WEVO Guide to User Experience Research Methods

UX research Methods
for Valuable Insights

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User research is a crucial component of design strategy and product development. Without it, there is little evidence of whether a product is of high quality and value to users. Having data to support business decisions and design choices generates buy-in from all levels of the organization and ensures that resources will be optimized for the best outcome.

In this guide we explain user experience research, and dive into types of user research, showcasing the many methodologies for pulling qualitative and quantitative data from attitudinal and behavioral approaches.

What is User Experience Research

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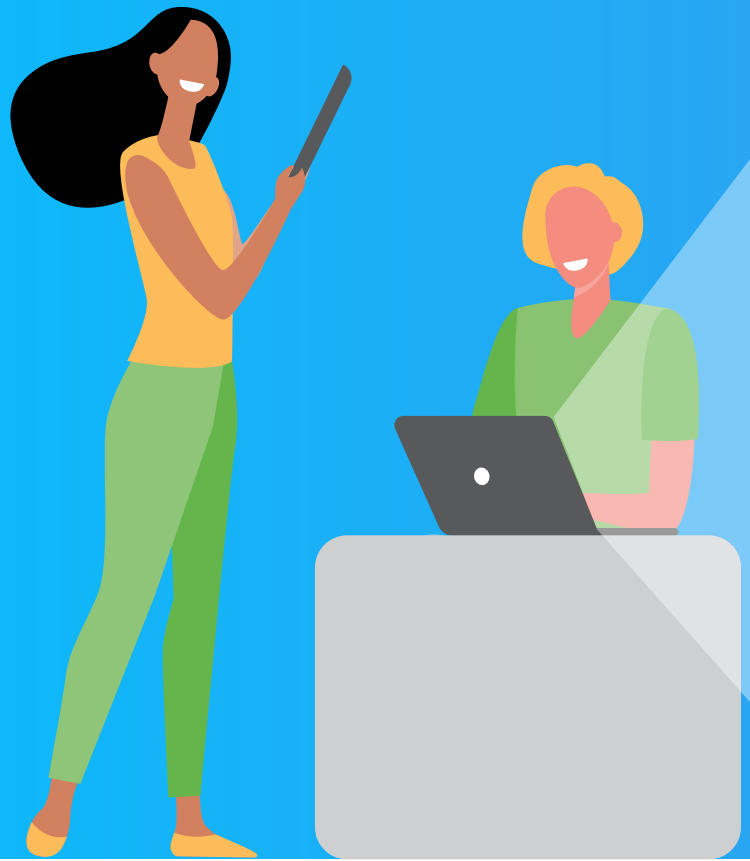

User experience research, often abbreviated to UX research, is the study of target users and their needs. The goal of this practice is to provide user insights to guide design processes and business decisions.

To identify difficulties, trends, and potential solutions, UX researchers use a variety of methods. User experience research uncovers valuable user insights that may be used to create new products or improve existing ones. User feedback is a highly valuable tool in every organization's arsenal to better prioritize decisions in product features or digital experiences.

Within user experience research, there are common methods researchers rely on to gather informative, accurate insights. Methods are selected based on the goals of the researchers, choosing testing types that will garner the most informative data for them to derive insights from. Let's explore the approaches user experience researchers take in gathering this vital user feedback.

Types of User Experience Research

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When conducting a study, UX researchers may ask participants questions, observe their behavior, and measure the results of their actions when completing a wide variety of tasks. All of these approaches gather information about the target group in relation to the factor(s) that the researchers want to measure. There are two overarching types of information that UX researchers gather: quantitative and qualitative.

The Power of Qualt: The combination of Quantitative and data that delivers the most accurate, reliable user insights.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Quantitative research involves collecting and analyzing numerical data, recognizing patterns, making predictions, and generalizing findings that pertain to a target audience or topic. The metrics gathered from quantitative research include error and success rates, time spent on a task, and number-based responses. Sometimes, the collection and organization of this data can be automated, since computers can handle numbers quite well on their own.

Qualitative research is more people-oriented and focuses on the "why" of user behaviors and opinions. User interviews and field studies are examples of qualitative UX research techniques that may be used to collect qualitative data through direct observation and study of participants. These strategies reveal people's motives, ideas, and attitudes and lead to a better understanding of the context behind their behavior.

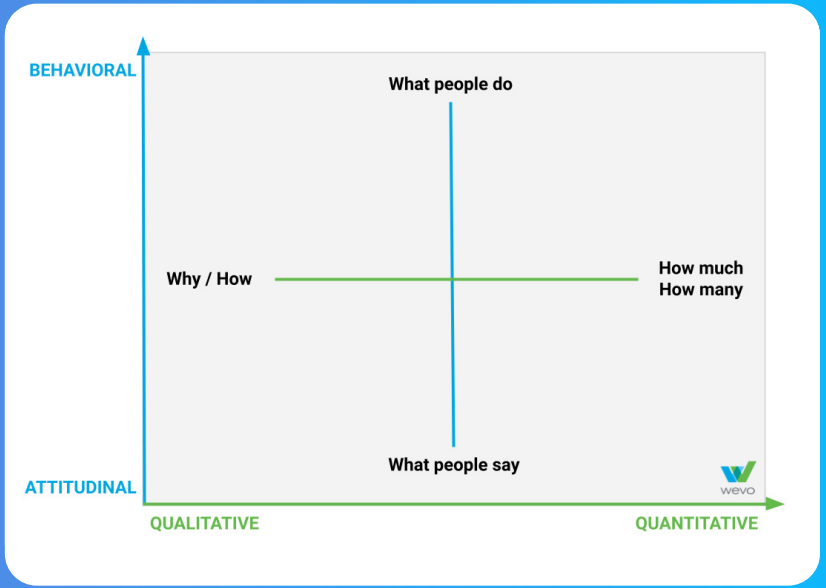
Quantitative research answers questions around how much, how many, and how often, whereas Qualitative research answers questions around why and how. **To get the full picture and the most useful insights for decision-making, it is imperative to gather and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data.**

Behavioral and Attitudinal Approaches

Another distinction among UX research methods is between behavioral and attitudinal studies. Behavioral studies aim to look at what people do, whereas attitudinal studies gather data on what people say. A person may have widely different responses in terms of what they say and what they actually do. A comprehensive research study can collect both types of information, but different questions or tasks may focus on one or the other.

If you know these four core definitions well, you're already well on your way to understanding the nuances and diversity of approaches to UX research. In the next section, we do a deeper dive into UX research methods and describe some common approaches in detail.

measure quantitative or qualitative data and whether they look at behavioral or attitudinal aspects of participant responses. It's rarely black and white, and many strategies incorporate a blend of all four, though often leaning more toward one direction (qual or quant, behavioral or attitudinal).



User Experience Research Method Quadrants

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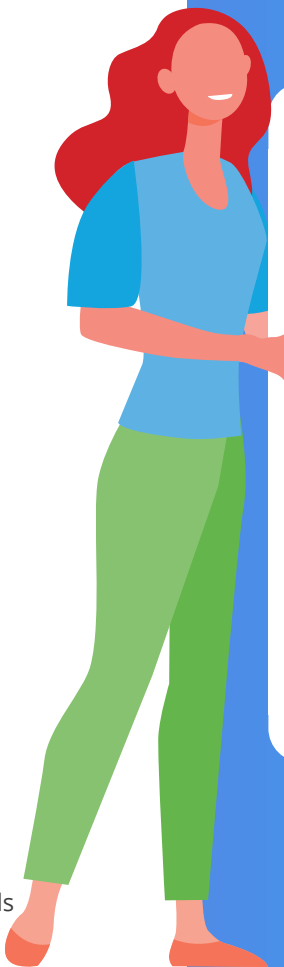
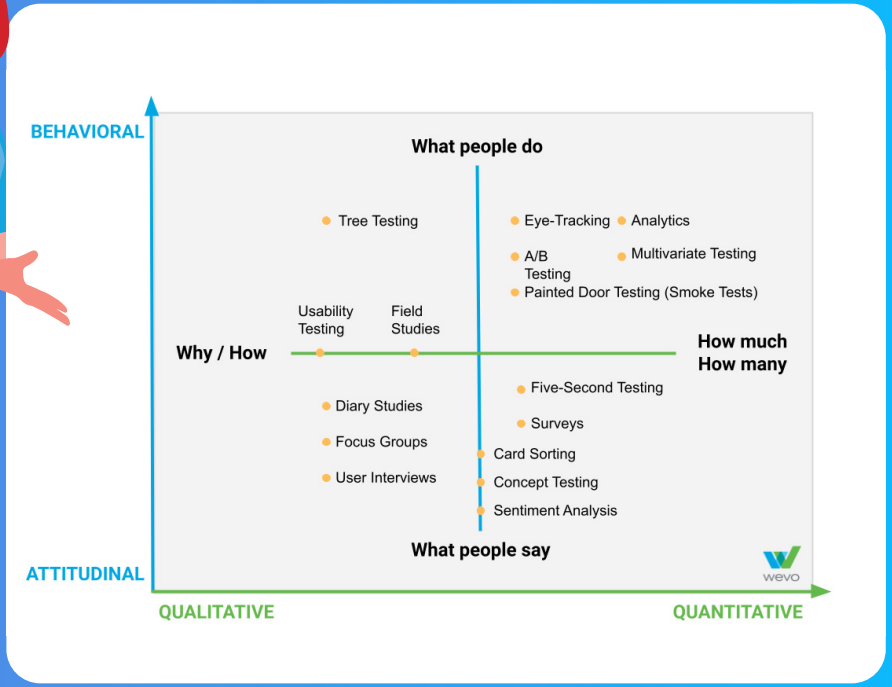
There are many different ways in which UX researchers can apply a focused lens on their human subjects, whether they want to find out their opinions on a set of options or give them a new product to test out. The strategies listed below are organized based on the above infographic, which shows where they fall in terms of the emphasis and type of data collected. Some are more intent than others.

These strategies fall everywhere on the spectrum, from heavily attitudinal or behavioral to a balanced blend of the two. Most strategies are either more quantitative or more qualitative, even though some methods do incorporate questions that measure both numbers and “why” explanations.





Qualitative + Attitudinal Methods

Starting in the bottom left quadrant of the chart, qualitative attitudinal methods look at the explanations behind people's attitudes toward a topic. They tend to be heavy on questions that ask participants to give an opinion or statement and gather data on the reasoning behind what they say. The data gathered using these methods can give great insight into the way people think, and people often enjoy participating in these studies. However, it is wise to take what people say with a grain of salt, as their responses can sometimes depend on their current mood or the kind of day they're having, and contain biases or misinformation.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a small group discussion on a specific topic that is facilitated by a moderator. The moderator poses scripted and follow-up questions and guides the discussion, and it's their job to make sure that the participants understand what is being asked of them. A focus group could last from 30 minutes to several hours depending on the complexity of the topic and the desired data.

User Interviews

User interviews are similar in format to a focus group, except that only one person is asked the questions at a time, instead of in a group setting. This approach gathers information about the user's ideas, beliefs, and opinions on a given topic. In this scenario, since each individual is interviewed separately, they are not influenced by the statements of others.

Diary Studies

A diary study gathers data from participants by asking them to record their thoughts about a certain activity or experience on a regular basis. The study may take place over the course of a few days to several months. Diaries can be a rich source of contextual information that give deep insights into what people think and why.

Qualitative + Behavioral Methods

Whereas qualitative attitudinal methods gather contextual and explanatory information about thoughts and opinions (what people say), qualitative behavioral methods gather the "why" data about what people actually do (not just what they say they would do.) Often with these studies, the maxim "actions speak louder than words" rings true. Observing and recording people's behaviors can be eye-opening for businesses seeking to understand their customer base. The success of these studies is highly dependent on the user's understanding of the task(s), so clear instructions are important. User error can skew the results in some cases.

Tree Testing

Also known as reverse card sorting, tree testing is a method in design to observe how well users can perform a task in a given environment. Most often, this method is used to test the usability and intuitiveness of a website or app design. Users are given a task and are asked to identify the name of the page in the site or app's organization that would allow them to complete that task (such as finding a piece of information.) Tree testing gives insight into how easy or difficult the proposed hierarchy for a site or app would be for the average user.

Borderline Between Qualitative Attitudinal and Behavioral

A few UX research methods reside somewhere between qualitative attitudinal and qualitative behavioral in terms of what kind of data they collect. These approaches to social science data collection look at the intersection between the “what” and the “why” of human behavior.

Usability Testing

In usability testing, participants interact with a website, app, or other product with the purpose of discovering how people think and feel about the product, and how easy it is for them to use. The participants are typically given a set of tasks to complete, which may be moderated (guided by a facilitator—good for giving participants a similar experience) or unmoderated (completed independently—useful for seeing how the product is perceived as if the participants were using it at home).

Usability testing can be conducted remotely or in person. Remote sessions are convenient and may attract more participants, but in-person sessions can sometimes collect more contextual data. Finally, there are two main styles of usability testing: explorative and comparative. An explorative test is conducted in the early stages of product development and involves allowing participants to give their initial feedback. Comparative tests are conducted toward the final stages of product development and look at a hard comparison between two different designs or products to determine which is preferred and why.

Field Studies

Most UX research takes place in an office or lab setting that is highly controlled. To get a more realistic environmental perspective, UX researchers conduct field studies that take place in the user’s direct context. These studies may involve observing participants using a product in their home, visiting a workplace or other group setting to conduct interviews and make observations, and interviewing people about the things they do in their everyday settings. UX researchers often use a combination of different methods to conduct field studies.

Quantitative + Behavioral Methods

Collecting numbers data about what people do is as important as making observations and soliciting detailed written or verbal responses. Quantitative behavioral methods are designed to gather figures about human behavioral patterns. This information comes almost completely without context, but it does give a hard number score to aid in decision-making processes.

A/B Testing

If you've ever been to the eye doctor to test your vision and been asked which of two lenses is clearer, then you're already familiar with A/B testing. It generally involved giving participants the choice of two options and asking which they prefer. The comparisons can be about anything, from which color they like best to which product looks easier to use. The options are then scored on a number point scale.

Multivariate Testing

Whereas A/B testing gathers information about single variable choices (color, font size, product shape, etc.), multivariate testing involves giving participants two choices that factor in several different variables. For example, they may be shown several variations of a packaging design and be asked to choose which they like best based on the font style, packaging color, and artwork. Multivariate tests help companies determine which variants collectively create the best possible design. They also provide more information than simple A/B testing and are more useful further on in the product development process.

Quantitative + Behavioral Methods (Continued)

Painted Door Tests (Smoke Tests)

In a painted door test, users are given a sort of “tease” for a new product, service, or business idea. The goal behind the painted door test is to soft-launch an idea without making it actually available in the marketplace (yet). A common way to conduct this test is by placing a call-to-action link on a website at the end of a customer experience pathway to see how many people click on it (meaning they would want to invest in the offer.)

Eye Tracking

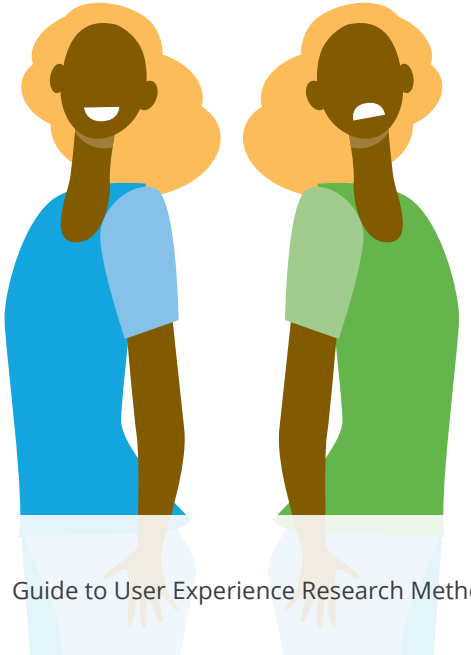
Eye tracking software looks at the patterns of eye movement on a website or app page. and determines what participants focus on as they scan the page. Data that this method collects includes which features of a page they look at and how much time is spent on each one. Eye tracking gives insights into what is most important to users, as well as which tasks take the most time to complete.

Analytics

Website analytics tools can give powerful data for decision-making and design. For example, UX researchers can look at website analytics to diagnose potential issues, determine why they are occurring, and generate solutions that lead to more desirable user behaviors. They may also use analytics to provide more objective data to validate data collected from qualitative studies like usability testing. Analytics can give hard numbers on everything from navigation to visual design to the technical functioning of a website.

Quantitative + Attitudinal Methods

Numbers data can also give insights into the “why” of human behaviors. Quantitative attitudinal methods collect figures about user opinions, ideas, and beliefs on a given topic. In these studies, UX researchers categorize the responses given and calculate their frequency.



Surveys

Surveys are a ubiquitous method of quantitative attitudinal data collection. They can take a wide variety of forms, from one-questions polls for website feedback to long, in-depth questionnaires that require an hour to complete. Questions on surveys can require a number-based response, or they may be in a multiple-choice format. UX researchers can then use survey analysis tools to tally up the number of responses on a question or category basis.

Five-Second Tests

First impressions matter, and the five-second test measures exactly that. Participants are shown an image, webpage, product design, or another visual element for five seconds and are asked a question about it afterward (typically yes/no or multiple-choice, in order to get a quantitative data point). The responses to these single-question tests are then gathered and counted to determine the most common opinions on the product.

Borderline Between Qualitative and Quantitative + Attitudinal

As qualitative and quantitative data and intrinsically linked, it's natural that some UX research methods would contribute data from both sides of the story. The methods described below shed light on both qualitative and quantitative attitudinal trends among users, giving both numbers-based, observational, and narrative data about why people think and do things in a particular way.

Card Sorting

Card sorting is a method that helps businesses develop and evaluate their websites. During a card sort, participants arrange topics into categories that make sense to them and give them names or labels that could be used in site navigation. To perform a card sort, UX researchers may use index cards, paper, or an online card-sorting software tool. This strategy gives insights into how users think about the content that will be presented on a website.

Concept Testing

Often applied in the discovery phase of product development, concept testing involves putting early-stage product ideas and design in front of participants to find out whether the development is on the right track. UX researchers may ask participants quantitative questions like how they would rate the product, as well as qualitative questions such as why they like or dislike it. This method helps businesses avoid getting too far in their process before realizing the product isn't ideal for the target audience.

Sentiment Analysis

A lot of buying decisions come down to how a product or service makes people feel. Sentiment analysis asks participants to offer feedback on their feelings about a given product or service. UX researchers will categorize responses into positive or negative categories, which can be used for both quantitative (how many positive or negative responses) as well as qualitative (the actual feelings represented) insights.

The Biggest Value of User Experience Research

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As a crucial component of product development and strategy, without user research there is little evidence of whether a product holds high value to users. Business decisions supported by data and design choices generated from insights ensures organizations are allocating resources for the best possible experience.

UX research can also help identify target audiences, including early adopters of a new product, which can contribute to business growth. Having the right tools for user research can help UX researchers gather and analyze data more efficiently.

While objective numeric data is often valued or relied upon more in the business world than subjective qualitative data, it is important to note that both types of data are needed to provide a complete picture of user experience. It is every company's best interest to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative research methods in their UX practices, something at WEVO we call Qualt.

Whereas quantitative data shows unobjectionable facts about user behavior, qualitative data provides key context, without which the human factors of consumer choices would be ignored.

Likewise, collecting data about both the "what" and the "why"—using both behavioral and attitudinal research methods—leads companies to choose the best "how" for delivering their products and services to customers.

Explore how brands are utilizing Qualt with WEVO.

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