

By Deborah Wyse

Coming to us from the software development industry, impact mapping aims to draw the straightest line possible from beginning to end of a successful project.

Impact Mapping: Chart Your Course to a Compelling Product

TO BEGIN, LET'S TAKE A BRIEF QUIZ.

As a design professional, I want to:

- Encourage customers/clients to participate in solution design.
- Use a single framework to create options and then prioritize.
- Help stakeholders with differing perspectives and expertise build a shared understanding of how features and functionality support business objectives.
- Maintain focus on validated learning and iterative delivery.
- Uncover and test assumptions sooner rather than later.
- Begin your design process with a discussion of “Why?” instead of a list of features.
- All of the above.

No matter how you answered this question, impact mapping is a tool that can help you achieve these objectives.

Developed by Gojko Adzic, a software delivery consultant and author of several books on the Agile project management methodology, impact mapping creates a visual framework to understand goals and expected outcomes and to facilitate collaborative decision-making. An impact mapping session convenes stakeholders with different perspectives and expertise—in business, for instance, or technology, or design. As they work together to create the impact map, participants communicate about the goal, the parties involved, the desired effects, and the deliverables, uncovering assumptions along the way. Once the map is complete, decision makers can use it to identify and focus on high-priority features, test assumptions, and prioritize iterations.

Impact map structure

An impact mapping exercise assembles a team of four to eight people, representing stakeholders with different perspectives and expertise, from designers to developers, business analysts, salespeople, and clients. Together, they create a visual hierarchy of the responses to the following four questions.

QUESTION 1 (GOALS): WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

This question is the foundation of the impact map. The response identifies the goal the product or project is trying to achieve. As new information becomes available over the course of the initiative, decision makers evaluate it within the context of the goal. Impact mapping is most effective when the goal satisfies most, if not all, of the following criteria:

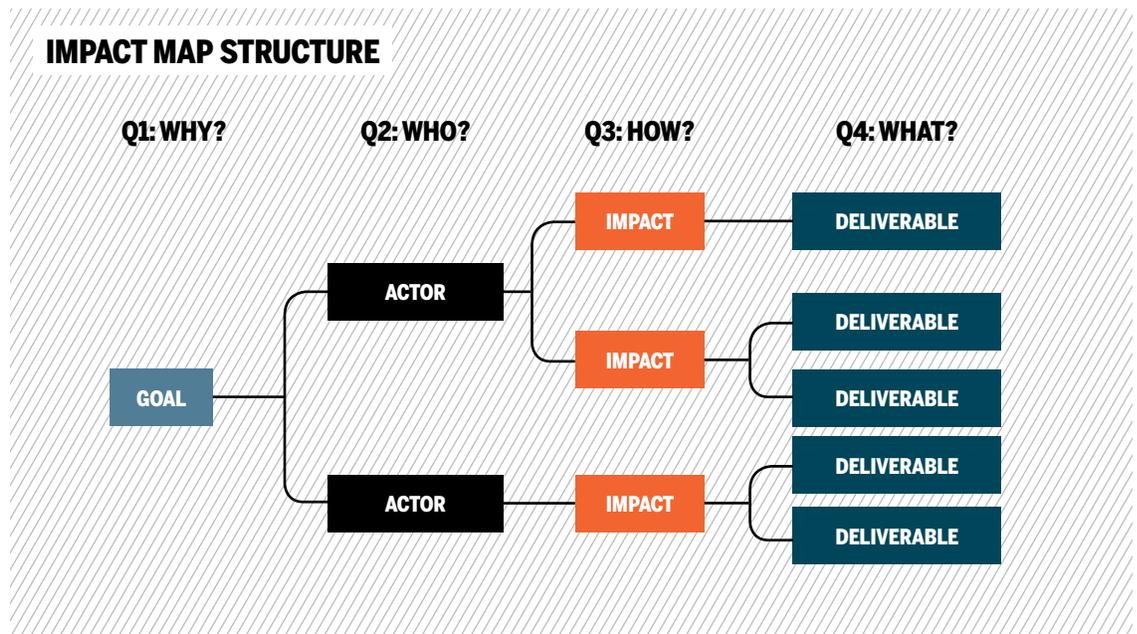
- Clearly describes what we want to do or achieve (specific)
- Includes a metric that can be used to determine goal progress and achievement (measurable)
- Reflects accurate assessment of available skills and resources (attainable)
- Is something to which we are willing to commit (realistic)
- Has a deadline (timely)

QUESTION 2 (ACTORS): WHO CAN HELP (OR NOT HELP) ACHIEVE OUR GOAL?

Responses to this question identify the actors—the individuals, user personas, roles, and groups that can have a significant positive or negative influence on achieving the goal. When defining actors, be as specific as possible. The actors may be individuals, but they may also be user personas, roles, or groups.

FIGURE 1

This illustrates how an agency and its startup client might use impact mapping to design a minimum viable product (MVP).



**QUESTION 3 (IMPACTS):
HOW WILL THE ACTORS HELP (OR OBSTRUCT)?**

Impacts can describe jobs that actors want to get done, or changes in actor behavior we assume will help achieve or obstruct the goal. The impact map’s second level identifies one or more impacts for each actor. It is important to select only the impacts that will have a significant effect on the goal. Many delivery plans and product requirements are essentially only a list of features, providing no context to explain their connection to the goal. Impacts provide that context.

**QUESTION 4 (DELIVERABLES):
WHAT ARE WE DOING?**

The impact map’s third level identifies features and activities that will support the desired positive impacts and mitigate undesired impacts. When defining the deliverables, keep in mind that they are options; not everything that you put on the map will become part of the final product. In an impact map, deliverables are high-level descriptions without a lot of detail. This level of the map will evolve as you receive new information, validate assumptions, and incorporate what you have learned after a delivery iteration. Once you confirm

that a deliverable supports a desired impact, you can break it down into user stories or use cases.

Creating an impact map

In his book *Impact Mapping*, Gojko Adzic presents two examples of impact maps, one for an online gaming platform and the second for a financial transaction processing system. For this article, I created a hypothetical example (Figure 1) to illustrate how an agency and its startup client might use impact mapping to design a minimum viable product (MVP).

Here’s the background: A startup company wants to monetize tool sharing by designing an easy-to-use, self-serve website to pilot in its city. There is already demonstrated interest in the website: Five hundred early adopters have purchased an introductory membership and are eagerly awaiting the release. The startup wants to build something quickly to take advantage of this community interest and to have something it can use in a pitch for additional funding. The company would like our agency’s help to build the MVP that will enable it to serve the introductory members and demonstrate usage.

To kick off the project, we invite the client to create an impact map, together with the leads from

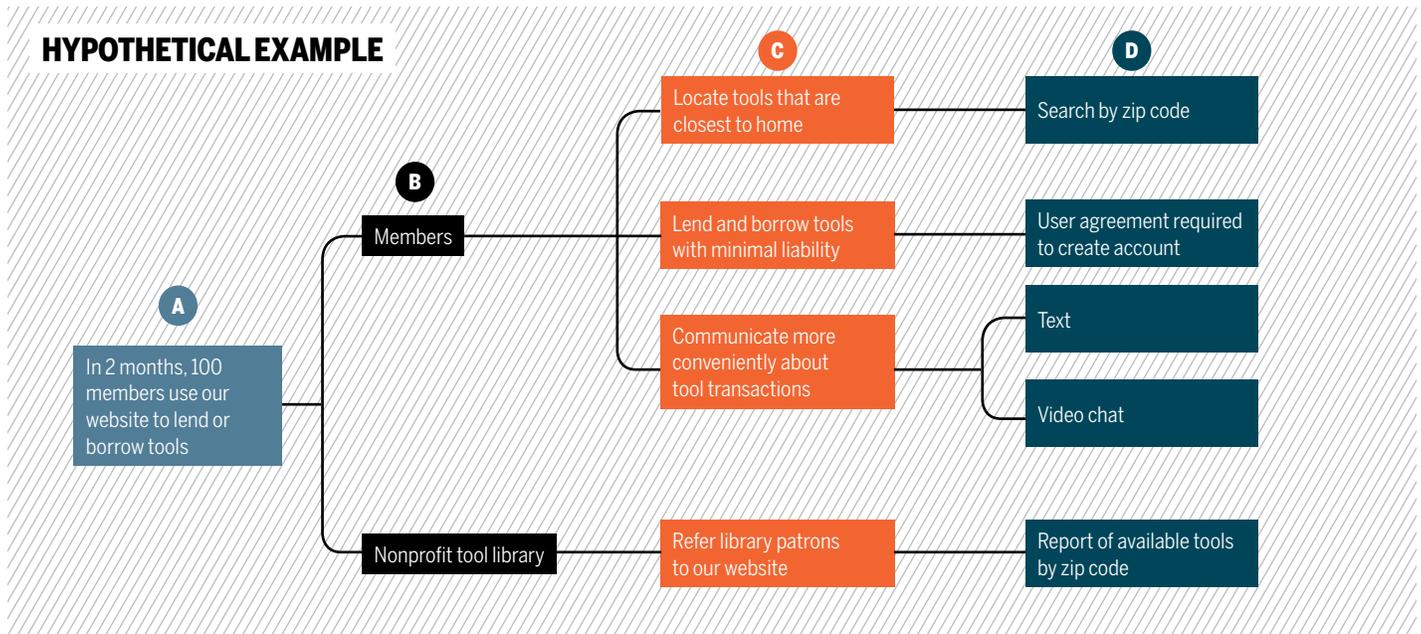


FIGURE 2

Using our impact mapping structure for our hypothetical example.

our development, user experience, design, and business analysis teams. Our first step is to set the goal (see A in Figure 2). We identify a target usage level we believe is realistic and attainable and agree to set a two-month time frame to design and develop a website that will reach the usage target. If and when we reach our usage goal, we will have our MVP.

Next, we identify who needs to benefit in order for us to make progress toward this goal, and who else can help us achieve it. These are the actors (see B in Figure 2). We identify two groups of them: the individuals with the introductory memberships, and the city’s nonprofit tool library. The library has a collection of tools it lends to members so that they can perform simple home maintenance, tend their yards and gardens, and learn new skills. Members pay a fee to belong. The library and the startup are already establishing a strategic partnership. The library thinks the tool-sharing service can improve its ability to serve its patrons.

To identify impacts (see C in Figure 2), we consider how the website will facilitate the tool-share process. We brainstorm how the site can support member behaviors that result in a convenient and enjoyable experience. Our assumption is that a convenient and enjoyable user

experience will drive usage. We also discuss how the library could help move us toward the goal. The impact we identify for the library assumes the library will refer patrons to the service when a tool is checked out, or if the library doesn’t have that particular tool in its collection.

Now that we have achieved a shared understanding of the goal, the actors, and the impacts, we can identify deliverables to support the impacts. Our map has one or two high-level deliverables for each impact (see D in Figure 2). The deliverables are options; they represent what we *might* build. This section of the map will evolve as we move forward and incorporate new information. When we need more detail, we can use the map to break down descriptions of deliverables into user stories. For example, here is a user story created from one of the impact/deliverable pairs: “AS A <Member>, I WANT <to search for tools by zip code> SO THAT <I can locate tools that are close to my home.>”

Navigating with the impact map

As we have grown this impact map, we have identified options and paths to achieve the goal. Now we transition to prioritization, using the impact map to make choices. Using the map to

create options (divergent thinking) and make choices (convergent thinking) ensures that we maintain a shared understanding as we prioritize, plan iterations, and adapt the product to new information and the results of our iterations.

Our impact map illustrates several paths to the goal. After conducting some user experience research, we decide that our first iteration will focus on the deliverables that support the following impacts:

- Locate tools closest to home
- Lend and borrow tools with minimum liability

During the first iteration planning (Figure 3), a team member advocates strongly to incorporate social media links so that existing members can invite their friends, which might help increase usage. However, when this suggestion is reviewed within the context of the impact map, it is clear that adding social media links does not support any of the impacts. This deliverable suggestion is beyond the scope we've agreed upon, and it will be shelved for now (see X in Figure 3).

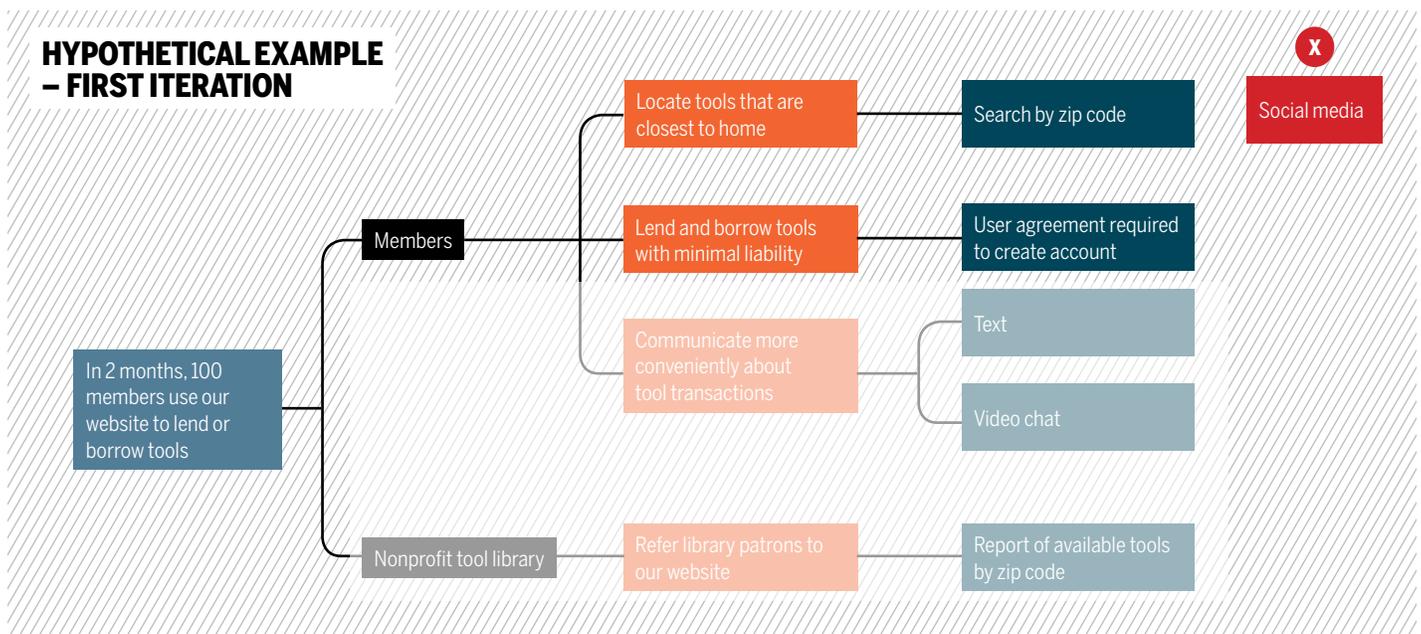
Shortly before completing our first iteration, we learn that the nonprofit tool library no longer wants to be in a strategic partnership with our startup client. In response to this new information, we remove the actor node for the nonprofit tool

library from our map, together with its dependent impact and deliverable. Figure 4 shows how we have updated the impact map in response to the new information. This update communicates to all involved that the “tools by zip code” report is no longer a high-value feature and does not need to be part of the second iteration planning.

When the primary guide for design and implementation is a list of deliverables, it can be difficult, especially in complex and volatile environments, to know when a deliverable no longer has high priority or value because it no longer supports the business goal. An impact map illustrates the effects of change and makes it easier to plan and communicate about the response.

After the first iteration is completed, the startup opens a beta site for introductory members only. During the first month, 100 members use the site to lend or borrow tools. Having achieved its goal, the MVP is complete and ready for the pitch to funders. The remaining impact (communicate more conveniently about tool transactions) is an option for a future iteration. However, because the goal has been achieved, the startup will not invest time and money to include text and video chat deliverables in the MVP.

FIGURE 3
First iteration planning.





Deborah Wyse is a project manager with a public policy background and more than 10 years' experience with technology products that stabilize lives and strengthen communities. She leverages impact mapping and other interactive approaches to guide cross-functional teams to collaborate, explore, and deliver quality.

UPDATED IMPACT MAP – RESPONSE TO NEW INFORMATION

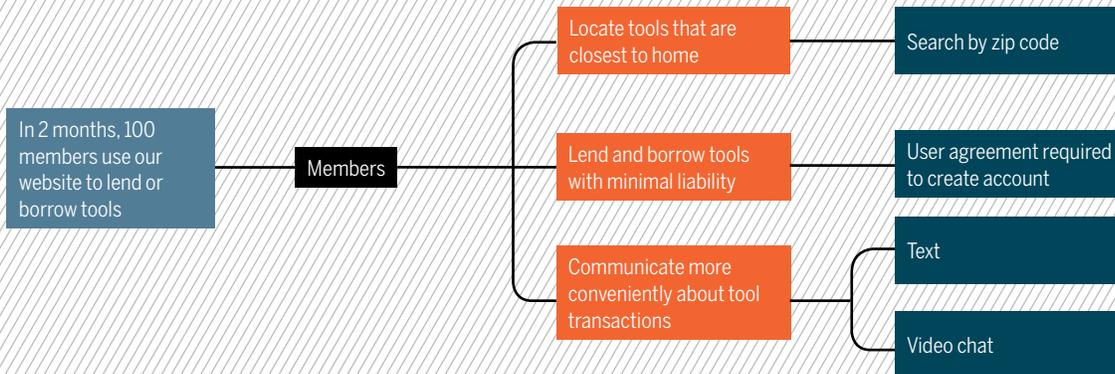


FIGURE 4

Updated impact map in response to new information.

Lessons learned

To supplement this straightforward example, here are some lessons learned from my experiences with impact mapping.

- **If possible, invest the time to facilitate an introduction to the impact mapping exercise with your group.** I found that it was more productive to create the actual impact map *after* I had presented the concepts and run through an example in a separate session.
- **Take the time needed to ensure that the goal exhibits as many of the goal characteristics (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely) as possible.** The goal is the foundation of the map. If it is vague, unrealistic, and/or cannot be measured, the impact map will not be useful or valuable. I recommend scheduling two sessions: one for the group to identify the goal, and a second to create the rest of the map.
- **Document assumptions that are part of the connections among the deliverables, impact, and actors.** As you plan and prioritize, review them periodically to ensure that the impacts and deliverables are still relevant and valuable.

For your next design-thinking opportunity, consider the impact map. Visual, collaborative, and quick, it provides a common language to align understanding among people with varying degrees

of design experience. It organizes options generated by divergent thinking and maintains focus on the end goal during prioritization. In today's volatile, uncertain, and ambiguous environments, you can use an impact map to manage the big picture and communicate how the implementation strategy is responding to rapid change. Most important, an impact map requires that you start with the "why?"—to ask, "Why is this useful, valuable, relevant? Why are we doing this?" An impact map will help you navigate your way to products that are feasible, useful, and marketable. ■

Resources

Impact Mapping, by Gojko Adzic, is filled with useful illustrations and conveys a lot of information in fewer than 70 pages. The companion website, www.impactmapping.org, includes links to other articles and online impact-mapping tools.

Em Campbell-Pretty's blog post "How I Fell in Love with Impact Mapping" is a detailed case study of how she used impact mapping to shift a client project planning team from delivering against a predefined scope to an iterative discovery process: <http://blog.prettyagile.com.au/2014/02/how-i-fell-in-love-with-impact-mapping.htm>

Michael Tarnowski's article "Impact Mapping: How to Use It" on his site *Plays-In-Business* summarizes the topic well in a few pages and provides links to other resources: <http://www.plays-in-business.com/impact-mapping/>