go wrong?
- What will we do next (and then in the mid/long term)?
- What do we need in place to start?

In answering these questions, we create a range of deliverables. These help us with **making the call** on whether to continue, and if so, how we can **hit the ground running**.

MAKING THE CALL: SHOULD WE CONTINUE?

A successful inception will give us enough insight to make a decision on whether to:

1. **Continue with the initiative**: Where we decide to continue, an inception results in a statement of the problem and solution, as well as the delivery approach and plan.
2. **Pivot**: When we decide to pivot, we may need to run a discovery to validate the new problem statement, and then run a lighter inception to de-risk delivery.
3. **Stop**: This can often be hard due to the *sunk cost fallacy*, or good old politics. But sometimes, this is the right thing to do. When we decide to stop, it's a good idea to provide a bit of space for the team to process the implications.

IF WE CONTINUE: HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

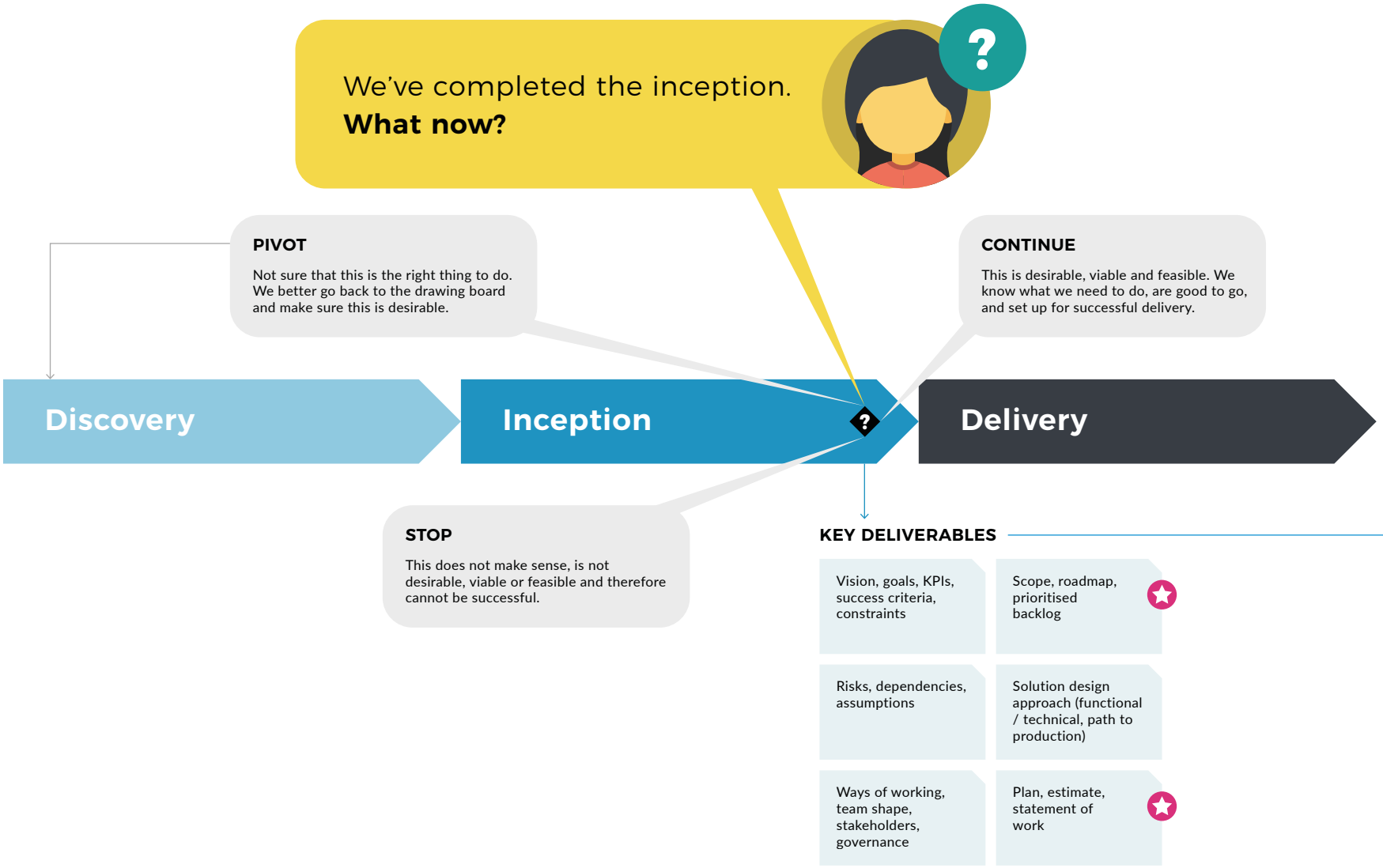
If we decide that the right thing to do is to continue with delivery, we will generally create deliverables covering the:

- **Goals and scope**
  What we will do and why
- **Solution approach**
  What the solution will 'look like' and how we will deliver, covering functional and technological aspects, as well as processes and ways of working
- **Risks and dependencies**
  Where to be careful
- **Plan and cost**
  An overview of when to expect what, and the required capabilities and resources
- **Playback deck**
  A summary of findings and recommendations

These deliverables will be reasonably high level with just enough detail to make the call and shape the overall delivery. There is often more detail for the very first iteration so we can hit the ground running.

The next page has an overview of some typical deliverables.

> Inceptions are not anti-agile.
>
> We often need a light plan to enable the team to know what to do next. The plan and costs also empower our clients with data to make better-informed decisions.


We've completed the inception.
What now?
?
PIVOT
Not sure that this is the right thing to do. We better go back to the drawing board and make sure this is desirable.
CONTINUE
This is desirable, viable and feasible. We know what we need to do, are good to go, and set up for successful delivery.
Discovery
Inception
?
Delivery
STOP
This does not make sense, is not desirable, viable or feasible and therefore cannot be successful.
KEY DELIVERABLES
Vision, goals, KPIs, success criteria, constraints
Scope, roadmap, prioritised backlog
Risks, dependencies, assumptions
Solution design approach (functional / technical, path to production)
Ways of working, team shape, stakeholders, governance
Plan, estimate, statement of work

We create deliverables (depending on the context) that allow us to answer whether to proceed and if so, how.

From an overall ‘project management’ perspective, often the most important deliverable is the scope, plan or roadmap and associated cost. We often turn these into a single statement of work (marked by ). This is not the case for all type of inceptions - for instance, when we incept a new feature for an existing team, we are often more interested in an assessment of readiness and detailed backlog for the next phase.

We create a number of intermediate artefacts, before creating these deliverables. These help us achieve alignment by providing background and context, and are often the basis for subsequent work. We will discuss this in detail in later chapters.

Inception or Discovery?

FINDING PURPOSE VS. GETTING OFF THE GROUND

The terms ‘inception’ and ‘discovery’ are often used interchangeably. We look at it this way: we first ‘discover’ the purpose of a product or service, and then we ‘incept’ its delivery.

In other words, during a discovery we focus more strongly on ‘what we should do and why’ - i.e. ‘doing the right thing’. Then during an inception we validate and refine this and then focus on ‘getting it off the ground’ - i.e. ‘doing it right’.

Of course, there is considerable overlap between the two and we do re-visit user needs and business goals in an inception. Even so, we generally take the initiative’s raison d’être as sound. Sometimes, we uncover mis-alignment or concerns about the validity of a value proposition, in which case we may decide to pivot and do a discovery. This is not failure, and is in fact exactly why we run inceptions: to do the right thing.

In this playbook, we’ll assume a discovery has already happened and we are now focused on getting an initiative off the ground.

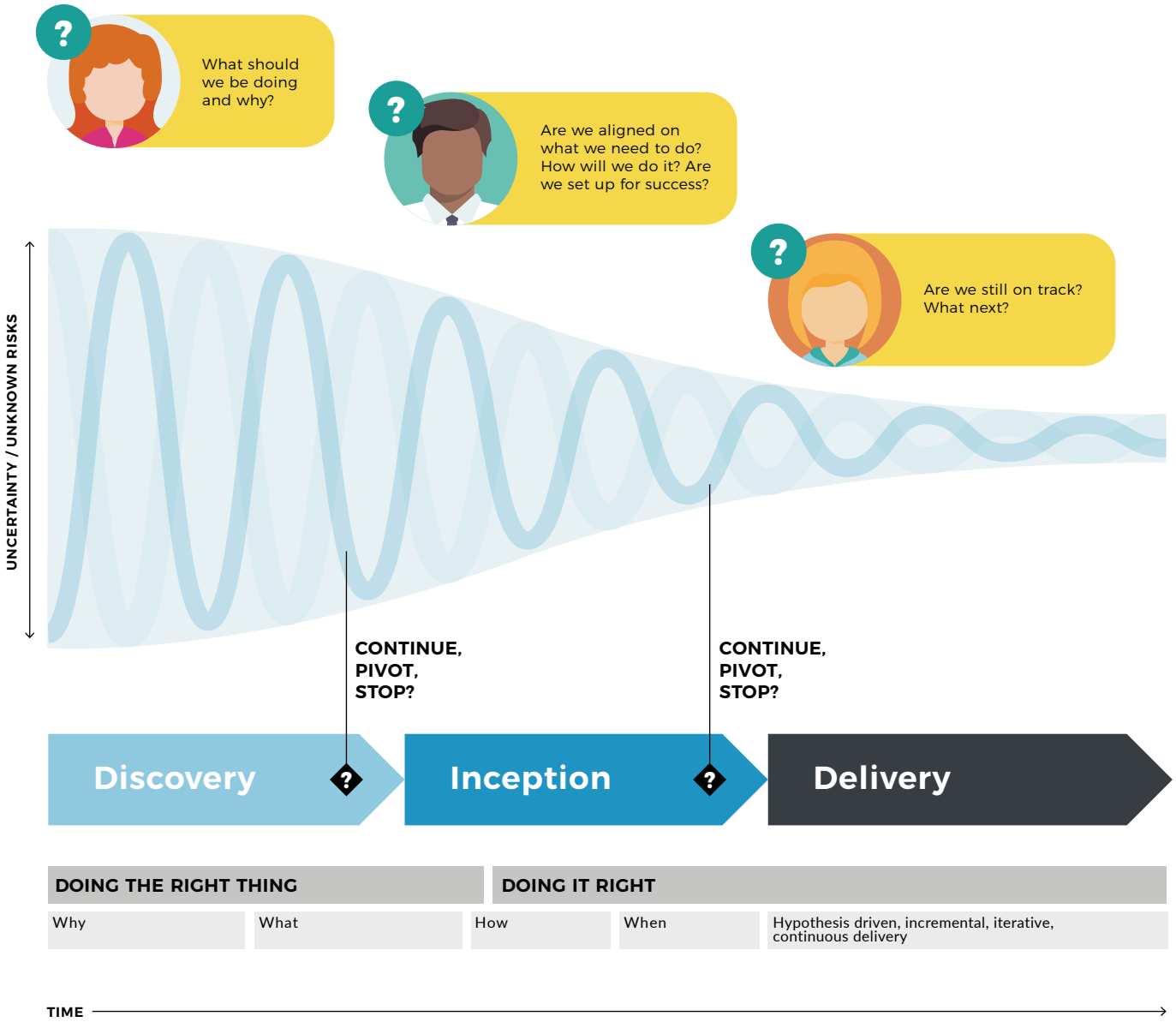
TIMING

While we run inceptions at the start of something new, we may also run them at pivotal points – e.g. when a new phase of the initiative kicks off, or there’s a significant shift in our context. In the past, we’ve also found inceptions useful to provide information for business cases, as part of pitches for work, to start new client engagements, to kickoff new features and even as an opportunity to sense-check and realign given our broader strategy or circumstances may have changed.

INCEPTIONS ARE VERSATILE

In this playbook, we have a bias towards initiatives with a strong element of software development. That’s simply because this is what we do, and is where we have run most inceptions successfully. However, it’s worth noting that inceptions can be run for many other types of initiatives, in much the same way as suggested here.

> In practise, high performing teams often run aspects of discoveries, inceptions and delivery in parallel.



INCEPTION VS. DISCOVERY

We start with an idea, problem or opportunity, refine this and ensure 'that we are doing the right thing' during discovery.

We then align on what to do and define how to do it during inception, ensuring 'we are doing it right'.

We then build, operate and improve the solution during delivery.

While we are talking about waterfall-like stages here, this is still an iterative, incremental approach in line with an agile mindset.

Getting buy-in

MAKE STAKEHOLDERS SEE THE VALUE

While more and more clients and teams 'get it', we sometimes get questioned when we propose running an inception. This is how we respond:

WHAT WE HEAR

I like the idea of this 'inception'. Just remind me: how do I explain it to my colleagues?

HOW WE RESPOND

An inception is a lightweight set of activities to align on what we're going to achieve, and how we will get there.

It's the minimum amount of work needed, to start delivering the right thing. We'll look at people, processes, scope, technology, risks, dependencies, constraints etc...

WHAT WE HEAR

This sounds expensive. Is it worth it?

HOW WE RESPOND

The upfront cost of an inception is outweighed multiple times by the cost of potentially building the wrong thing.

What's the impact if we find out in 6 months that we need to start again? What if we could have identified and mitigated this risk during an inception?

WHAT WE HEAR

We have ambitious deadlines – is it really worth spending time just talking about what we want to do?

HOW WE RESPOND

You're right: this is why we will only focus on the core questions we need answers to, to get the team started on delivery.

The time needed will vary depending on the size of the challenge, and can be broken into smaller workshops.

WHAT WE HEAR

Isn't that like waterfall? Why don't we start delivering in Sprints right away?

HOW WE RESPOND

Not quite: inceptions aren't a project phase, but a set of activities we run before (and during) delivery. We only go so far with the detail, because identifying everything upfront is risky, will affect our agility and likely result in rework.

WHAT WE HEAR

Is this really needed? Our stakeholders are very busy.

HOW WE RESPOND

Inceptions help us protect your time in the long run. By spending this time upfront, we can reduce certain questions that will come your way throughout delivery.

WHAT 'THEY' SAY

Fortunately, we have done requirements elicitation already, I can share the business requirements doc with you so we can get right into solution design.

HOW WE RESPOND

Excellent! We'll definitely leverage the work done so far in the inception.

We'll also need to understand the context around the requirements (what assumptions do we need to validate?) and agree on how we'll work together: both core components of an inception.

WHAT 'THEY' SAY

We don't need all those people involved, it would just add noise. The initiative sponsor and programme director can tell you everything.

HOW WE RESPOND

Inceptions are designed to reduce noise: making sure we have the right people in the right sessions. With diverse inputs, we'll have a better chance to ask nuanced contextual questions. We will also be able to build the relationships needed during delivery to ensure we are able to work at pace.

WHAT 'THEY' SAY

That's great. Then we'll have all the answers and all the detail we need to deliver.

HOW WE RESPOND

We will definitely have enough information to start delivery. During delivery, we'll work through lower levels of detail, so new questions will arise which we'll work together to answer.

What does good look like?

DOING THE RIGHT THING AND DOING IT THE RIGHT WAY

As with anything we do, inceptions are based on **principles and paradigms** that we know make the difference:

- We validate that our solution is **desirable**, **viable** and **feasible**. Note that we use discoveries to find opportunities and define valid value propositions, and then inceptions to further validate these and find the best way of delivering.
- We deliver the most valuable impact when we focus on **outcomes, problems** and **opportunities** before defining solutions and outputs.
- We achieve this by applying **product thinking** to focus on users; **lean** principles to work efficiently, and **agile** approaches to deliver in an environment of change and uncertainty.
- We gain certainty by forming **hypotheses** and validating these by **running experiments** that capture qualitative and quantitative data.
- We deliver most successfully when all stakeholders are **aligned**, **risks** are identified and mitigated early, and **trust** within the team is high.

THE OUTCOME OF A SUCCESSFUL INCEPTION

By following these principles, we aim to gain confidence that

- We are doing the right thing
- We will be doing it in the right way
- We know what to do next
- We can hit the ground running
- We have minimised risk as much as possible

We know we have been successful when we can continue on to deliver with greater confidence and ease.

We may also want to periodically review our understanding and whether we are on track.

These principles are woven through everything we do during an inception – as well as the subsequent delivery and operations work.

Run an inception

Overview

HOW IT ALL HANGS TOGETHER

There are five stages to run an inception: **Set-up** and get ready, **Design** what we will do during the inception, **Plan** when and how we will do it, **Run** the actual activities, and **Wrap-up** the inception to facilitate the next steps.

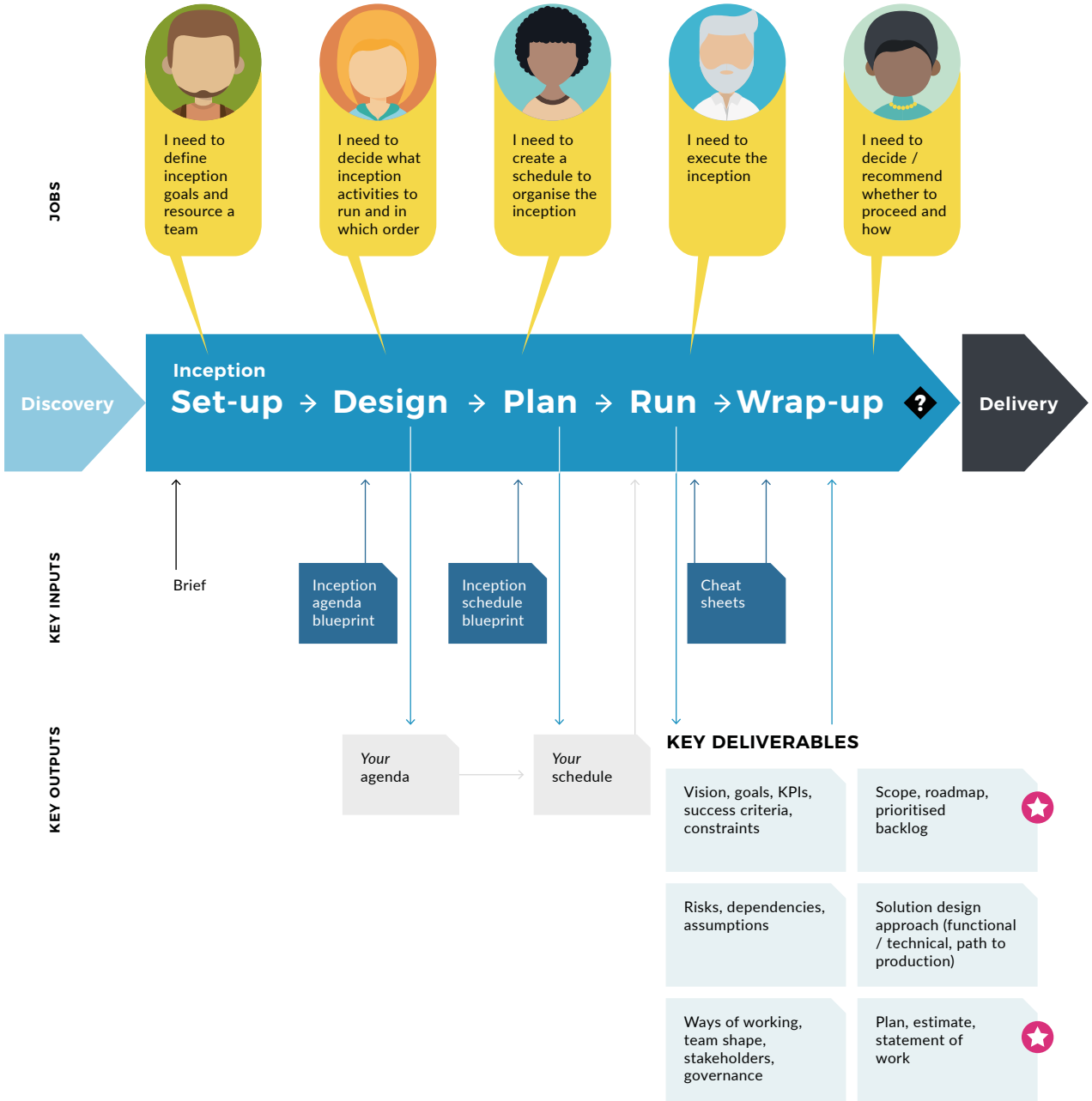
We cannot say it often enough: inceptions are not easy to do well. We constantly need to be able to respond to the unexpected because inceptions frequently uncover assumptions, misalignment and conflicting views. The following considerations help us succeed:

1. **TAILORING FOR THE CONTEXT**
   Some inceptions include discovery activities (prototyping, running experiments) while others look more like project kickoffs (focus on governance and scope). We tailor inceptions based on various factors including assumptions around the problem / opportunity / proposed solution, risk appetite, commercial constraints and availability of participants.

2. **TIGHT BUT FLEXIBLE PLAN**
   We put together detailed schedules of each day's activities and the participants needed. The activities continue to build on each other, providing a narrative of how the problem leads to the proposed solution. There are also opportunities throughout the inception to plan, reflect and reschedule activities based on what we learn.

3. **EXPERT FACILITATION**
   This is critical for achieving the outcomes of an inception. The challenge here is in: keeping everyone on track while still being able to respond to change as needed.

After reading through this section of the playbook, feel look at the following sections. These contain **blueprints** you can use to design an inception, **cheat sheets** with practical advice, and for the discerning practitioner there is further food for thought in our **deep dive** section.



HOW IT ALL WORKS

We **Set-up** our team, **Design** and **Plan** the inception, then **Run** it and finally **Wrap-up**, i.e. act on the insights gained.

This playbook supports these activities via blueprints which can be used as templates, cheat sheets as quick reminders of the most important things during each activity and deep dives that provided detailed guidance on how to design and plan.

Set-up

GETTING READY

Due to the challenge an inception addresses, getting it right is not easy. Consequently, preparation and having the right conditions in place are vital.

As part of this step, we:

1. Get up to speed
2. Line up our team
3. Define inception goals

By doing this, we are able to successfully design, plan and run an inception.

> Preparation is key. Please don't run an inception without having enough time to prepare.

1 Get up to speed <1d

A strong understanding of the client's wider context is critical to asking the right questions. Before you start, spend a few hours doing some research to inform your thinking:

- Analyse the brief
- Speak with existing client contacts and clarify any immediate questions
- Conduct lightweight research on the industry, client and problem domain

2 Line up your team <1hr

Ideally, the team that will run the inception should be involved in designing and planning it too.

Our teams are cross-functional and at a minimum, include:

- Delivery
- Product
- Technology

See Plan an inception: deep dive for more information.

3 Define the inception goals <1hr

Explicitly call out the overall inception goal, and what each participant and group is trying to achieve through the inception. This will be your lifeline and your focus throughout.

Ensure it aligns with the brief and known constraints, whether they relate to time, money, your values or anything else.

After finishing these set-up activities, you are ready to move on to design the inception.

PRO TIPS

- We get a lot of information and context during pitches, which form a great starting point for planning and running inceptions. Where we haven't pitched, we need to factor this in.

- Involve those running the inception in its planning. There's nothing worse than having to run a workshop you haven't planned yourself or don't fully understand. Be aware of the time it may take to setup the team.

- What's even worse is having to deliver an initiative when you haven't negotiated the scope, constraints and approach, and you have no context. We recommend that the group that designs/plans/runs the inception should do the delivery.

- While an experienced team can prepare an inception in a relatively short period, allowing for elapsed time so things can 'stew' leads to a better agenda and outcomes.

- Push back on any inception that 'needs to be run tomorrow'. You really want the time to prepare properly.

- Don't run an inception with a team entirely new to inceptions or generally quite junior. You will want at least some old hands in the mix.

Design

GET YOUR NARRATIVE RIGHT

An inception can be like a drama – with a narrative, dramatic arch, and very often blood, sweat and tears (and some laughs too, hopefully!) As part of this step, we setup an **agenda** which defines the outline of our narrative (i.e. the activities we want to run and the topics we need to address).

Designing an inception must be a cross-functional, collaborative exercise. We either do this in one session, or over a period of time up to a week. This depends on the complexity of the inception. While it's best to design the inception with everyone in the room, we've also successfully done this with distributed teams.

No two inceptions are alike – many contextual factors play into which activities we plan in (e.g. relationship with client, degree of uncertainty around the problem-solution fit, etc) Even so, we believe we can base the agenda on a generic inception agenda blueprint.

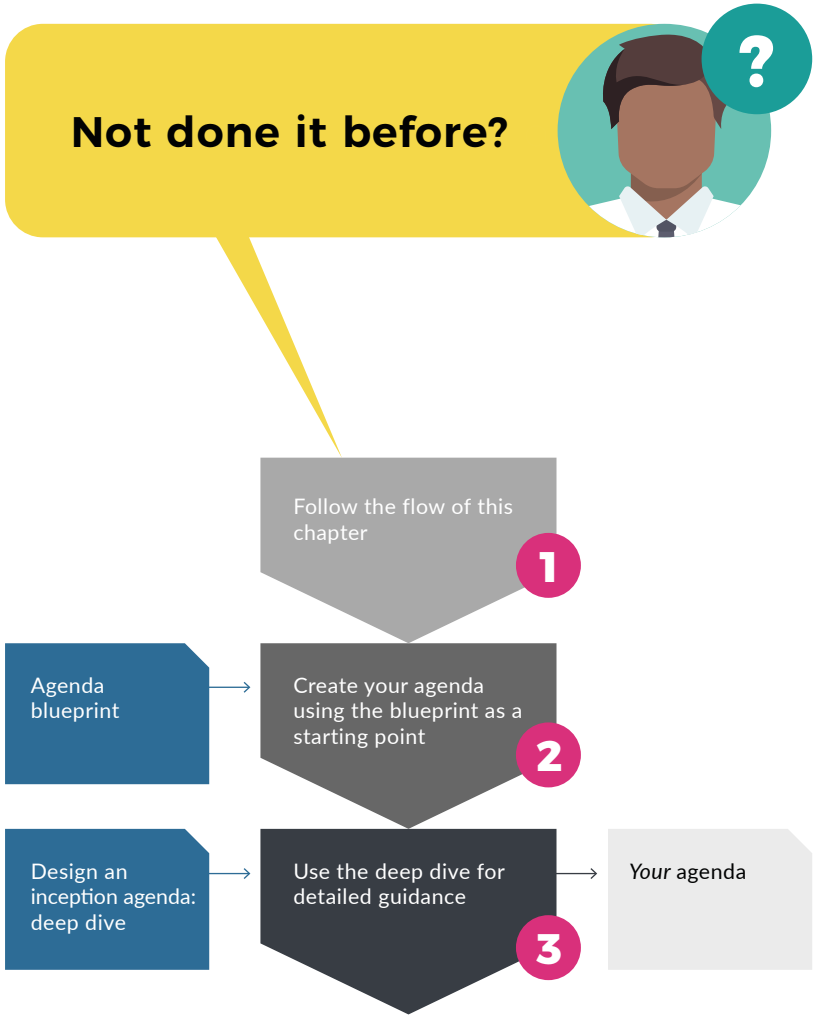
To avoid wasting time reinventing the wheel, we start with our inception agenda blueprint and follow the steps in this chapter, to tailor this.

The time it takes to design an inception is usually relative to how long the inception will run for. This itself is relative to the size of the challenge (are we building a new business? product? feature?)

As a rule of thumb, expect to spend:

- A couple of hours to design and plan a one-day inception (say, incepting the development of new features);
- Two days to design and plan a one week inception (for a 3-6 month initiative);
- A week to design and plan a six-week inception (for an initiative taking a year or more).

Once we've designed the agenda, we turn this into a schedule by following the steps in plan an inception.


Not done it before?
Follow the flow of this chapter
1
Agenda blueprint
Create your agenda using the blueprint as a starting point
2
Design an inception agenda: deep dive
Use the deep dive for detailed guidance
3
Your agenda


Done it before?
Agenda blueprint
Create your agenda using the blueprint as template and the deep dive for inspiration
Your agenda
Design an inception agenda: deep dive

Design inception agenda

As mentioned earlier, a good agenda has a narrative, a logical flow through which we run activities that give us insight to ultimately fulfil the goals of the inception:

1 **UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM / OPPORTUNITY**

We start with aligning on what the problem, vision and goals are:

- Why are we doing this?
- Where do we want to be?

2 **UNDERSTAND CONTEXT AND DOMAIN**

We then analyse the current and future states covering people, process and technology:

- Where are we now and where do we want to be?
- What are we dealing with?

3 **IDENTIFY AND DEFINE SOLUTION OPTIONS**

We then head into top-level to-be solution design: We define scope (usually feature / epic-level overall and story-level for the immediate next sprints) and functional / technical solution design. We agree how to prioritise, identify risks and dependencies, and define ways of working:

- What are potential solution options?
- What will the solution look like?

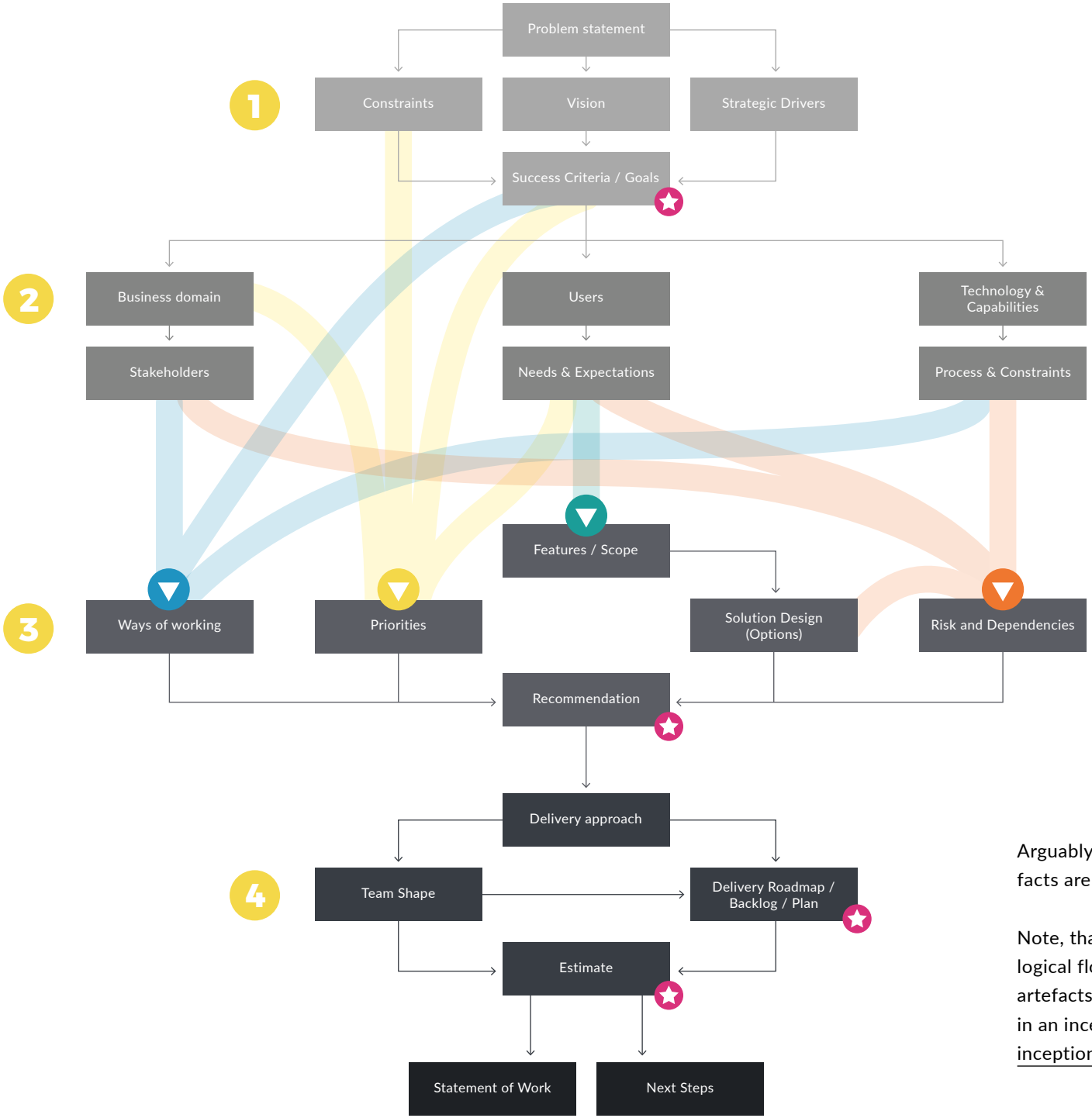
4 **IDENTIFY DELIVERY APPROACH AND PLAN DELIVERY**

Finally, we make a recommendation (continue, pivot or stop).

When we continue, we define a delivery approach, team-shape, plan/roadmap and ultimately an estimate. This results in a statement of work and actionable immediate next steps:

- How do we get there?
- How do we deliver?

Most inceptions will follow this high level agenda: this is all that's needed to confirm desirability, viability and feasibility of the initiative.



Arguably the most important artefacts are those marked with ★.

Note, that this diagram shows the logical flow, not all or exact steps or artefacts that you may come across in an inception. These are in the inception agenda blueprint.

Here is how we do it:

1 Identify the activities and expected outcomes

While detailed activities are highly contextual to each inception, the overall flow and framework will stay loosely the same.

When planning inceptions, we take the blueprint as a starting point, add or remove activities as required and adjust the overall flow for the best-fitting narrative.

We also define outcomes for each activity, so it's clear as to why a given activity is being conducted and what the focus is on.

The inception agenda blueprint outlines a generic starting point. Alternatively you can use the example schedule.

PRO TIPS

- Inceptions can be run for any type of initiative, not only the digital product or feature builds we focus on in this playbook. In the case of construction, change and transformation initiatives, digital prototypes may need to be physical prototypes, and wireframes of mobile apps might be replaced with sketches of a potential new office space (as an example).
- Clearly articulate why you are doing each activity. What are you trying to achieve? What questions need answering? Good inceptions are all about actionable insights and outcomes.
- This playbook is focused on inceptions rather than discoveries, which means we're concerned with building foundations for delivery. Therefore we assume that the rationale for the initiative is sound and articulated (e.g. business case, value proposition, goals). We'll want to validate and align on this, during inception and pivot to a discovery if we found it lacking.
- Taking the rationale for the value proposition as solid doesn't mean we can't formulate hypotheses or experiments during inception or subsequent delivery Dependent on the initiative, our inception may result in a very concrete feature list and roadmap, a backlog of experiments, or a mix of both.
- Inceptions may be run within a known or new domain, with an existing or new client – all of which will affect the inception activities. Some activities may be skipped. E.g. we'd skip the ways of working if we already have an established team; we'd forgo the detailed analysis if we're working in a known domain or context (in which case we may focus on validation instead).
- Inceptions can be templated and re-used. For one of our clients, we created a generic inception schedule to be run whenever one of their legacy applications was containerised and readied for cloud-deployments.

2 Identify the inputs needed for each activity

We define the information needed to make each activity a success. We've achieved our best results by sharing expectations and knowledge on where the client wants to go and where they are now. We place less importance on preparing extensively on defining or understanding the proposed solution.

The latter can lead to heavy bias and the need to backpedal, which can further frustrate stakeholders who've invested time in preparation.

PRO TIPS

- Let's be honest: stakeholders rarely have the chance to do homework prior to inceptions. They are busy people. In any case, the quality of responses to long lists of questions list is rarely as good as having a face to face chat.

- Don't do too much research. It's always best to balance primary research with insights and perspectives direct from the client.

- Be aware that prepared material is often stale, biased, siloed or counter-agile. It can still provide valuable context and is therefore worth reading through. We often get requirements documents from our clients which we'll use to prepare and validate against, but often don't use during the inception.

3 Define how to run each activity

Based on the topic, objective and expected participants, we figure out the best way to run individual activities. This includes setting out which tools and techniques to use. This could be a simple presentation or a workshop using the tools and techniques listed in the inception agenda blueprint, and discussed in detail in the Design an inception agenda: deep dive.

4 Define who is needed

For each activity we identify relevant participants and stakeholders. We focus on cross-disciplinary groups that hold the required knowledge, as well as the authority to make informed decisions.

PRO TIPS

- A variety of engagement styles, techniques and tools increases engagement, motivation and attention spans. Move people around, have a mix of sitting and standing activitites, get everyone to contribute to capturing insights on post-its, walls and drawings, etc

- Be confident in the tools you use. You can (and should) get scepticism and pushback, so confidently explaining and navigating this will be important. E.g. many, many people intensely dislike energisers - so framing this appropriately or having a variation / alternative will be helpful..

5 Prepare any materials you will need for each activity

As with inputs, we are careful to avoid over-preparation (as it leads to bias and impedes collaboration and buyin). We simply ensure we're prepared to drive discussions and analysis, and usually have a toolkit (of tools, techniques and case studies) we use if we need to swerve and pivot.

Once you have your agenda laid out, you can head right into scheduling and running it.

PRO TIPS

- Focus on the process of the inception, not the solution at the end of it.
- Quite often, there's a limit to how much prep you can do. That's OK. It's the inception's job to tease out and answer questions, collaboratively – not to critique a solution approach you've already prepared with limited context.

See Design an inception agenda: deep dive for an in-depth discussion with recommendations of tools and techniques.

Inception agenda blueprint

This inception agenda blueprint outlines generic stages and activities, as well as supporting tools.

We've used this agenda blueprint many times as a valuable starting point for successful inceptions. Of course, it will need to be tailored to fit individual initiatives, as described in the previous chapter

While the schedule may look linear, in practice, analysis and working on the solution design is best done as an incremental, evolutionary process. This way, we prioritise breadth over depth and constantly revisit and update what was previously discussed. A good schedule will allow for such 'cyclical' working.

The tools listed here are all the things we have found useful in the past. Please note that better tools come out all the time!

We've listed tools against the activities where they are most relevant and beneficial. The most valuable and important tools for an activity are also marked with *.

Tools marked with ↻ tend to accompany us along longer stretches - in some cases, throughout the inception. We've listed them against the activity where the tool is primarily used, but we'll revisit and update them during many activities. The most obvious of these tools are those that allow us to track risks, assumptions, dependencies, issues, stakeholders and needs as they emerge and change throughout the inception.

This blueprint applies to non- software delivery initiatives, but may need a bit of rewording: the 'solution' will not be a software application, but may be the future state of a team or an organisation; and architecture and infrastructure may refer to how an organisation is set up, creates value and supports its workforce.

Want more? We discuss the agenda in-depth in the Design an inception agenda: deep dive.

ACTIVITY	WHY	TOOLS
Preparation < 2wks See Plan the inception		
Kick Off < 2 hrs **Manage expectations of what's going to happen during the inception**		
Welcome and introductions to organisations and individuals	Who is in the room and why? Start building relationships.	Icebreakers
Scene setting	Why are we doing an inception and what is an inception in the first place? Provide purpose and urgency	-
Schedule walkthrough	What will be happening during the inception? Manage expectations.	*Schedule Kanban board
'Rules of engagement'	How will we make this work? What does good look like? Introduce principles and best practices.	Rules of engagement on the wall
Participant expectations	What are the participants' expectations, wishes and concerns? Get buy-in.	1-2-4-All Parking lot
The opportunity < 1d **Understand and align on the problem or opportunity to address**		
The opportunity	What problem are we asked to address? We align goals.	Strategic drivers / trends / forces *Lean business case / Epic hypothesis statement Product vision *Lean canvas Business roadmap SWOT
Success criteria	What does success look like? We align on SMART goals to work towards and measure against.	*OKRs Affinity map Objective trees *Project sliders
Constraints and concerns	What are the constraints? We identify constraints and set boundaries for the initiative to operate in.	*Project sliders *Business milestones 1-2-4-All Values ↻ Round table Dependency mesh
The domain < 2wk **Understand the problem domain**		
Business domain	What does the organisation do and how do they do it? We investigate what the business does, how they deliver products, services and value and how they are affected by external factors.	*Business model canvas Value chain Supply chain Stakeholder onion Stakeholder matrix Porter's diamond Porter's five forces PESTLE SWOT
Target audience	Who is my target audience and what do they find desirable? We identify users, their needs, gains and pains, and what value means for them.	*Value Proposition Canvas (right side) *Jobs to be done *Empathy map User persona
Stakeholders	Who is needed to deliver this? We identify stakeholders across all areas of the domain, why they are relevant and how to engage with them.	*Stakeholder onion ↻ Stakeholder matrix

ACTIVITY	WHY	TOOLS
Experience lifecycle: users	What does this user experience look like? We model how the target audience will be using the solution in the wider context of a customer lifecycle. Includes internal and external users.	*Experience map Service blueprint User journey Event storming Value stream mapping User research (focus groups, etc) *Epic level requirements catalogue or backlog Requirements hierarchy Non-functional requirements catalogue Technical requirements catalogue Stakeholder onion Stakeholder matrix Assumptions log Risk log Dependency mesh
Experience lifecycle: capabilities	What capabilities are needed to support the user experience? We identify and model what capabilities (features, systems, processes, people, data) are required to provide my target user experience.	*Experience map Service blueprint *Context / Domain model *Architecture outline UML models (as-is) BMPN models (as-is) Epic level requirements catalogue or backlog Requirements hierarchy Non-functional requirements catalogue *Technical requirements catalogue Stakeholder onion Stakeholder matrix Assumptions log Risk log *Dependency mesh
Non functional requirements	What qualities and characteristics must the solution have? We elicit and agree expectations towards the non functional qualities of the solution.	*Non-functional requirements catalogue
Hypotheses	What do we believe will lead to success? We define what we believe to be valuable 'experiments' to run.	*Hypothesis Decision framework Prioritisation model
The Solution <2wk Design the solution (options)		
Features	What features will the solution have? We specify the overall shape of the solution (usually top level features and functions) in light with the target user experience.	*Epic level requirements catalogue or backlog Requirements hierarchy *Storymap *Wireframes / Screen Mockups User Journeys User research *Experience map Service blueprint *Non-functional requirements catalogue *Technical requirements catalogue
Top level end2end design	What will the solution look like and how will it be built? We identify solution options and specify and 'design' the solution at top level from user, business and technical perspective (experience, architecture and infrastructure).	*Epic level requirements catalogue or backlog / Requirements hierarchy Storymap *Wireframes / Screen Mockups User Journeys User research Proof of Concept / Prototype / Steel Thread *Technology stack *Architecture outline *Infrastructure outline *Path to production outline Decision framework Non-functional requirements catalogue (see above) Technical requirements catalogue (see above) *Experience map Service blueprint *Non-functional requirements catalogue *Technical requirements catalogue

ACTIVITY	WHY	TOOLS
Solution option(s)	Which solution option will we go with ? Based on desirability (value), feasibility (context) and viability (constraints and business goals) we chose the most appropriate solution option.	*Wardley Map Weighted Scorecard *Radar Chart Decision framework Total cost of ownership *Experience map Service blueprint
Solution slices and feature prioritisation	What will we do first? Based on business goals, milestones, roadmap and dependencies we identify 'release' goals and which features and capabilities are in each release	*Hypothesis *Epic level requirements catalogue or backlog / Requirements hierarchy *Storymap Total cost of ownership Solution Slicing *MVP / First iteration scope Radar Chart *Prioritisation model
Plan < 2wks Identify delivery approach and plan delivery		
Align on values	What values should we adopt? We identify our and the clients' values and assess fit and changes - if feasible - should be made	Affinity Map
Ways of working and governance	How will we work? We define working practices, principles and tools we will be using and the governance structure we apply.	*Team charter RACI *Stakeholder Onion Stakeholder matrix Decision framework Project Sliders
Risks, assumptions, dependencies	Are we in control of things that will trip us up? We review risks, assumptions and dependencies and put mitigation strategies in place.	*Assumptions log *Risk log *Issues log *Decisions log *Dependency mesh
Estimate	What is the effort to create each deliverable? We estimate each deliverable in terms of effort as input for subsequent ROI based (re)prioritisation, solution option choice, costing, planning and roadmapping.	Backlog *Estimation
Team shape	What is the most appropriate team shape for delivery? We define (options for) team size, composition and distribution which will input into the various planning scenarios.	*Resourcing sheet Rate card
Delivery plan and roadmap	How long will it take and when do I get what? Based on solution option choice and prioritisation (now considering value and cost), consideration of risk and dependencies, as well as consideration of potential team shapes we create a feature / delivery roadmap(s) and plan(s).	*Product / Feature / Delivery roadmap Deliver plan
Recommendation	What is the best way forward? Based on the opportunity in context and based on all we have learned during inception we propose a way to proceed.	*Playback deck
Next steps	What do we do next? We define immediate next steps to proceed.	Statement of work
Wrap-up <2wks See Wrap-up		

Plan

CREATING THE SCHEDULE

The inception agenda defines the sessions and topics we'll cover in our inception. During planning, we define a detailed **schedule** that we can use to organise and run the inception.

The schedule frames, tops and tails the 'sessions' defined by our agenda with a number of supporting ceremonies. It also determines timings and locations and confirms attendees.

This provides the necessary structure to ensure we stay on track and manage expectations. It can also enable participants to still attend to critical day-to-day work.

Remember, no plan survives contact with the enemy, so be prepared to adapt as you go along. A good schedule will help you do so.

Not done it before?

Follow the flow of this chapter **1**

Schedule blueprint → Create your schedule using the blueprint as a starting point **2**

Plan an inception: deep dive → Use the deep dive for detailed guidance **3** → *Your* schedule

Done it before?

Schedule blueprint → Create your schedule using the blueprint as template and the deep dive for inspiration → *Your* schedule

Plan an inception: deep dive → Create your schedule using the blueprint as template and the deep dive for inspiration

The diagram below illustrates a generic 1 week inception schedule (which can be compressed or expanded as required for shorter / longer inceptions).

DAY 1	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	LAST DAY
Set up	Standup & Prep (core team) Recap (wider team) - optional							Set up
Kick off	Session	Session	Session	Session	Session			Session
Session	Session	Session	Session	Session	Session			Session
Session	Session	Session	Session	Session	Session			Session
Lunch	Lunch							Lunch
Day job catch up	Day job catch up							Day job catch up
Session	Session	Session	Session	Session	Session			Session
...	...	...	...	...	Weekly playback			Inception Playback
Daily retro / Planning (core team)	Daily retro / Planning (core team)				Weekly retro / Planning (core team)			Inception Retro
End of day review / Post processing (core team)	End of day review / Post processing (core team)							Lessons Learned (core team)

To create your schedule, follow the steps in this chapter. See further guidance in our Planning an inception: deep dive.

1 Schedule sessions

To create the schedule, break down your agenda (created in the previous step) into individual sessions and turn them into a schedule like the one to the left, allowing for the framing, top and tail ceremonies.

PRO TIPS

- Consider the incremental and iterative nature of good knowledge gathering and solution synthesis: allow for multiple points to reflect, revisit and validate topics as more information comes to light. Also acknowledge that many activities will be continuous (i.e. you may have a specific risk session, but risk can be identified at any point in time, and needs to be recognised and addressed).
- Ensure the agenda is well-balanced and interesting (i.e. provide a good mix of topics and approaches).
- Don't overload your agenda. It's very easy to burn your team out. To avoid this, ensure you allow reasonable time for preparation and post-processing.
- Ensure a good balance between scene-setting, investigation and creating the solution, allowing for divergence (breadth and depth) and convergence (bringing it all together). This will set you up to come to better alignment and decisions.

2 Set the location

Inceptions are all about communication and building relationships. The location makes a big difference. By default, we opt for co-location especially for a new team or engagement. We have also run smaller inceptions with established clients very successfully with distributed teams.

PRO TIPS

- Be mindful of the impact of not being co-located. Expect things to be more difficult, and to take more time. Distributed inceptions become increasingly harder with more participants, cultural differences, or if you have yet to build relationships.
- Adjust session length. For instance, you may plan for a much shorter session duration when conducting a phone conference rather than face-to-face meetings.
- Select convenient and pleasant locations. You'll spend a hell of a lot of time in that room. Make it convenient for people to get there (and select one where the Wifi actually works...)
- Consider taking clients out of their 'natural environment'. They will be more focused as a result. Plus it's a pleasant change.

3 Assign participants

Work with the right people. Ensure you have a good mix of decision-makers, subject matter experts and champions in the room, across all relevant areas of the business. Only then can you be successful. For each session, be clear:

- Who you'll want to attend from the core inception team (unless we're talking very specific deep dives, the answer should be "all")
- Who will be leading / facilitating the session
- Which client stakeholders you want to attend, and in what capacity

In Plan an inception: deep dive we provide further information on team composition and related considerations.

PRO TIPS

- Collaborate with your client contact to identify the right participants. Specify what you need, then let the client advise on who should be involved.
- Don't take 'We don't need Alice, Bob knows all about it' for an answer when Bob is not performing Alice's job. You want to hear it from Alice herself. One caveat: we often struggle to get access to real users during an inception so assumptions are often tested with users afterwards.
- Make sure participants are available. Have your client communicate with their colleagues, and book them in.
- Expect participants' availability to change, and unexpected participants to emerge. Be prepared to adapt the attendee lists and inceptio schedule to cater for their inclusion. After all, an inception is all about collective exploration to derisk.
- Ensure participants' buy-in. Choose a client champion and provide them with 'ammunition', and then ask them to 'sell' their colleagues onto the idea of this inception.
- Engage with the traditionally unloved roles, such as infosec, compliance and customer support as early as possible. Use every opportunity to build relationships!

4 Finalise, communicate and confirm

Ensure that you have a well-balanced and flowing agenda that works for all stakeholders. This includes your team, as well as the client and other participants. We suggest that you create a presentation deck covering each step / activity to structure and guide the inception. This can also be used to capture, share and playback information.

5 Get ready

Make sure you've got your act together and are set up to succeed:

- Organise your inception facilitation kit
- Arrange travel and accommodation
- Consider a dry run of the inception

Example inception schedule

The example below is a fairly generic five-day software delivery-related inception schedule for a product-build initiative, which we use in early planning stages to align with our team and clients. Note that we would refine this with more exact timings and attendees closer to the time.

TIMING	ACTIVITY	ACTIVITY / OUTCOME	CLIENT STAKEHOLDERS	FOCUS
Day 1 - Set up for success				
Set-up / Prep (core team)				
a.m.	Welcome / Kick off	Introduction of all parties, meet and greet	All (Business, Product, Technology)	Initiative
	The Opportunity	Aligning all stakeholders on vision, goals, expected outcomes, business milestones and how we will measure success.	All (Business, Product, Technology)	Initiative / Product
	The Value Proposition and Business Model	Understand the overall value proposition and how the business operates and delivers that value proposition.	All (Business, Product, Technology)	Product
p.m.	Project Sliders	Discuss what success 'looks like' and what's important to the organisation when trade offs need to be made. This will be the framework for subsequent decision making.	All (Business, Product, Technology)	Initiative
	Scope	Explore high level scope	All (Business, Product, Technology)	Initiative
	Governance and Ways of Working	Agree on governance structure and ways of working, roles and responsibilities.	All (Business, Product, Technology)	Initiative
Daily retro / Review / Planning / Post processing (core team)				
Day 2 - Explore				
Standup & Prep (core team), Recap (wider team)				
a.m.	Understanding the domain	Identify target audience, needs (jobs to be done), gains and pains.		
	Understanding the domain	Top level end to end experience mapping following from jobs to be done, gains and pains. Identification of gaps and opportunities. This will provide the framework for all further activities.	Product, Technology	Product
p.m. (two sessions in parallel)	Identify and Map required capabilities	Building on the experience map created in the a.m. add technical and process perspective to identify required and impacted business capabilities.	Product, Technology	Product
	User research deep dive	Conduct short interview sessions with representative users to validate findings from the 'Understanding Users' session and gather insights for Day 3 sketching session.	Product (supporting), Users	Product
Daily retro / Review / Planning / Post processing (core team)				

TIMING	ACTIVITY	ACTIVITY / OUTCOME	CLIENT STAKEHOLDERS	FOCUS
Day 3 - Explore & Solutionise				
Standup & Prep (core team), Recap (wider team)				
a.m.	Non-Functional Requirements	Agree and align on NFRs	Technology, Product, (Business)	Technology
	Solution design	Define stories / features, hypothesis and experiments, and indicative release slices in-line with objectives and hypotheses (Storymapping).	Product, Technology	Product
	Technology	Analysis and solutionising (is / to be). Define target architecture and stack in context of constraints and capabilities.	Technology	Technology
p.m.	Infrastructure	Analysis and solutionising (is / to be). Define target infrastructure and path to production in context of constraints and capabilities.	Technology, (Product), (Business)	Infrastructure / Operations
	UX design deep dive	High level sketching based on user needs profiles and user research from Day 2.	Product, Technology, Users	Product
Daily retro / Review / Planning / Post processing (core team)				
Team Dinner / Social (All)				
Day 4: Plan				
Standup & Prep (core team), Recap (wider team)				
a.m.	Prioritise	Prioritise stories / features and create backlog	(Business), Product, Technology	Product
	Roadmap	Create high-level roadmap.	(Business), Product, Technology	Product
	Estimation	Feature level estimation	Product	Initiative
	Risk & Dependencies	Identify risks and dependencies.	(Business), Product, Technology	Initiative
p.m.	[reserved for deep-dive sessions]	Time set aside for a deep-dive session, as determined by earlier workshop sessions.	[dependent on deep-dive session subject matter]	TBD
Daily retro / Review / Planning / Post processing (core team)				
Day 5: Prepare				
Standup & Prep (core team), Recap (wider team)				
a.m.	Estimation / Cost	Finalise estimation / cost	Product	Initiative
	Iteration 1 scope	Plan iteration 1, define iteration 1 stories	Product (Technology)	Product
p.m.	Delivery approach	Finalise delivery approach / team shape	(Business), Product, Technology	Initiative
	Next steps	Define next steps to ensure readiness	All (Business, Product, Technology)	Initiative
	Playback / Retrospective / Next Steps	Showcase the inception outputs, insights and key de-cisions to all stakeholders. Inception retrospective and planning of next steps.	All (Business, Product, Technology)	All
Lessons Learned (core team)				

Run

WHAT YOU'RE IN FOR...

This is where you run all the activities defined in the agenda and planned in your schedule.

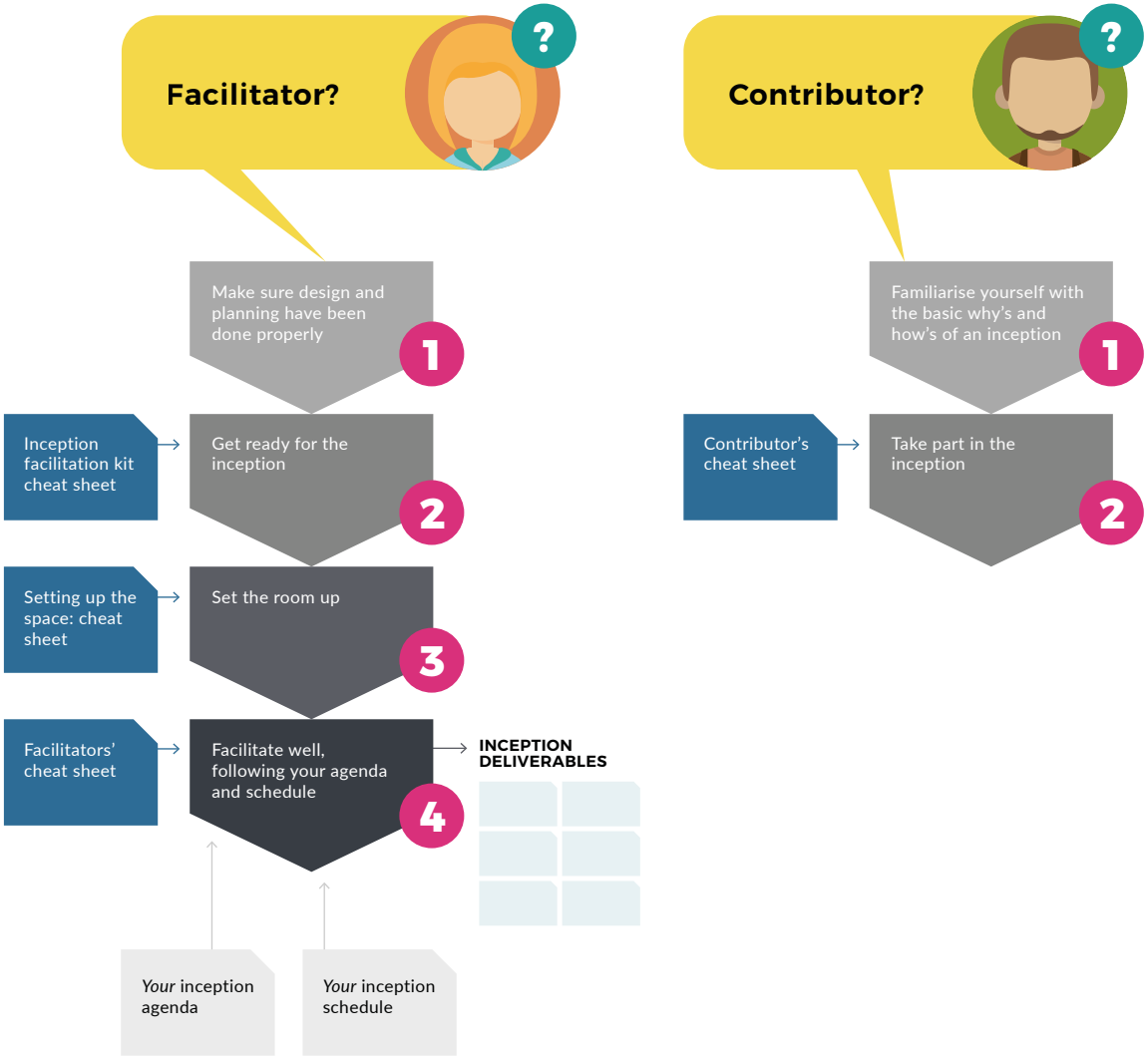
Remember:

- The **agenda** defines the activities to conduct (and is the core of the inception),
- The **schedule** helps with the logistics.

FACILITATOR OR CONTRIBUTOR?

As a facilitator, we need to make sure we facilitate delivery of the expected outcomes, react to change as needed, and 'herd the cats'. As a contributor, we collaborate towards the achievement of these outcomes.

The facilitator, contributors' and principles cheat sheets provide further detail on how to take part in an inception. You'll find them in the cheat sheets section.



PRO TIPS

- Do not let yourselves be rushed into running the inception, prepare well, and include the core inception team into planning the inception.
- Do not run the inception with half the team, or an overly inexperienced or ill-prepared team.
- Frequently check the temperature with your client. Not many clients will have done this before. Ensure they understand what's going on and why. Demonstrate progress and show a clear narrative of how one activity leads to another, and ultimately works to the inception goals.
- Be strong: you are the specialists and know how this is done best. But appreciate that clients can get uneasy if they don't know what's going on.
- Regularly check in with your team to ensure they are happy, aligned and on track.
- Do not run too fast. You don't have to answer all questions in an inception. You need broad brush-strokes. Where you cannot answer an important area, treat it as a risk or dependency. Flag it as something to answer later or extend inception.
- Refuse to provide recommendations and judgements too early. Such statements can easily become 'truth' and are hard to change later.
- Do not commit to definitive outcomes or low-level requirements specification and planning. Remember, we are working in an agile way, and these details will emerge later.

Wrap-up

MAINTAINNG THE MOMENTUM

While some inceptions feel like a major initiative (and may well be!) they are really only the start of the initiative. This is no time to rest on your laurels; it's the moment to ensure that you're not losing momentum.

There are four things to focus on at this point:

Present outcomes: Play-back to the team or client what you learned and what your recommendation is and why. Remember to structure this around a meaningful narrative. Hand-over a summary presentation and relevant artefacts to the client.

Make the call: Should we continue with the initiative, pivot or stop? This is a decision that needs to be made by both client and supplier. Perhaps values don't align, or you don't believe you can be successful.

Share learnings: Each inception is an opportunity to reflect, learn and improve for future inceptions and initiatives.

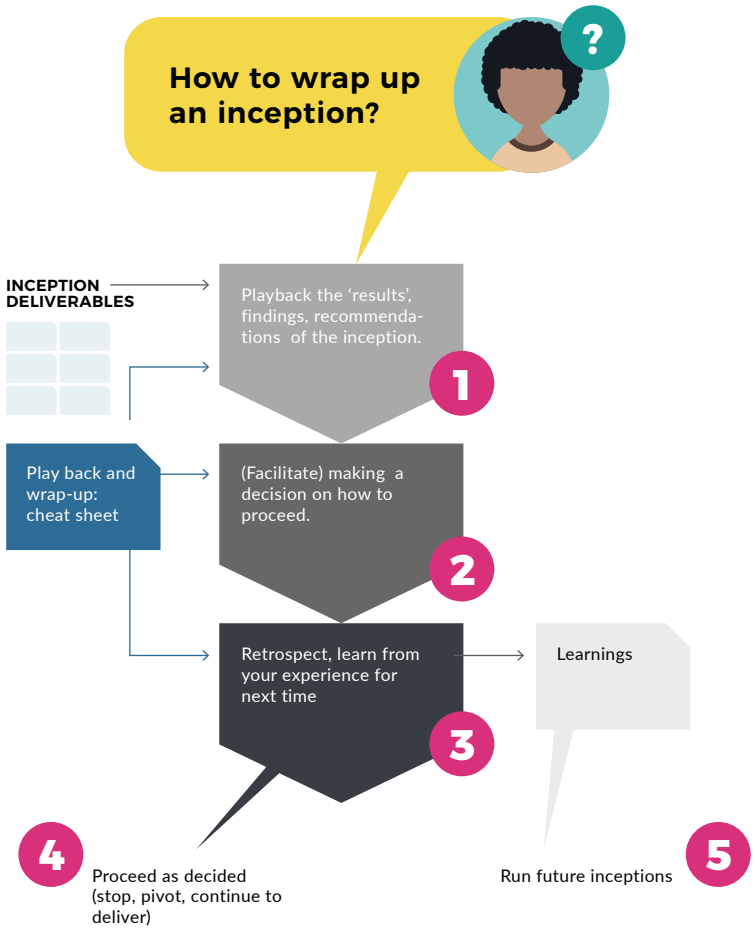
Move forward – at the right pace. In some cases, our initiatives have followed on directly from the inception at a sustainable pace. In others, there has been a gap of several months between the inception and delivery (with tools being downed, the team being kept doing busy-work, or a need to provide decision-makers with further detail). Frequently, excited clients will want to rush into delivery literally the day after inception.

Whatever the situation, it's important to find the right balance between keeping the initiative going in a way that is not wasteful, and ramping up at the right pace (while meeting client expectations for timely delivery).

> Momentum and excitement is great, but don't let yourselves be rushed into the inception or subsequent delivery. Rushing through can result in pain later on, due to insufficient onboarding or waste from working on low-value "keep busy" work.

PRO TIPS

- You can make the call to pivot or stop once you have sufficient information: There is not always a need - or point even - to continue to the bitter end.



- Ensure you're doing the right thing by your client, but also respect your own organisational goals and values. Not all relationships are made to last beyond inception.

- Do not let yourself be rushed into delivery, or ramp up too fast; but also communicate the cost and risk of delaying the start, in terms of loss of knowledge or momentum if things drag overly long.
  Reset the pace from a fast-paced inception to sustainable delivery.

- The information gained during inception and the various artefacts produced are not only for the client: they form the perfect basis for knowledge handover where you onboard new team members.

- You may find that stakeholders who have not been a part of the inception will attend the inception playback. Structure it so that it works 'in isolation'. Also, insist on presenting (rather than sending) the results to enable discussions and avoid misunderstandings. For large, high-impact initiatives you may want to consider a detailed debrief with the team and a separate townhall with the wider business.

- Challenge your client if they suggest that your inception output can easily be used by another organisation to get right into delivery. Similarly, avoid using another team's inception as a starting point; inceptions are not cheap, fast replacements for a waterfall specification process. They are crucial for building alignment and trust through a shared experience.

Cheat sheets

Types of inceptions

SO YOU'VE BEEN ASKED TO DO AN INCEPTION

As we've highlighted throughout this document, inceptions are contextual. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. However, we have come across certain patterns which we use as a starting point, as shown in the example on the next page.

INITIATIVE TYPE	**New feature** (e.g. adding Paypal as payment method to an existing payment gateway, extending a CRM system into a new market or to a new sub-brand).	**Medium size greenfield** (e.g. customer facing reporting portal on top of an existing trading system)	**Large brownfield / greenfield** (e.g. payment gateway, government tax platform, fashion stock management solution)
INITIATIVE DURATION	1-2 weeks	3-6 months	12 months+
INCEPTION GOAL	Assess readiness	Align & make ready	Align & make ready
MAIN DELIVERABLES	Goals, concrete next steps	Goals, scope, solution approach, roadmap, risk log, costs	Goals, scope, solution approach, roadmap, risk log, costs
INCEPTION DURATION (PREP | EXECUTE | WRAP-UP)	2hr | 0.5d | n/a	1w | 2w | 1w	2w | 2-6w | 2-4w
TEAM SHAPE	Product Owner, Tech Lead	Delivery Lead, Product Owner, Tech Lead, UX, DevOps	Engagement Manager, Delivery Lead, Product Owner, Tech Lead, UX, Devops
FORMAT	remote / face2face	face2face	face2face

Contributors' cheat sheet

SO YOU'VE BEEN ASKED TO ATTEND AN INCEPTION

Inceptions are a team sport and are made successful by collaboration with the right mix of stakeholders. If you're invited to an inception, it's likely you have a related outcome to achieve, you are a key-decision-maker, you control resources, you are impacted by the decision(s) that will follow, you hold vital relevant knowledge or skills, or you will benefit from being involved in some other way.

Being part of an inception – in any role or capacity – is your opportunity to state your expectations and concerns, shape and provide direction, help others to succeed and otherwise get as much value from the process as you can.

Whether you own / pay for / benefit from the final outcome, deliver or operate it, or you are simply supporting with your skills or knowledge, the following thoughts will help you take part in an inception.

PREPARATION:

Understand why you are participating, what you are being asked to contribute, and what you want to get out of the inception. Ask yourself:

- What are *my* goals and expectations?
- What do *others* expect from me?
- What information do I need?
- What do I want to share?
- Is there anything I need to prepare beforehand? (We are big fans of lean working, so don't write that 100 page requirements document...but bring it along if you have it!)

DURING EACH SESSION:

- As each session kicks off, ask yourself "What do I need from this session to feel confident that I can make decisions and complete resulting actions as part of the inception or delivery? And what do others expect from me?"
- Lead in your discipline, and support others in achieving their goals.
- Where discussions get complicated (or heated), relieve pressure by being empathetic to other participants.
- Help gain clarity and insight.

THROUGHOUT THE DAY:

- Take notes of the dynamics you're observing, where you think there might be unaddressed (or taboo!) topics and risks. Raise these with the group or a trusted party so the problem can be addressed.

AT THE END OF THE DAY:

- Retrospect as an opportunity to improve, fine-tune and adapt the inception.
- Reflect; distil learnings and insights that will inform next stages of the inception.

PRO TIPS

✚ Focus on breadth by default, only going deep in areas of particular complexity and risk. Don't get lost in the details of your area of work. This is a team sport with shared goals.

✚ Process findings at the end of each day, so you are prepared for the next day and insights don't get lost. Don't do long nights and burn out. Ask if you need extra time; explore adjusting the schedule if necessary.

Facilitator's cheat sheet

SO YOU'VE BEEN ASKED TO FACILITATE AN INCEPTION...

As facilitator of an inception, all eyes are on you. But take heart –you're not doing this alone. Inceptions are a joint effort, and your colleagues will lead in their areas of expertise and contribute with their consulting skills.

PREPARATION:

- Put together and maintain a facilitation kit.
- Focus the team on session goals and responsibilities (leading, facilitating, note and time tracking).
- Where needed, remind the team of the 'plan of attack', especially when heading into complex or political territory.

DURING EACH SESSION:

- Start each session, confirm the expected outcomes and how the session will be run.
- Ensure participants understand why they are there, and what value they will get out of it (or are expected to provide).
- Balance attendees meeting their own needs (to vent, be heard, etc) with moving forwards on the topics at hand.
- Reinforce the rules of engagement (e.g. if someone breaks the rules of engagement, point to the rule being broken and confirm whether the group still signs up to this).
- Stay on track. Summarise decisions, insights and outcomes. Park topics that are not relevant right now, explain why, and note them down for future revisiting. Park and revisit whenever you're going round in circles, can't make a decision, or where a stakeholder hijacks a session.
- Note down assumptions, risks, dependencies and actions. Assign owners.
- Keep momentum going, but also provide space to think and reflect.
- Read the room and make suggestions based on what you observe (breaks, focused break-out discussions, revisit topics on another day, involve (different) experts or decision-makers in future sessions).
- At regular intervals, play back outcomes, insights and confirm the next session/activity.

THROUGHOUT THE DAY:

- Start each day with a recap of the previous day, and a look ahead at what the sessions will be today.
- Throughout the day, you are continually building up a picture of the current context and potential future state. To make the knowledge count, tie in what you learn in each subsequent session/activity to the work done before (e.g. when talking about a feature, you can refer back to a specific pain point raised a day earlier).
- Take notes of the dynamics you're observing, where you think there might be unaddressed (or taboo!) topics and risks; raise these with the group (or a trusted party) so the problem(s) can be addressed.

PRO TIPS

- Enlist a co-facilitator / buddy to pair with.
- Be flexible with your agenda: you'll find some of your assumptions to be incorrect, and there might be some fundamental conversations or alignment needed among the people in the room. Be comfortable with updating your agenda accordingly.
- Optimise for flow: ensure that the logical flow of your inception is not broken when scheduling.
- Be clear on whether sessions are divergent (exploring, asking questions, coming up with new ideas and understanding) vs convergent (agreeing on topics, making decisions, choosing solutions).
- Energise the room by mixing different interaction and workshop styles. Appreciate that some participants prefer to sit or lounge; others to stand. Participation is more important than pose.
- Direct proceedings and show leadership, but allow everyone else to participate – especially the quieter participants, who will often make high-value contributions when given the space to do so.
- Don't be arrogant. The people in the room have successful businesses and extensive domain experience in their discipline. Assume they know what they are talking about and have good reasons for their current views.
- Don't grill participants. It's very easy to become preoccupied with what we think we need to get out of an inception, and in doing so miss important details. Find a balance between listening, asking, workshopping, advising and directing.
- Have lunch and other breaks outside the meeting room to avoid cabin fever.

Inception facilitation kit

OUR BOX OF TRICKS

This kit will save your life! It's all you'll need to help capture and visualise all the great work taking place in the room. We've literally carried boxes of this gubbins from London to Dubai to Bangalore and back.

You'll need:

- An easy-to-transport box or bag to house your kit.
- Post-it notes – loads of them, in multiple colours.
- Sharpies for everyone in the room... and then some... they always go walkies...
- Whiteboard and flipchart markers, plus whiteboard wipes.
- Flipboard paper and Magic Whiteboard paper.
- Blu Tack, cellotape, and anything else you might use to stick things on walls.
- A timer (GREAT for showing how much time is left for discussions).
- EE icebreaker cards (naturally).
- If you travel, consider taking a universal power adapter.

PRO TIPS

- You will want more whiteboard space than you think. Magic Whiteboard works a dream for that.
- Respect your clients' premises. Be careful where you stick items: you don't want to rip wallpaper off.
- Use cellotape to stick Post-its to sheets of paper, in case you need to transport them.
- Use Sharpies to write on Post-its – biro ink doesn't show up well when photographed or read at a distance.

Setting up the space

HOME SWEET HOME

We have run two-week inceptions from a single hotel conference room. Cabin fever anyone? Trust us, you want to arrange a nice space for an inception if you can..

Some extra things to consider:

- You want good wifi, and a functioning projector you can connect to.
- You want people to be able to sit, stand, and move around, with the possibility to break out as and when discussions need a bit of divergence.
- You will want wall space, as much as possible. Space to draw and illustrate and take notes.
- Set up dedicated wall space sections to log risks, assumptions and dependencies, plus a 'parking lot' where you can capture ideas for later discussion. Separate whiteboards or flipcharts can work well for this.

PRO TIPS

- Consider the location in terms of convenience of travel, plus taking people out of their natural habitat to avoid bias and distraction.
- Be early, and allow for some faff before you get going. Checking in and getting set up on wifi can take longer than you think. As can writing up the agenda and rules.
- Where you have no big whiteboard, create one with Magic Whiteboard. Generally speaking, you'll want at least 2sqm of free scribbling space.
- Get good dynamics by mixing up the seating arrangement: a good mix of suppliers and clients around the room, with a different order every day.
- Avoid too many room changes during the day – and arrange to be able to leave things in the room overnight.
- Consider that early on you're likely to have more participants in the one place, before moving to more focused workshops (that often run in parallel with smaller sub-groups).

Playback & wrap-up

SO YOU'VE DONE IT

During an inception, we do regular playbacks to share insights, align and drive decisions. At the end, we do a final playback where we share our reponse to the inception brief (often a lightweight solution approach with a delivery and cost proposal).

After this, a decision will be made on how to proceed. We also take the opportunity to reflect, learn and improve for the future.

Here are some key considerations for this phase:

- The final playback must be problem oriented. Ensure you address the problem and answer all questions via a 'narrative' that outlines clear recommendations and next steps, but also assumptions, risk and dependencies.
- Keep it brief and actionable. You want to leave the client with insightful answers to help them make a decision – not a shiny deck they can't do much with.
- This is an ideal opportunity for all parties to assess whether this initiative is a good fit for all parties (i.e. not only the client).
- We take this as an opportunity to learn from our clients as well as our team, to optimise our ways of working with this particular client, as a team and as an organisation.

> The final playback makes our ultimate recommendation: this may have changed throughout an inception due to our agile approach.

PRO TIPS

- Give your team enough time to prepare the final playback. Don't let yourselves be rushed into providing a cost and/or plan if you haven't had the time to think it through.
- Have a clear narrative from problem through to recommendation. Address desirability, viability and feasibility.
- Ensure that you are doing the right thing by your client, but also respect your own organisational goals and values. Not all relationships are made to last beyond inception.
- Be sure to answer the brief. Where you deviate from it, be very clear why you are doing so.
- Don't be arrogant: our clients have built successful businesses. Don't think you know better than them about what they need. You can (perhaps should) challenge them, but always respectfully.

Principles we apply

Some guidance
In order to do the right thing in the right way, we follow a number of principles and practices which, in our experience, have led to good outcomes.

START FROM BEST PRACTICES - TAILOR TO CONTEXT

The guidance in this playbook will give good results, but must be tailored to the initiative at hand before you get started.

PREPARE WELL - WORK LEAN

Do not underestimate the difficulty of running an inception well. First impressions count, and one day's preparation for a full inception is rarely enough. At the same time, there's no point in doing too much preparation for an inception – it would likely be based on too many assumptions.

DO THE MINIMUM - DON'T MISS THE BIG RISKS

In order to be successful with an inception, we can't go into everything in detail. In fact, too much detail too early creates waste, as information becomes stale over time. The solution is to analyse the domain at breadth, and deep-dive sparingly into areas of high risk and complexity.

WORK BREADTH OVER DEPTH - DON'T FLUSH ALL DETAIL OUT

Again: an inception is there to decide whether to proceed, and if so, to align on scope and approach, and set the team up so they can hit the ground running. This means that we don't have to answer everything. We deliberately want to leave details for delivery. Where we come across a big, strategic question we can't answer during inception, we flag this as risk and provide an approach on how to answer this later. This can be a caveat to our recommendation.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS - COMMUNICATE

Transparency, honesty and empathy will build high-trust relationships over time. Clearly communicate so everyone is on the same page and is comfortable that they know what's happening.

COLLABORATE

Inceptions are made successful by cross-functional, multi-stakeholder input and alignment. Involve the right people for the right reasons.

ENGAGE WELL - BALANCE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Present, communicate and engage well. Different stakeholders react to different stimuli and different organisations expect different things. We believe visualisations help communication– structure and content are both important.

CONTROL THE DISCUSSION - READ THE ROOM

While it's important to be in control so we get what we need, we also need to have empathy for other participants. Show leadership and control to prevent digression, but be humble, respectful and receptive.

PROJECT COMPETENCE - DO INFLUENCE - DON'T BE A DICK

As experts, we're expected to provide our expertise to help the wider team gain insight. We're also expected – professionally obliged, arguably –to 'nudge' people to do the right thing. However, we need to be mindful of our biases (and those of others). And of course, no-one appreciates arrogance. Be humble, be professional and clearly state your point of view, but also know when to shut up.

FOCUS ON OUTCOMES - ALWAYS START WITH THE USER

Everything we do is ultimately for people. Even the most technical initiative has some users that have needs, and expect to be able to get their tasks done. Be sure to understand them – add product thinking to the mix and clearly articulate expected outcomes.

DELIVER ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus on, and drive towards outcomes and goals. Form a hypothesis and validate it at the earliest opportunity. Present the client with actionable recommendations they can use for decision making and to inform their next steps.

MAKE THE CALL - REFLECT

Reflect periodically, and take time to create the recommendation at the end of the inception process. Be true to the client and your team as to whether the endeavour is desirable, viable and feasible.

Deep dives

Design an inception agenda – Deep Dive

We use the generic inception agenda blueprint as a starting point, but always tailor it to fit each specific initiative. This chapter provides in-depth guidance for each step and activity in the inception agenda.

1 Kick Off

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN DURING THE INCEPTION

First impressions are always important – this is your opportunity to make it count

You may find yourself in a room with 30 people you don't know (some of whom may not want you there), or in a room with a small team you've worked with before.

Why

This activity positions everything that follows. We manage expectations, allowing each person to understand how they fit in and how to plan their time. We start to build relationships, address worries and concerns and get participants to buy-in.

What good looks like

We want everyone in the room to understand the objective, how they can add value and why attending is important for them.

Activities

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS TO ORGANISATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

Who is in the room and why?

Usually done by a client senior stakeholder.

This sets the scene as to why everyone is here. If done well it reinforces importance, provides focus, creates the necessary empowerment, clarifies boundaries and sets the basis for good collaboration.

An introduction of the various organisations and individuals ensures everyone understands why they (and everyone else) is participating, what they are expected to contribute, and what they can expect from the upcoming sessions.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Icebreakers

I WANT TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Icebreakers are tongue-in-cheek, off-topic activities or questions that relax the room and often allow individuals to introduce themselves. This is the first step to building personal relationships. However, be mindful of cultural factors when playing this.

SCENE SETTING

Why are we doing an inception, and what is an inception in the first place?

As an explanation of why the inception was arranged, the overall goal here is to illustrate how we will go about achieving the objective.

SCHEDULE WALKTHROUGH

What will be happening during the inception?

A top-level walkthrough of the inception schedule to manage participants' expectations, clarify why and where individual participants are expected to attend, and to allow individuals to manage their time.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Kanban board

I WANT TO TRACK WORK IN PROGRESS

Use a kanban board to visualise upcoming activities and track progress – both daily and across the ineption as a whole.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

How will we make this work? What does good look like?

We share concepts of how we'll approach the inception. This includes thoughts on interaction, collaboration, agile and iterative practices.

We cover aspects like the attendance needed, decision making frameworks we'll use, mobile phone use during sessions, ensuring we work breadth-over-depth, that there's an exchange of value, etc.

This is our chance to set expectations on the level of involvement and interaction participants should expect. It defines what good looks like, plus anti-patterns we may want to discourage.

PARTICIPANT EXPECTATIONS

What are the participants' expectations, wishes and concerns?

Check and address participant expectations in regards to ways of working and outcomes. This is important, to ensure we're not losing people before we have started.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Parking lot

I WANT TO TRACK ITEMS TO BE ADDRESSED LATER

Use a parking lot to place notes of any activities, actions, thoughts or questions we must not forget.

1-2-4-All

I WANT TO SHARE THOUGHTS

Use this technique to enable individuals or groups to share thoughts. Feel free to jump right to 1-All if appropriate.

PRO TIPS

- The general welcome and scene setting are best done by a senior client, for instance the sponsor. After all, they tend tend to have the hard power in the room.
- Keep this session brief, and tailor it to local customs.
- Consider name tags for big groups.
- When in a team, never present someone else. As credible, mature adults who are equals, we should introduce ourselves, injecting our own personality as we do.
- Dress comfortably, but within the cultural framework of your clients. Err on the side of caution.

2 The Opportunity

UNDERSTAND AND ALIGN ON THE PROBLEM OR OPPORTUNITY THAT NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED

To ensure we're all working towards the same goal, we need to align on the problem to address.

This is really about asking 'What problem are we solving, what opportunity are we seeking to exploit, why and with what goals in mind?'

Why

Good outcomes are only delivered when we solve the right problem, the solution provides value and all contributors are aligned. These activities allow the team to align and flag any concerns or mismatches.

Activities

THE BUSINESS PROBLEM OR OPPORTUNITY

What problem are we being asked to address?

We jointly articulate the business problem or opportunity, vision, goals and value proposition.

We outline what the business wants to achieve, why, and explain how value will be generated and for whom. The more metrics and SMART goals, the better!

During an inception we generally focus on validating, aligning on and refining these aspects (rather than having to define them in the first place). That is, the business case and value proposition should already be sound.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Strategic Drivers, Trends and Forces

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND THE UNDERLYING FACTORS THAT CREATE THE OPPORTUNITY

Strategic drivers allow us to identify the factors that the organisation needs to respond to. This can be in order to benefit from an opportunity, or avoid a threat. Strategic drivers are (generally speaking) the ultimate source of opportunities and the raîson d'etre behind everything an organisation does.

Product Vision

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND THE VISION RELATED TO THIS INITIATIVE

The product vision canvas links target audience needs with product capabilities and business goals. Use this to create or understand the overarching vision.

Lean Canvas

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE ORGANISATION DELIVERS THE VALUE PROPOSITION

The Lean Canvas is a way to explain how a value proposition is delivered.

Business Roadmap

I WANT TO KNOW HOW MY CLIENT'S BUSINESS WILL EVOLVE OVER TIME

A business roadmap outlines how, over time, a business will evolve its capabilities at the highest strategic level. This forms an important input into delivery roadmaps, as we often need to align product roadmaps to a high level strategic roadmap.

Lean Business Case / Epic Hypothesis Statement

I WANT TO JUSTIFY (OR UNDERSTAND THE JUSTIFICATION OF) AN INITIATIVE

These two documents provide a lightweight framework for defining the rationale for an initiative.

SWOT

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES I CAN ADDRESS OR EXPLOIT

A matrix to note strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, classified by whether they are external, internal, harmful or beneficial. This tool is useful for uncovering these contextual aspects, which can help in defining a strategy. It is not however focused defining and prioritising solutions or actions, and should be used with other methods to action the insights that emerge.

SUCCESS CRITERIA

What does success look like?

We pose the questions 'What does success look like' and 'How will we know'? It's important that these questions are constantly revisited as the inception progresses to ensure that what we do remains viable, desirable and feasible. We must define success for the client and also success for the supplier. Such success criteria should cover the commercial, socio-cultural and (in some cases) personal factors that are important to all parties.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

OKRs

I WANT TO DEFINE AND MEASURE BUSINESS GOALS

Objectives and Key Results are a structured way to define actionable objectives in an agile way, and enable cascading this intent throughout an organisation.

Affinity Map

I WANT TO STRUCTURE INFORMATION, FIND PATTERNS AND PROCESS A LARGE AMOUNT OF INFORMATION MORE EASILY

An affinity map is a diagram which groups items that belong together. It's helpful when we ask a team to provide their thoughts, which we then group by relationship / category. We use affinity maps to gather success criteria from all stakeholders and distil themes which are then reflected in our team charters and ways of working.

Objective Trees

I WANT TO ENSURE I HAVE SMART OBJECTIVES FOR THE INITIATIVE

Objectives apply at different levels within a business. It's important to understand the objectives that apply to a given initiative and how they contribute to higher level objectives. To do so, we create a tree (or network) that illustrates this hierarchy. This can be used to group, categorise and reduce a large number of objectives to a more manageable set. These can then be mapped against strategic themes and features.

Project Sliders

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND AND ALIGN ON WHAT IS IMPORTANT

Alignment on values and principles is vital, as it determines not only ways of working but also the decisions and compromises we make. Project sliders allow stakeholders to indicate the relative importance of a number of dimensions. This helps teams to align, and also defines a decision-making framework.

CONSTRAINTS AND CONCERNS

What are our constraints?

At this stage it is worth being very clear about constraints and concerns we'll face. Constraints may relate to time, milestones, budget, resources or other constraints the delivery team will have to operate to. Concerns are often more personal, but usually point to risks that we need to be aware of and manage.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Project Sliders

(see above)

Values

(see below)

Business Milestones

I WANT TO KNOW WHICH KEY EVENTS OR TARGETS I NEED TO FACTOR INTO MY PLANNING

Business milestones are events that impact our initiative from a strategic perspective. They affect prioritisation, roadmaps, dependency maps and delivery plans.

Values Alignment

I WANT TO MAKE SURE TEAMS HAVE SHARED VALUES

Identifying and aligning values across teams and organisations helps to ensure successful collaboration.

Roundtable

I AM INTERESTED IN PEOPLE'S OPINIONS AND THOUGHTS

We surface risks, concerns and get buy-in by going around the table and ask all stakeholders for their individual view on a given matter. Keep it simple, keep it short.

Dependency Mesh

I WANT TO MAP DEPENDENCIES THAT IMPACT MY DELIVERY

A tree or network identifying individual dependencies, their relationships (x depends on y), their status and ownership.

PRO TIPS

- At this stage, work at the business level. Do not jump to the solution just yet.
- Observe the dynamics in the room, whether opinions are freely voiced or whether certain participants are overly dominant, and take appropriate action where necessary.
- By default, assume the value proposition and the business case are sound and validate them (as opposed to assuming that you will need to define them). Where you find gaps or mismatches, consider whether pivoting to a discovery is more appropriate.
- While you are obliged to clarify, align and question to ensure the initiative is the right thing to do, do not tell the client how to suck eggs. You may have a client that does not know how to build software but they do know how to run their business – so tread carefully when questioning top-level vision, objectives or value propositions.

3 The domain

UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM DOMAIN IN SUFFICIENT DETAIL.

As far as inception goals go, we have until now, just set the scene: we've understood what the opportunity is, why it exists and where the organisation sees itself in the future.

Now we get into the nitty gritty of our problem. We analyse the problem domain in enough detail to be able to make a decision on: whether we can deliver a desirable, viable and feasible solution; what such a solution could look like; and how we could deliver it.

Note that the individual activities in this step (and their sequencing) very much depend on whether we are building a solution from scratch, or evolving or fixing a solution within an existing domain. In the case of the former ,we start building from a blank slate, for the latter we have to do as-is analysis and build on top of that.

The activities will also be influenced by the 'type' of initiative. A product build will need technical analysis in form of technical architecture, while a change initiative may require no technical analysis, or do so in the form of process modelling.

Why

While we believe in an agile approach, we also recognise that we're most likely to succeed in delivering valuable outcomes when building on solid foundations.

Many inexperienced or misguided teams jump to solutions too early, which are then based on risky or random assumptions and impacted by unknowns and unmanaged risk. While agile ways of working allow us to manage some level of uncertainty, it would be neglectful to do no analysis or preparation at all.

What good looks like

We want a sufficient understanding of the domain so we can outline a solution for the opportunity at hand – and subsequently assess whether it is truly desirable, viable and feasible. We adopt lean principles, which in practice means doing the necessary minimum to learn or achieve specific outcomes: by working breadth over depth and focusing on areas of risk and complexity.

Activities

BUSINESS DOMAIN

What does the organisation do and how do they do it?

We investigate what the business does, how it delivers products, services and value and how it is affected by external factors.

Businesses are often complex organisms, embedded in an even more complex environment. Following systems thinking and domain-driven design, we focus on the smallest relevant sub-domain (which may be an entire organisation, a business unit, a department or an individual team). While we want to keep the boundaries of our domain as small as possible to achieve focus, the domain we really need to look at to truly deliver value (to account for all dependencies, risks, design operable solutions etc) is often a bit bigger than clients may initially believe. Sometimes, also the opposite can hold true: areas highlighted as needing a detailed understanding are not always relevant.

Generally speaking, we look at the business model, the top level value and supply chain, then start identifying stakeholders. From this we can understand how the organisation is embedded into the wider context that affects it.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Business Model Canvas

I WANT TO CREATE OR UNDERSTAND WHAT THE BUSINESS DOES AND HOW THEY OPERATE

While invented to design a business, this is an excellent tool that quickly allows us to model an existing business and identify areas affected by introducing a new system, product or service. We generally use this as our starting point to understand any domain, as it's a great conversation starter.

Stakeholder Onion or Stakeholder Matrix

(see below)

Value Chain and Supply Chain

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND HOW A BUSINESS DELIVERS PRODUCTS AND SERVICES AND CREATES VALUE

These older models are timeless, as they provide a clear view of cause-and-effect, identify bottlenecks and areas where we can make improvements. They do however cover just one piece (of the many pieces) of the puzzle, and generally need to be supplemented with other tools to create a fuller picture of the current internal domain.

PESTLE, Porter's Five Forces and Porter's Diamond

I WANT TO IDENTIFY EXTERNAL DEPENDENCIES OF A BUSINESS OR INITIATIVE

These are models that facilitate identifying and thinking about external dependencies that affect a business or initiative.

SWOT

(see above)

TARGET AUDIENCE

Who is my target audience and what do they find desirable?

We identify users, what they desire and expect from a solution, and where we can provide value to them. It's important that we recognise internal and external, primary, secondary and supporting users. We must also remember that even the most technical problem ultimately has a 'user'. Arguably this is the single most important step – ultimately, every bit of value created by or for a business stems from satisfying the needs of users.

By default our thinking should be informed by market and user research, though subsequent experiments and testing the solution will provide the most robust feedback.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Value Proposition Canvas

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT MY TARGET AUDIENCE NEEDS, AND HOW I CAN DELIVER A PRODUCT THAT MATCHES THOSE EXPECTATIONS

The value proposition canvas zooms deeper into the alignment of expectations and capabilities.

Jobs To Be Done

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT USERS REALLY NEED OR DESIRE

Jobs to be done focuses on the things a user wants to achieve and how they want to do them, and thus is a perfectly user-centric approach to understanding 'requirements'.

Empathy Map

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND MY TARGET AUDIENCE'S CURRENT EXPERIENCES

Empathy maps are a tool to identify and document what users are thinking, saying, hearing and seeing in a given situation(s), allowing us to tailor / optimise solutions to meet these aspects. They're closely related to the user side of the value proposition canvas, where 'empathy' can be mapped to help identify opportunities and issues.

User Personas

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND AND 'DEFINE' MY TARGET AUDIENCE

User personas express the characteristics of the target audience in the form of a limited group of stereotypical users. These can be used to inform your value proposition and solution design.

User Research

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND MY TARGET AUDIENCE, WHAT THEY DESIRE AND HOW I CAN ULTIMATELY PROVIDE VALUE TO THEM

We have a wide range of research tools and techniques at our disposal to understand users and situations, validate assumptions and hypotheses prior to and during design, delivery and actual operation. Research is vital and informative, as long as we're mindful of its constraints: early user research, especially focus groups and user testing with small sample sizes are indicative at best. Monitoring (e.g. web analytics) and testing (A/B testing) in live use are more reliable, but less exploratory.

STAKEHOLDERS

Who is important in the delivery of this initiative?

In addition to identifying system users, we look at the wider picture of stakeholders that affect, impact or are interested in the initiative. This helps us validate that we have identified all users, be they individuals or organisations that we need to recognise as part of analysis, experiments definition or delivery.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Stakeholder Onion or Stakeholder Matrix

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHO I AM DEALING WITH

Any successful delivery is based on interactions with people. These people have different roles, interests, agendas; they may be empowered or just there to execute or inform. A stakeholder onion maps stakeholders by degree of closeness, while a stakeholder matrix arranges them on dimensions such as influence vs. interest.

A stakeholder matrix allows you to easily track and communicate who your stakeholders are, their relevance and area of expertise and involvement. When doing this, be careful to consider all relevant users for input into requirements: it's easy to focus only on the end-user and ignore operations or other important users when designing an application.

EXPERIENCE LIFECYCLE: USERS

What does this user experience look like?

We model how the target audience will be using the solution in the wider context of the customer - or more generic 'user' - lifecycle.

To map the user experience across the relevant parts of the customer lifecycle, we identify the flow of activities that relevant users conduct at the various touch points they have with our domain. We also note their experience (emotional, social, functional) at each stage.

Once completed by adding capabilities (see next step) the resulting model(s) is possibly the most important tool we use to understand the domain, communicate context and use as the basis for solution design.

In the case of a brown-field initiative we will usually start modelling the existing experience, then identify gaps, opportunities, strengths, weaknesses and issues and use this to inform our target experience. For a green-field initiative we would model our vision of the target experience.

As before, our thinking should be informed by market and user research, though subsequent experiments and operation of the solution will provide the most robust feedback.

As part of this we start eliciting and engineering wider (business) requirements.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Experience Map

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND HOW MY TARGET AUDIENCE (EXPECTS TO) INTERACT WITH THE BUSINESS AND ITS PRODUCTS

User experience maps illustrate users' interactions across the various touch points they may have with an organisation, and what

capabilities are required to support the interaction. We can also map user sentiment and empathy against each touchpoint, which then allows us to link back to our value proposition.

Finally, we can use an experience map to indicate threats and opportunities, areas of risk and improvement on this map.

We use these to map the as-is or to-be state, and communicate areas of recommended focus to a business.

Service Blueprint

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND HOW A BUSINESS DELIVERS SERVICES OR WHAT WILL BE REQUIRED TO DELIVER A SERVICE

Similar to a user experience map, the service blueprint focuses on the internal workings of an organisation. The information inherent in a user experience map and blueprint can be combined into a single diagram in many cases.

We can use the service blueprint to model the as-is and/or the to-be state.

Event Storming

(see above)

I WANT TO IDENTIFY THE CAPABILITIES AND FEATURES MY SYSTEM NEEDS TO PROVIDE

This activity allows us to model a domain by focusing on its 'events'. We've used this successfully to model heavily time-driven domains (for instance, the complex supply chain management system of a UK retailer, where most activities are determined by sales seasons, orders and arrival of stock).

User Journey

(see below)

Context Model

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND, ANALYSE AND SHARE THOUGHTS ABOUT A DOMAIN

A visualisation that illustrates domain concepts. This could be a single complex model, or multiple visualisations showing different aspects. Focus on people and systems, but you can also add data, processes and events.

An example might be a systems landscape, illustrating how the various systems that support a website of an automotive company are linked to each other, or an illustration of the flow of assets, securities and fees for a securities lending project.

A Context Model is a good way to illustrate which areas are in and out of scope of your Initiative.

Value Stream Mapping

(see below)

User Research

(see above)

Epic Level Requirements Catalogue or Backlog / Requirements Hierarchy

I WANT TO SUMMARISE REQUIREMENTS

Where we gather requirements during an inception, they should be user-centric and at Epic level. It's too early to go down to implementation level at this stage.. We generally stay at feature / epic level during inception, only moving to a ranked backlog (Requirements Hierarchy) for prioritisation later in the inception.

Non-Functional Requirements Catalogue

I WANT TO DOCUMENT THE NON-FUNCTIONAL QUALITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOLUTION

Contrary to functional requirements, non-functionals are often well understood and documented. The challenge is to tease out and agree on the specifics, (e.g. number of concurrent users, expected throughput, etc). Where no benchmark exists, in our experience it's best to put a gut-feel based stake in the ground, and plan for evolutionary architecture and infrastructure to scale and evolve in the future where required, rather than build for scale from day one.

Technical Requirements Catalogue

I WANT TO DOCUMENT IMPLEMENTATION / TECHNOLOGY-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS OF THE SOLUTION

Technical requirements are often based on existing capabilities, business constraints or preferences. Ultimately these should be workshopped in light of context, industry best practices and requirements. A good way to illustrate the overall scope is to visualise requirements in a tree structure, with themes at the top, and features, epics and stories coming further down the tree in increasing detail. This provides an easy-to-consume overview that allows us to track delivery progress.

Stakeholder Onion or Stakeholder Matrix

(see above)

Assumptions Log

(see below)

Risk log

(see below)

Dependency Mesh

(see above)

EXPERIENCE LIFECYCLE: CAPABILITIES

What capabilities are needed to support the user experience?

We identify and model which capabilities are required (i.e. features, systems, processes, people, data) to provide the target user experience.

In this activity, we bring together the user-centric view with the business and technology perspectives. We extend the user experience model by mapping existing and required capabilities that support the various user activities. This includes internal processes, relevant internal users, the systems and data captured and/or used. This is the time to also look into aspects of operations and support (i.e. how will the business provide the end-to-end experience from an internal perspective?) Accordingly, we often involve service designers in these activities. In a second step, we can then identify gaps, opportunities for improvement and issues that need addressing.

Dependent on the size of the domain, we may end up with a number of models which focus on different parts of the domain at different levels of granularity.

In addition, we conduct further analysis on the details of these capabilities and any related requirements the organisation may have. This can include (but is not limited to) enterprise / technology architecture, system interfaces and the technology stack, as well as infrastructure, tooling, etc.

We continue to elicit and engineer requirements as they come to light. Note: at this stage we have not yet examined the solution as our focus is still on the as-is domain and solution-neutral requirements. In practice, we will update these models as part of solution design.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Experience Map

(see above)

Service Blueprint

(see above)

Event Storming

(see above)

Context Diagram

(see above)

Architecture Outline

I WANT TO MODEL HOW THE VARIOUS TECHNICAL COMPONENTS OF A SYSTEM ARE RELATED TO EACH OTHER

We use lightweight, low-formality architecture diagrams to analyse, align on and communicate information about the technical domain.

Ultimately this allows us to explore and agree:

- Architectural approach
- Architectural patterns
- Technology choices

It also feeds into team profile and shape, and informs scope, feature and solution design related decisions.

It's important that we consider this in close conjunction with all other aspects of solution design (UX etc).

UML Diagrams

I WANT TO DOCUMENT TECHNICAL DETAILS TO AN INDUSTRY STANDARD

A standardised model which can be beneficial to express system behaviour and implementation in a formalistic way. Be mindful with overly early detailed design; analysis paralysis and the overheads to update such models are potential pitfalls here. Working and self-explanatory code is always better than specification.

User Journeys / Activity Diagrams / BPMN / Value Stream Mapping

I WANT TO ANALYSE AND DEFINE PROCESSES IN MORE DETAIL

User Journeys are a detailed illustration of how users interact within a touchpoint, usually from screen to screen. Activity Diagrams are a formal expression of logical flow, usually used to illustrate user interaction or system activities. BPMN is a formalised visual modelling language to document business processes. Value Stream Mapping is a technique that helps to improve processes, following lean paradigms.

Epic Level Requirements Catalogue / Requirements Hierarchy

(see above)

Stakeholder Onion or Stakeholder matrix

(see above)

Assumptions log

(see below)

Risk log

(see below)

Dependency mesh

(see above)

NON FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

What qualities and characteristics must the solution have?

We elicit and agree expectations towards the non-functional qualities of the solution.

It is vital that we elicit and agree on the non-functional requirements or qualities of our solution early in the process, as this will affect solution design and delivery. We should consider that these will change over time (e.g. expected throughput), so we should allow our system to evolve too – not only functionally, but also in relation to its non-functional characteristics.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Non-Functional Requirements Catalogue

(see above)

HYPOTHESES

Do we believe this will lead to success?

We define what we believe to be valuable 'experiments' to run.

Based on our understanding of desirability (what users need), viability (what will contribute to longer term business success) and feasibility (what the business can provide), we define a hypothesis (or potentially several) against which we will build 'experiments' to validate our thinking.

Please note that we use the term 'experiment' in a very wide sense: an experiment can be something we want to try out, or it can be a feature or broader solution which we actually implement (based on high confidence that it will be valuable) to test and validate during live operation.

At this stage we will have arrived at a list of hypotheses which we prioritise based on associated value (to user and business) and, as far as we can tell at this stage, cost, complexity and risk. We will update these priorities as we come to solution design – when feasibility and viability become more concrete.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Hypotheses

I WANT TO ARTICULATE WHAT AM I DOING AND WHY, AND KNOW WHEN I HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL

Whether we design and build a totally new product and have to validate whether there is a market at all, deliver a sound value proposition but need to be sure it was done in the right way, or simply want to explore potential opportunities, we are always – often subconsciously – working to a hypothesis. Articulating and formalising this in terms of expected outcomes streamlines our subsequent design and planning and makes sure we're always focusing on delivering value against strategic goals. Note that a hypothesis or related experiment can be in regards to the solution itself (value, usability) but also to delivery (to validate technical feasibility or an approach or process).

Decision Framework

(see below)

Prioritisation Model

I WANT TO PRIORITISE ITEMS SO THAT I KNOW THAT TO FOCUS ON

We use a range of prioritisation techniques, dependent on context, but generally find that simpler methods work at least as well as complex methods. Humans are good at comparison, but not great at absolute values. A range of biases also play into supposedly more "scientific" decision methods. As such, we advocate for being pragmatic: be data-informed, acknowledging your instinct and biases in parallel.

PRO TIPS

- This is one of the trickiest, yet most vital phases of an inception. Use a wide range and mix of tools, techniques, and let your colleagues lead sessions in their own area of expertise. Keep it relevant, focused and fresh.
- When trying to understand a domain, focus on people, process, systems, data and events.
- Be careful if presented with detailed specification of existing systems: user requirements move on, system design becomes out of date.
- Where requirements documents exist, use them for inception planning, then put them alongside the actual inception activities and compare the outputs you create with them. Highlight and discuss any mismatches. Until proven otherwise, assume that requirements documents created in advance are indicative at best.
- Discuss functional requirements early in the process. They always turn out to be more painful to define than expected.
- Ensure engagement with all relevant stakeholders in terms of their requirements, expectations and needs. Specifically engage with ‘secondary’ stakeholders such as brand, infosec, compliance, operations and support. Ignore these gatekeepers at your peril.

- Start discussions regarding expectations towards technology and infrastructure stack, as well as any other constraints and requirements that infosec or other regulatory departments may throw at you.

- Work lean and just-in-time: keep the analysis as light as possible.

- The trick, or rather the challenge, is to do enough. Too little, and risk increases; too much, and risk again increases (as there's greater certainty in unvalidated assumptions) and you will also be compromising lean values and will incur waste. Stay at epic level.

- Initially, think slightly bigger. Often the business will tell you to 'focus on the task at hand and don't worry about bigger concerns'. But it's these bigger concerns (for instance, the business going for an IPO), or what's happening just outside of your domain that will put things into perspective or flag important dependencies.

- Use tools and techniques that drive insight and provide actionable outcomes. Many old-school MBA tools don't do that. Use them in a way to drive a shared understanding or actionable outcomes.

4 The solution

DESIGN THE SOLUTION

Having aligned on the overall goals and identified expectations, requirements and constraints, we can now head into defining the solution. Depending on the type of initiative, it may be conceptual or quite concrete. It may be defined in terms of concrete features and functions, actions for change, or defined as 'experiments' to explore and validate. Ultimately, we're seeking to define the concrete things we need to do to achieve the given goals in the most reliable way.

Dependent on initiative, the different types of areas, business architecture, product and user experience, technology and infrastructure will differ in focus.

If time allows, user research and other prototyping / technical exploratory activities could be built in to de-risk and validate thinking at this early stage.

At the end of this phase, you will want to know what the solution would look like to users, but also what's 'under the hood'.

Why

In this phase we define the most appropriate solution option, taking into account desirability, feasibility and viability.

We lay the groundwork for the feature roadmap, delivery plan and subsequent delivery.

What good looks like

We want to devise a solution with sufficient detail so that we can demonstrate and assess its value (desirability) and feasibility, and conduct subsequent planning for implementation and viability assessment. This will often mean staying with Epics and indicative user experience or service design for the time being.

Activities

FEATURES

What features will the solution have?

We specify the overall shape of the solution (usually top-level features and functions) in light of the target user experience. At this early stage we keep this at Epic level, using mock-ups rather than detailed designs.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Epic Level Requirements Catalogue or Backlog / Requirements Hierarchy

(see above)

Storymap

I WANT TO STRUCTURE EPICS, STORIES OR FEATURES SO THAT I CAN EASILY DELIVER AN END TO END SOLUTION

Story Maps are our default tool to elicit and visualise requirements at both an overview and detailed level. They are user-centric, goals-focused, end-to-end, and provide a means to align requirements with the business roadmap, objectives and scope.

They also help us slice and prioritise a large solution into manageable parts (see below).

Wireframes / Screen Mockups

I WANT TO VISUALISE WHAT THE SOLUTION WILL LOOK LIKE AND HOW IT WILL FUNCTION

Screen mockups or wireframes (at various levels of fidelity) are great tools to illustrate a solution, be this to stimulate ideas, elicit or validate requirements or communicate a solution approach. Wireframes also allow us to get more accurate estimates, as they illustrate complexity. Keep in mind that at this stage we are only aiming to bring things to life, rather than providing a development-ready 'specification'.

User Journeys

(see above)

User Research

(see above)

Experience Map

(see above)

Service Blueprint

(see above)

TOP LEVEL END-TO-END DESIGN

What the solution will look like and how it will be realised

We identify solution options and specify and 'design' the solution at top level, from user, business and technical perspectives (covering experience, service design, architecture and infrastructure).

At this stage we may refine wireframes, create visual designs, draft architecture, agree on the tech stack, define the infrastructure and the path to production, as well as define operational and support capabilities. It's very important that we provide a design that works across the entire business and for all stakeholders.

'Working for all stakeholders' doesn't mean there won't be any changes on the part of stakeholders or their teams: but rather that we will work together to codesign the changes needed to work for the business as a whole.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Epic Level Requirements Catalogue or Backlog / Requirements Hierarchy

(see above)

Storymap

(see above)

Wireframes / Screen Mockups

(see above)

User Journeys

(see above)

User Research

(see above)

Proof of Concept / Prototype / Steel Thread

I WANT TO EXPLORE THE SOLUTION. WILL THIS WORK?

Time allowing, we may decide to explore certain concepts or aspects by building more or less detailed / production-ready 'things'. As a part of an inception, this is mostly for the purposes of de-risking and/or validation from a user experience or technical perspective. In some cases, the things we build will be thrown away; in others this will be a valid starting point for the productionised product.

Technology Stack

I WANT TO DEFINE THE TECHNOLOGIES WE WILL BE USING

We explore and agree on technology stack quite early in the process. A good stack is based on solid criteria, so that during

development a decision framework can be used to inform the best technology choices. A good stack recognises business needs, capabilities and solution-fit, and provides a balance of flexibility and consistency. A tech radar can be an effective way to represent this.

Architecture Outline

(see above)

Infrastructure Outline

I WANT TO UNDERSTAND AND DEFINE THE INFRASTRUCTURE THAT WILL SUPPORT MY SOLUTION

An exploration and early agreement on top level infrastructure and related tooling. This will cover classic infrastructure concerns such as hosting, but must also address the path to production and related tooling (see below).

Path To Production Outline

I WANT TO DEFINE HOW CODE IS DEVELOPED, DEPLOYED AND RELEASED INTO PRODUCTION

We explore and agree on how code gets developed, tested, deployed and released in a controlled and repeatable manner. It's important that we consider all relevant stakeholders, from the development team to system administration, operations and regulatory compliance, etc.

BPMN / Value Stream Mapping

(see above)

Decision Framework

(see below)

Non-Functional Requirements Catalogue

(see above)

Technical Requirements Catalogue

(see above)

Experience Map

(see above)

Service Blueprint

(see above)

SOLUTION OPTION(S)

Which solution option will we go with?

Based on desirability (value), feasibility (context) and viability (constraints and business goals) we choose the most appropriate solution option.

Either the solution was defined before the inception, or defining the solution is a goal of the inception. In the former case we will want to validate the solution (and flush it out in more detail). For the latter, we need to determine the most appropriate solution design and how to deliver this. Note that a final decision may not be possible until much later, when we have an idea of not only value but also cost.

Factors impacting this decision include device (desktop vs mobile), hosting (AWS vs Azure) or delivery choices (build, lease, buy).

The choice is to be made in context of objectives, business capabilities, constraints and total cost of ownership.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Wardley Map

BUILD, LEASE OR BUY?

The Wardley Map is a strategic decision-making tool that identifies business capabilities as part of the overall value chain, and maps them against industry maturity. Generally speaking we want to build what is our competitive advantage; own (or possibly lease) what is mission critical; and outsource what is a commodity. Of course there may be other factors that may influence our approach (likely financial or political).

Weighted Scorecard

WHICH OPTION FITS BEST?

By defining a number of criteria or dimensions, weighting them and then ranking each option, we can compare options with each other and choose 'best fit'.

Radar Chart

WHICH OPTION FITS BEST?

By defining a number of criteria, possibly defining an ideal 'target' shape, and then scoring every option against these characteristics, we can use radar charts to help us find a best fit.

Decision Framework

(see below)

Total Cost of Ownership

IS THIS A GOOD OPTION?

Total Cost of Ownership looks at overall cost of a product or service from design through to implementation, use and decommissioning. It's a valuable tool, not only for number crunching but also to identify the more subtle areas of cost and effort around elements in an organisational supply chain.

Experience Map

(see above)

Service Blueprint

(see above)

SOLUTION SLICES AND FEATURE PRIORITISATION

What will we do first?

Based on business goals, milestones, roadmap and dependencies, we identify 'release' goals, and which features and capabilities are in each release.

Dependent on the type of initiative, we may have to break down an existing system into manageable parts, divide target scope in a meaningful way, or simply prioritise desirable features.

When doing so we need to recognise value, cost, constraints, 'fit' and risks. We may find that the subsequent estimation exercise will require us to revisit and refine our earlier prioritisation.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Hypotheses
(see above)

Epic Level Requirements Catalogue / Backlog / Requirements Hierarchy
(see above)

Storymap
(see above)

Total Cost of Ownership
(see above)

Solution Slicing
I NEED TO BREAK A BIG, COMPLEX 'THING' INTO MANAGEABLE PARTS

We apply solution slicing as a technique to slice an existing solution into parts, so that they can be decoupled and treated (analysed and or delivered) individually.

MVP / First Iteration Scope
WHAT IS THE MINIMUM WE CAN DO?

At this stage, we not only want to identify what we are doing (and the priority of items) in isolation, but also in the context of a related group of features that we can deliver as a release. This can focus on the very first release (also see Steel Thread below) and/or a larger, first market-ready release (MVP, together with future slices at less granularity). All of this can result nicely from Storymaps.

Radar Chart
(see above)

Prioritisation Model
(see above)

PRO TIPS

- Keep solution design light. You are still not building the thing just yet. Use these activities to explore, clarify, illustrate and build trust.

- Consider setting up decision-making framework(s) to help make decisions on matters related to scope and technology choices.

- Avoid committing, keep options open: work towards a culture of making agreements based on what is known now, with the option to change at a later stage as further insights come to light or conditions change.

- While collaboration and joint application design is the ideal, we may also consider diverging into specialist sub-groups before converging and aligning the whole team afterwards. This can allow us to focus efforts, keep cognitive effort to a minimum and run activities in parallel.

- Continue to include users and a wide range of stakeholders in these activities. Ensure a balanced multi-disciplinary group. This prevents the business from estimating on behalf of technology, or technology prescribing features.

Plan

PLAN HOW TO DELIVER

Having developed an understanding of what we will have to do, we now need to determine how we will go about delivering this.

As part of this, we will be looking at ways of working and governance, but also creating estimates and a plan to drive delivery – often to provide cost and timings to a client in the form of a statement of work.

While this playbook will naturally seem linear, the items in this chapter should not be seen as sequential, but rather parallel / iterative. Ways of working, team shape and plan are intrinsically linked and thus will influence each other.

Why

Knowing what to deliver is all fine and good, but delivering well is just as important. By defining ways of working and having a plan and delivery approach, we are not only 'doing the right thing' - we are doing it 'in the right way'.

Another consideration: stakeholders will need some indication of 'what, when and how much' in order to make a decision on whether and how to proceed.

What good looks like

The goal is to setup solid foundations to decide on whether to proceed, and how to kick off delivery in the best possible way.

We expect many of the items defined here to change over time. However, by having an agreed starting point we can go about subsequent change in a controlled and directed manner.

Activities

VALUES

What values should we adopt?

We identify values (both ours as the supplier, and the client's) and assess fit (and what changes should be made, if feasible). These will shape our ways of working, or, in some cases determine whether we believe we can be successful at all.

Expect to make changes and amendments to ways of working or the wider engagement as you start collaborating and 'true' values come to light, or the context changes.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Affinity Map
(see above)

WAYS OF WORKING AND GOVERNANCE

How will we work?

We define the working practices, principles and tools we will be using that are most suitable for this specific initiative, based on the type of opportunity, capabilities, values and constraints.

We consider the overall process (from ideation to go-to-market, operation and decommissioning) as well as the more nitty gritty details of day-to-day work:

- Iterative vs linear methodologies
- Continuous delivery
- Colocation vs distributed teams
- Collaboration and communication
- Ceremonies and delivery cadence
- Project funding
- Governance
- Quality assurance, regulatory concerns etc

We generally keep this relatively light (in our experience, more complex models tend to be promptly ignored the moment delivery starts). We focus on facilitating day-to-day delivery, clear decision making and a clear escalation paths.

Expect ways of working to initially be a 'best laid plan', with a view to adapt these as the context and team evolves. Ensure that as you evolve you are still set up for success.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Team Charter

I WANT TO KNOW HOW WE WORK TOGETHER

We use lightweight team charters to remind ourselves of the standards and principles we agree to work towards. We use these as a baseline against which we review the team health, optimise our 'performance', and also use these when onboarding people.

Note that a Team Charter is not a training or coaching manual. It simply outlines principles and constraints, as well as key ceremonies.

RACI

I WANT TO KNOW WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT

A RACI can help a team initially define boundaries between roles. If applied in a lightweight fashion it can be used to facilitate interactions by clearly outlining responsibilities.

While RACI matrices are often a bureaucratic overhead, the insights gained during their initial creation can be of benefit.

Stakeholder Onion or Stakeholder Matrix

(see above)

Decision Framework

I WANT TO MAKE DECISIONS IN THE MOST OBJECTIVE AND CONSISTENT WAY

Decision-Making Frameworks are a way to formalise the criteria by which decisions are made, and ensure these are made with strategic goals and outcomes in mind.

We use them for all aspects of decisions, whether they relate to investment, feature design, prioritisation or technology choices.

Do note that such models do not take into account the nuanced contextual factors that are sometimes at play. We need to be careful not to make bad choices by applying inappropriate models.

Project Sliders

(see above)

RISKS, ASSUMPTIONS, DEPENDENCIES

Are we in control of things that will trip us up?

We review risks, assumptions and dependencies and put mitigation strategies in place.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Assumptions Log, Risk Log, Issue / Decisions Log

I WANT TO MAKE SURE WE ARE ALL AWARE, ALL ON THE SAME PAGE AND ARE READY TO MANAGE OUTSTANDING CONCERNS

We find that key failure points of projects are often down to misalignment and unmanaged risks. Documenting assumptions, decisions made, issues to be resolved and risks allows us to identify, communicate and manage these items in a controlled manner from day one.

While ultimately we hold these artefacts in an easy to share / collaborative digital format, during workshops we reserve white-board space for these. They are constantly updated as fresh information arises.

It's vital to recognise that we need to start populating these artefacts on day one, and continue to add / update / manage them throughout the entire initiative (i.e. not just the inception).

Dependency Mesh

(see above)

ESTIMATE

What is the effort to bring each deliverable into the hands of our users?

We estimate each deliverable in terms of effort. This serves as an input into subsequent ROI-based (re)prioritisation exercises, solution option choices, planning and roadmapping activities.

There is a lot to be said about the right and wrong way to estimate – enough to fill another (play)book.

The most important thing to appreciate and communicate is that estimates provided during inception are indicative: they are sufficiently detailed to allow solid decision making but should be expected to be refined during delivery.

Our experience has also shown that neither longer upfront planning nor more granular estimation increase estimation accuracy (in fact, they often do the opposite). Instead, we openly recognise the level of level of uncertainty we are subject to, and factor it into our estimates. For example, early planning stages tend to come with more uncertainty than later planning stages; greenfield projects tend to come with more uncertainty (particularly when the team, concept, context and domain are totally new to everyone) than brownfield projects (though brownfield projects may come with more dependency-related risks).

As our project progresses and we gain more insights, we tend to refine our estimates. This ensures that we have more certainty about when and how we will deliver imminent work, while having a hazier understanding of how we'll do this for work much further in the future.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Backlog
(see above)

Estimation
I want to know how much effort individual deliverables require.

TEAM SHAPE

What is the most appropriate team shape for delivery?

We define (options for) team size, composition and distribution which feed into the various planning scenarios.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Resourcing Sheet

I WANT TO KNOW WHAT MY TEAM WILL LOOK LIKE

A document outlining team shape, i.e composition in terms of roles and numbers and how, over time the team will 'ramp up'.

Rate Rard

I WANT TO KNOW HOW MUCH WE CHARGE FOR OUR SPECIALISTS

A document outlinig tealent cost, which, together with the resourcing sheet will allow cost estimation. the team will support costing.

DELIVERY PLAN AND ROADMAP

How long will it take and when do I get what?

As well as potential team shapes we create a feature / delivery roadmap(s) and plan(s), taking into account the chosen solution, prioritisation (now considering value and cost), risk and dependencies.

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Product / Feature / Delivery Roadmap

I WANT TO KNOW BY WHEN I CAN EXPECT EACH OUTCOME, FEATURE OR DELIVERABLE

We are big fans of roadmaps (as opposed to plans). Roadmaps are outcome and value focused, and give stakeholders what they need: an indication on how we get to where they want to be. There's a focus on when value is to be delivered, in a visual format that is easy to update and digest.

Individual teams can then take this roadmap and formulate 'tactical' plans to structure their own team profile and delivery approach.

Delivery Plan

I WANT TO KNOW WHEN I NEED TO DO WHAT

We focus on value-based delivery rather than tracking work. For this reason we prefer roadmaps to outline and track the overall 'plan' and progress, and only use plans as a tactical means to tightly control individual aspects of delivery (as and when required).

This reduces overheads and allows us to create plans that have at least some chance of remaining stable and helpful, rather than being a document that simply shows that things change all the time.

RECOMMENDATION

What is the best way forward?

Based on the opportunity and the context we've learned during the inception, we propose a way to proceed. This is the culmination of all the work that was done to date, and in many cases summarises the functional and technical solution, and the delivery approach, together with some kind of rationale or justification. It may also be a recommendation to pivot to a discovery (especially in cases of a curtailed inception) or to not proceed.

If we have run our inception well, we will have been sufficiently close to all decision-makers – so this recommendation should not come as a surprise. In many cases, we provide it in the form of a playback; in others, more formal feedback may be required. This is often then used as input into a business case or board presentation.

NEXT STEPS

I want to know what to do next.

We define and communicate immediate next steps. Remember, right after the inception we 'Wrap-up' and collectively decide whether to proceed with the initiative (or not).

RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Statement of Work

WHAT AM I PROMISED?

We create Statements of Work as contractual documents between supplier and client, once both parties have agreed how they want to proceed with delivery of the solution. The various design and planning outputs of the inception form the inputs into such documents.

PRO TIPS

- Maintain and communicate agility as a concept: inception outcomes are based on knowledge available at that point in time, but scope, solution design, plans and estimates will change as more information comes to light during delivery.
- This is not a shortfall of the inception process; assuming that such change can be controlled or made more definitive is a fallacy.
- We find that aligning values and beneficial ways of working is one of the key success factors for delivery. Be cautious if values or ways of working conflict in the early stages, and make an honest assessment of whether the gap and misalignment can ever be bridged.
- Value alignment needs to be constantly monitored and worked on. Especially as it's only once we really start collaborating that true values will surface.
- Avoid overly heavy governance models. A massive RACI matrix or team structure can be an indicator of this. While governance is important, it must facilitate, guide and ensure consistency in critical areas without hampering teams' autonomy.
- Another key success factor is managing risk and dependencies, closely and continuously. In fact, much of an inception is about mitigating risks. Be aware that logs alone do nothing– it's how you use them to manage and action items in practice that makes the difference.
- As the initiative proceeds, expect changes to many things you may have taken for granted. That's fine, as long as those changes do not go against the original vision and goals (without subsequent realignment having happened).

Plan an inception – Deep Dive

PLANNING A SUCCESSFUL INCEPTION

In this chapter we will provide learnings, insights and guidance on how to plan a successful inception: who to involve, the ideal length of an inception, and the most beneficial schedule to use.

The inception team

An inception team must be a multi-disciplinary team that generally consists of 3 groups:

- inception core team who leads the inception
- inception team who closely contribute and make decisions
- wider stakeholders who provide input and are taken along for buy-in

At the minimum, your team will need representatives from delivery, product and technology to cover the various areas an inception touches on. The core team must be experienced in their field and in running inceptions!

This section on Types of inceptions provides examples of actual team shapes.

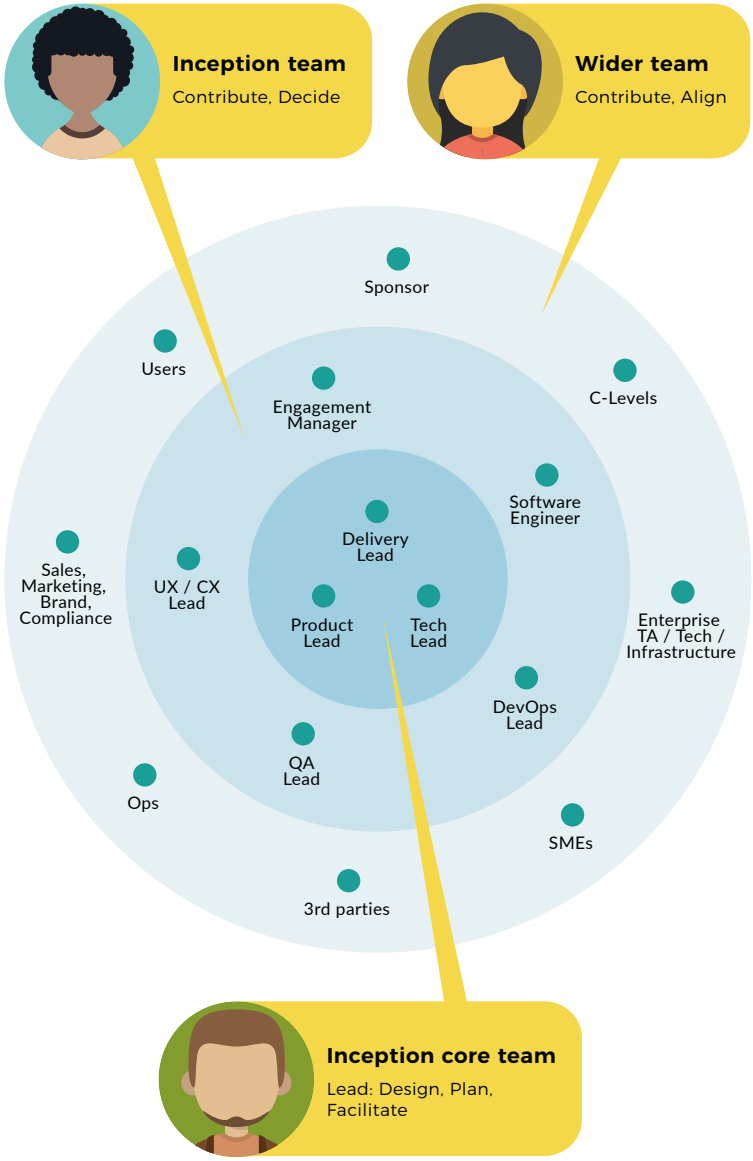
The team shape looks slightly different for an in-house vs. client-supplier scenario where the supplier runs the inception:

INTERNAL

In this situation the entire inception team are from one organisation which usually allows for a leaner team shape.

CLIENT - SUPPLIER

Where a supplier runs the inception we generally find that certain roles in the inception team are either taken or doubled-up with both supplier and client counterparts. To ensure robust outcomes from the inception, the core team should always be from the supplier, even if delivery, product or technical roles are added by the client.



Core and inception teams

At the minimum, your team will need representatives from delivery, product and technology to cover the various areas an inception touches on. In the world of consulting we live in, these are usually provided by the **supplier**.

Expect the average inception to require the following roles:

- **Engagement manager**
  Focus: the overall engagement, risks and constraints.
- **Delivery Lead**
  Focus: governance, dependencies, ways of working.
- **Product Lead / Business Analyst**
  Focus: objectives, requirements, business processes and capabilities.
- **UX / CX Designer, Researcher**
  Focus: bringing in the voice of the users.
- **Tech Lead / Software Engineer**
  Focus: technical capabilities, constraints and related technical and non-functional requirements.
- **DevOps Lead**
  Focus: operational capabilities, constraints and infrastructure requirements, and non-functional requirements.
- **QA**
  Focus: quality assurance approach and regulatory requirements.
- **Misc specialists**
  Focus: as required by initiative (e.g. data science).

How large should the team be?

Generally one representative per role, although we have run inceptions where a single individual covered multiple roles. During bigger inceptions, we've often had multiple individuals cover a discipline (usually for BA/Product, Dev or DevOps). Our Types of inceptions shows some examples.

Who is involved in planning an inception?

We tend to have at least one seasoned 'inceptionist' – in fact, often a Delivery Lead + Business Analyst pair. They facilitate planning by taking inputs from all other disciplines. Ideally, the entire team is involved in planning the inception.

Who is involved in running an inception?

Running an inception is the responsibility of the entire team, with a dedicated facilitators for each activity. We find that organically often one individual becomes the 'overall' leader or 'MC'. This is often a delivery lead or product consultant, but it can be anyone, really, if they have experience in running inceptions and client engagements.

It's particularly important that this person is able to facilitate and be clear about when they're facilitating vs contributing. As a facilitator, it is crucial to not bring in bias, as this erodes the trust the attendees will have on the impartiality of the facilitation. All voices should be equal.

Facilitators can of course contribute but only when they are explicit about stepping out of their facilitation role, and into the role of a contributor. This is one of the most commonly overlooked aspects of successful inceptions, which can erode trust from a very early point in an engagement.

By default, we assume that the entire team will be present in all sessions. However, as an inception progresses and discussions become more focused and in-depth there can be a benefit in splitting into dedicated specialist teams, as long as we keep sharing relevant knowledge across teams.

Wider team

In addition to the core and inception teams we must consider the following roles (in a client-supplier scenario these are provided by the client)

- **Senior Decision-Maker / Sponsor**
  Focus: makes the final calls – their necks are on the line, they are interested in the ultimate outcome, and they pay for it all!

- **Project Management / Project Support**
  Focus: providing information about delivery capabilities, ways of working, dependent initiatives and governance requirements. Are interested in monitoring and controlling change in the initiative.

- **Product (Sales / Marketing / Product)**
  Focus: own the deliverables and need to deliver value. Understand the problem domain and will make feature specific decisions.

- **Operations**
  Focus: will operate the product and have related requirements. Know the existing domain.

- **Technology (Architects / Software Engineers)**
  Focus: knowledge of client's technical capabilities. Interested in appropriate solution from technical perspective. Will provide constraints and requirements and knowledge of existing and dependent systems.

- **Infrastructure / Sys Admins / DevOps**
  Focus: knowledge of infrastructure capabilities and current domain. Interested in appropriate solution from an infrastructure and operability perspective.

- **Brand / Compliance**
  Focus: provide requirements specific to their domain.

- **Misc. Subject Matter Experts**
  Focus: providing information and/or controlling resources in their area of concern.

- **Users**
  Focus: Will changes according to the initiative, but these are the people we'll develop the solution for. Ultimately it must be of value to them. The most important group of all, however they're often only represented via proxy. Should include internal users (e.g. support) as well as external users (e.g. paying customers).

What you need from them

- **Availability**
  We ask our clients to support scheduling and making their people available.

- **Interest and attention**
  Inceptions work best when participants are interested and focused. Good planning and communication ensures they have the mind-space to participate, understand why they are participating, what is expected of them and what value they will derive from this exercise.

- **Knowledge and preparation**
  We share the agenda and expected outcomes of each session prior to the inception, so that expectations of participants can be managed and they can bring or refer to other participants as necessary. We communicate what preparation we expect them to do, but are mindful that stakeholders may be busy and that siloed preparation may not provide much value in any case. Generally, we avoid too much upfront preparation as it tends to be biased.

Who attends which sessions?

- By default we opt for a wide range of participants, especially in the early stages, but balance this with more focused activities (often run in parallel) as the inception progresses and we get more granular. We support this with a mix of all-hands sessions vs. smaller break-outs.

- When doing so, we are mindful to avoid working in silos: we want cross-pollination and information sharing to occur between departments and disciplines as much as possible.

Creating the Schedule

We take the following into consideration when scheduling an inception:

How long is an inception?

The length of an inception largely depends on the type and complexity of its related initiative. We've run inceptions that took just half a day (for new features) and some that took six weeks (to support the building of a business case for a new product line).

Our average, though, two weeks is sufficient for a substantial multi-million pound, 12+months initiative. We often add a further week (elapsed time) to plan the inception and a further two weeks to process the outputs of the inception.

How long are individual steps and activities?

Again, the answer is that it depends. Some activities are one-offs, while others require multiple rounds of discussion and analysis before sufficient understanding or consensus is reached.

As an example, for a sizeable product such as a greenfield supply chain tool, expect multiple story-mapping sessions to outline scope, and multiple discussions to agree the tech stack.

What does a 'good' schedule look like?

The inception schedule is a carefully constructed flow of activities that facilitate analysis and drive insight and outcomes. While the activities are specific to each inception, they happen within a fairly consistent framework. Feel free to check out this sample inception schedule.

A good schedule is characterised by:

CLEARLY DEFINED OUTCOMES

We define clear goals and outcomes for the overall inception and each activity and session.

CLEAR NARRATIVE

We structure the inception agenda and schedule along a clear narrative that links the various activities towards delivery of the ultimate outcome.

APPROPRIATE CADENCE

We opt for running all activities of an inception consecutively and as close to a full-time exercise as possible. This is especially the case for large or complex initiatives. In well known or less risky situations we have run two days' worth of inception activities over a week.

ITERATIVE APPROACH

Individual activities may be one-offs or require multiple sessions (to look at the problem from multiple perspectives, allow for different participants to attend, or to allow sufficient time to analyse, process and validate).

CATERING FOR PARTICIPANT AVAILABILITY

We always expect to have to tailor our schedule to match (client) participant availability.

ALLOWING FOR SLACK

Things usually take longer than expected. We always build some slack into our schedule to allow for post-processing, ad-hoc changes, and additional sessions that will be required as we explore and get to know the problem domain.

CLEARLY ASSIGNED ROLES

The best outcomes are achieved when participants understand what is expected from them, and what they can expect from both the overarching inception as well as the individual activities and sessions. This includes aspects such as who facilitates, who makes decisions and who contributes subject matter expertise.

BY-IN AND ALIGNMENT ACROSS ALL PARTIES

Ultimately we need to ensure that we can be successful in achieving the desired outcomes. We achieve this by aligning all stakeholders across client and supplier, and all relevant disciplines on what they need to bring to the table.

Frame, Top and Tail

The activities we run during an inception fall into two groups: sessions during which we run the activities that help us deliver the expected outcomes, and the **Frame, Top and Tail** activities. These are the supporting activities that facilitate, structure and optimise our inception. The inception schedule in Plan an inception illustrates these, and we'll discuss each type below in more detail:

Set-up, Standup & Prep

We like being well prepared. Plus, no matter what we do, there will always be cases where we'll just have to wing it – so let's not add to them.

Every day, before you enter the room, you will want to briefly regroup with your team (and maybe close clients) to make sure you're all set for the day ahead by being aligned on what you want to achieve and how you will run each session.

In our experience, setting up on the first day is always a bit different. We may not know the location, we may have to go through lengthy check-in procedures and getting onto Wifi can occasionally be less than straightforward.

Kick off

With the inception kick off, we begin our inception. It's our chance to meet and greet and set the scene. In some respects this is the single most important meeting. We discussed this further in Design an inception.

Recap

Where you are dealing with a large number of (changing) participants, or clients that are new to agile practices or inceptions, consider holding regular recap sessions where you re-iterate principles, progress and goals to focus the team and provide reassurance.

Sessions

This is where the magic happens. We run the various activities and sessions that make up our inception, following the inception schedule. Of course, there are best practices we tend to follow, which are outlined in the facilitators' cheat sheet and contributors' cheat sheet.

Day job catch up

We need to be considerate of inception attendees and respect that most will have day jobs. It can be helpful to cater for daily slots for clients (in particular) to catch up on urgent work.

Retros and Lessons Learned

We usually run retrospectives jointly with some of our closer clients. These are an opportunity to reflect on how things are progressing in terms of our objectives, and cultural fit. Are we learning what we need to? Have we missed something big? Is progress looking good? Is everyone engaged? Do people see the value? What concerns do we need to address? What insights have come to light? We use these questions (and more!) to adjust our approach as we go along.

We run retros at end of each day, week and inception. The final retrospective is run with our clients to get their views on how the inception went. We use this to improve the engagement, as well as future inceptions throughout our network.

End of day review / post processing

This is an opportunity for the core team to reflect, discuss learnings, concerns, needs to shift or pivot, add / remove sessions, adjust methodology, approach and engagement techniques. In our experience, inceptions frequently require adjustments to cater for client preferences, availability and culture.

We also recognise that we must allow for some time to write up and process learnings from the day. This is particularly important to drive upcoming sessions, and stay abreast of the documentation needed. Be very careful not to run eight hours of workshops and then post-process for another eight hours. Trust me, we've done it, and it's not pretty. Six hours of actual workshops in a single day is about right as a maximum).

Playback

The inception playback is the final presentation of our findings to our clients. We start with the brief and our agreed inception goals, and present our insights, findings and recommendations. We need to be sure we are answering the brief well.

In the case of long or complex inceptions we may want to run a demo or playback session to demonstrate status and progress. We usually do this as the last session of the week.

Also, don't forget to create an deliverable to leave with participants. This could be a presentation deck or some other form of artefact so that our clients can peruse, refer-back to and share the inception outcomes.

PRO TIPS

- Be well prepared, but expect to have to adapt – you never know what obstacles you may face.

- Use your inception presentation deck to not only drive the inception but also for interim playbacks, by turning it into a diary. This is an efficient way to provide an overview of what has happened and the insights derived. However, your final deliverable may work better with a more considered, narrative-based structure.

- You'll all be working hard, but there is no point in driving yourselves to burn out. Allow for a maximum of six hours of workshops per day, and allow space to post-process, reflect and prepare further.

- Not all stakeholders (or even your colleagues) may be able to attend all sessions. Standups, recaps and playbacks help with this. This can add distraction, unease, and be outright counter-productive when decisions are questioned by those dipping in and out. Be prepared to handle this: by default we assume implicit consent by those absent, in line with Sociocracy 3.0 practices.

Closing thoughts

Closing thoughts

RIDING INTO THE SUNSET AND ALL THAT…

From personal experience, we know that inceptions are tough. Starting a new endeavour can be scary, draining and emotional. It can equally be a fun, high energy, exhilarating experience.

Either is possible, as inceptions are a nightmare when managed badly, but a massive opportunity for the client – and all participants – when done well.

This playbook is our way of sharing our hard-won experience with the wider community, to make all our work better and more enjoyable. We believe that experienced practitioners intuitively use these (and similar) tools and practises without needing the formal structures we've described in this playbook. And many will come up with their own, even better, ways of working.

Regardless, it's our sincere hope that this book supports you on your own path towards mastery.

We'd love to hear from anyone who has used this book, and find out what you've learnt, what worked well for you and what didn't.

We'd also love to receive contributions from the wider community.

Get in touch

We really hope you found this playbook useful. If you've used it to run an inception, or have feedback of any flavour, we'd love to hear from you.

WWW.PLAYBOOK.EE

Share thoughts, find updates, templates and other information or get in touch at www.equalexperts.com if you are interested in working with us.

We offer coaching and, of course, deliver initiatives with you, for your teams.

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