

# UX Researchers in an AI Enabled World: What do we do for work?

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When I started in this field, in 1977, we were just trying to make stuff easier to use. Then, starting in 2000, we pushed for institutionalized UX operations and worked to deliver much of that work remotely. Although challenging, we did pretty well.

When we initially got AI, I was very skeptical. Now, I'm enthusiastic. Sure, AI isn't perfect, but human UX practitioners aren't either. While AI can hallucinate, some of my staff can too. At UX4, we have an AI platform specific to UX research. However, I don't advocate just selling access to the platform. Instead, I think the platform usually needs to be bundled with a team of UX specialists who can create an effective co-bot research cell. Then, what do humans do?

## What UX Researchers Will Do for Work

### Stakeholder Interviews

It is not trivial to get the focus of an ecosystem model correct. We need a human-oriented picture of:

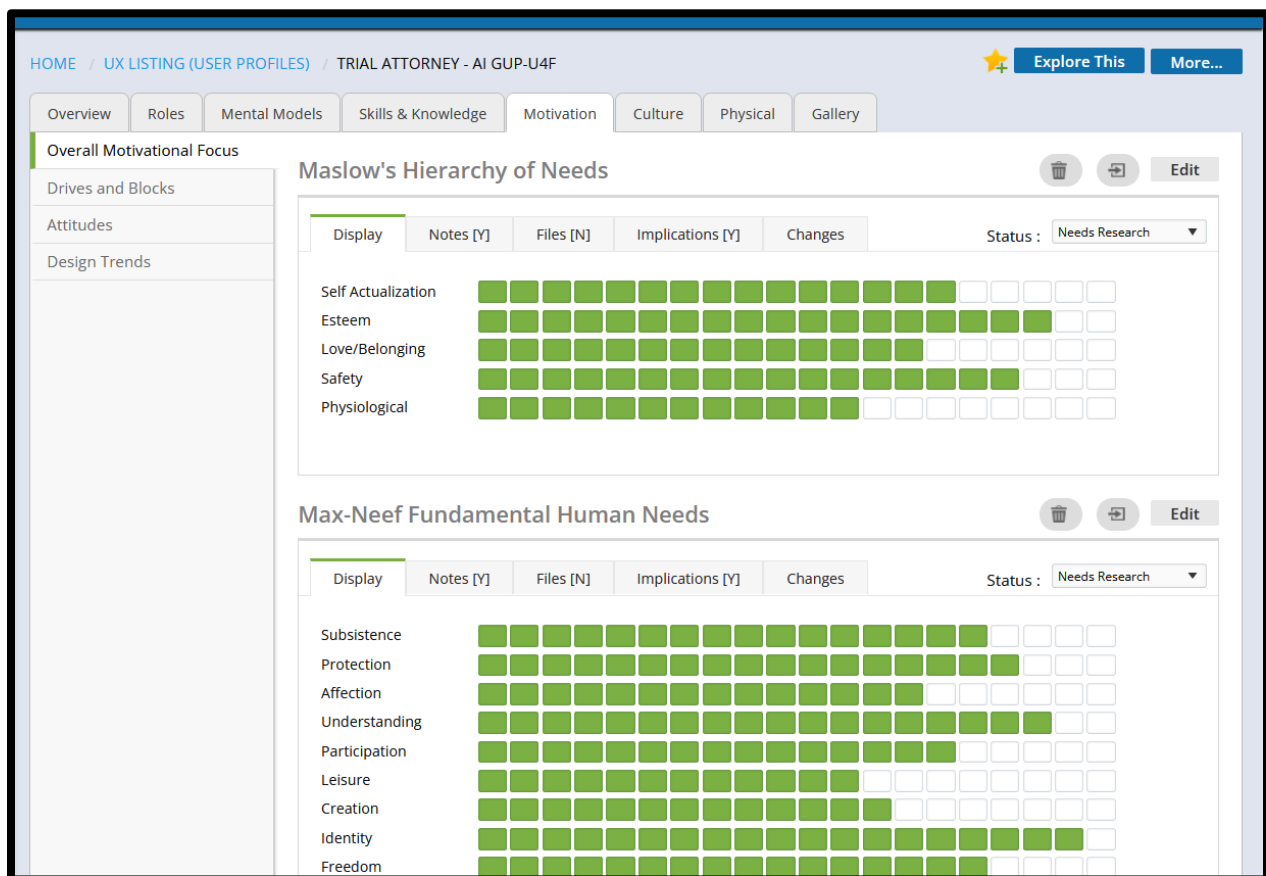
- Executive intent
- Differentiated UX North Star
- Solution space and market domain
- Degrees of design freedom
- Known problems and opportunities
- Organizational DNA and solution history

The initial context requires collaboration between UX specialists and the executive sponsors, product managers, and marketing team. The human-centered perspective on these topics is critical to shaping the ongoing research and design. Good UX staff see the space differently than executives, managers, and engineers. And they translate from a human-centered perspective.

### GUPs Designation

I always say that personas are for amateurs; they are a great way to explain to non-UX folks why a design has issues. But they don't have the depth and description of distributions that a user profile has. They don't define a full set of cultural dimensions, mental models, or social narratives and they don't indicate how much of the population is focused on self-actualization vs. safety. Therefore, we need Generated User Profiles (GUPs).

### Generated User Profiles (GUPs) Show Distributions – Not Just an Example



The UX Team needs to start with the market definition and segmentation. They should consider the organization's DNA and design degrees of freedom, and they also need to set up the queries that yield an appropriate set of GUPs.

### GUPs Content Loading, Refinement, and Further Study

GUPs are a step towards ecosystem understanding. Loading previously developed data helps the quality of the profile. At minimum, the GUPs data should be reviewed and refined by experienced UX staff.

Beyond inspection of the GUPs, the UX Team often wants higher quality data. I feel like the GUPs are cheap, fast, and better than nothing; we can always improve that data with additional studies and use various kinds of studies to validate the GUPs and get more depth in our understanding.

### A GUP Can be Directly Queried with a Specific Question

The screenshot displays a user interface with a chat window on the right and a data visualization on the left. The chat window shows a conversation between a user and an AI assistant. The user asks about their home and laundry routine. The assistant responds with detailed information about the user's home and laundry process. The data visualization on the left shows Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Max-Neef Fundamental Needs. The chart for Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs shows the following data:

Need Category	Percentage
Physiological	30%
Safety	58%
Love & Belonging	84%
Esteem	85%
Self-Actualization	59%

The chart for Max-Neef Fundamental Needs shows the following data:

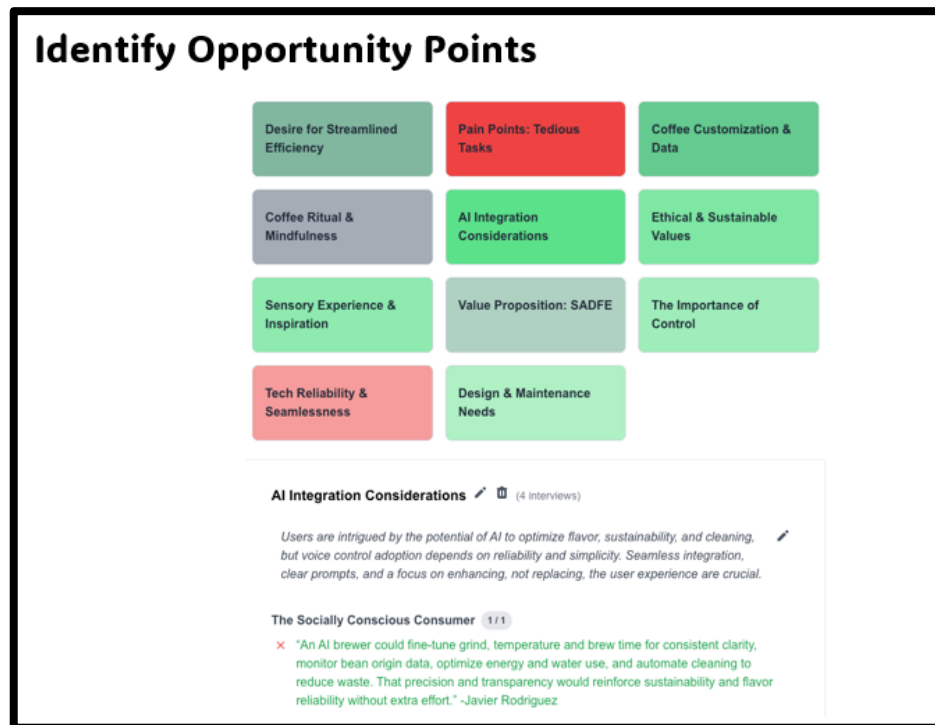
Need Category	Percentage
Subsistence	40%
Participation	62%
Affection	36%
Understanding	63%
Participation	38%
Leisure	50%
Creation	50%
Identity	39%
Freedom	50%

Two large black arrows point to the interface: one labeled 'Directly interact with your GUPs' pointing to the chat, and another labeled 'Underlying GUPs Model' pointing to the chart.

### Research Protocol Development and Execution

You can ask a single question to a GUP, but in many cases, you need a wider and more focused study. Such a study requires an interview protocol that is designed with the same care as our current study protocols that access human participants. In addition, such protocols need to be crafted to offset such issues as AI sycophancy. This protocol is then executed on the set of relevant GUPs by a UX-Adept AI interviewing agent. The interviewing agent probes for issues and the resulting interview dialogs can be directly reviewed or generally better the AI agent to deliver its own analysis. The ability of the AI interviewing agent to probe and interact is critical. Otherwise, it is just an automated questionnaire.

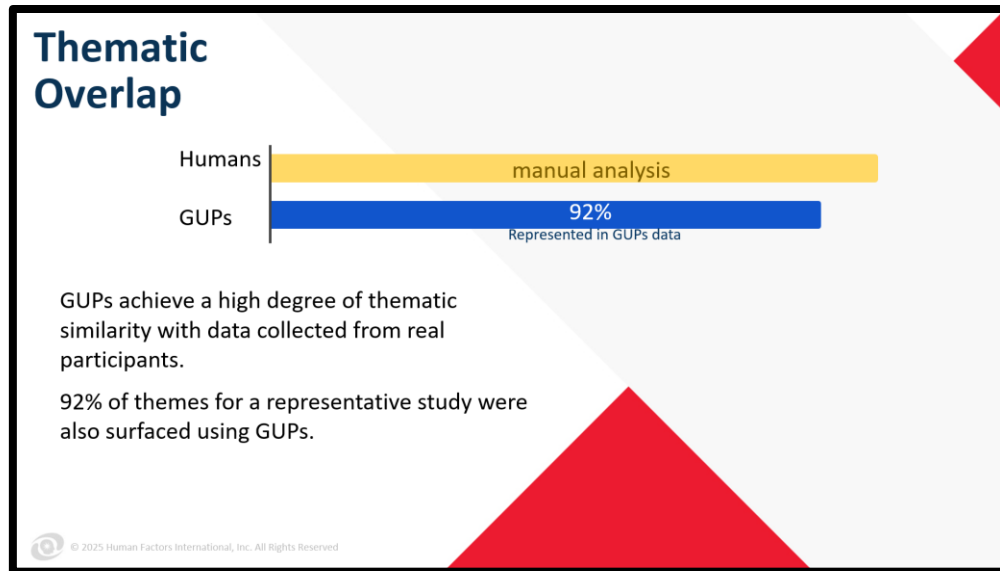
Example of findings from a study on coffee making machines:



### Supplemental Research

While we are passionate about UX, it is also a business. We need to trade off the cost and time of additional research against the risk of getting something wrong. Where the stakes are relatively low, we might accept the GUPs study alone. But we can increase our certainty with research on human participants. We have found that running the same protocol with the AI interviewing agent completing interviews over chat with selected human participants yields some additional insights. The amount gained by running human participants with the AI interviewer probably varies based on domain and topic. But we have been surprised by how many of the insights are derived from the GUPs study alone.

The GUPs study revealed 92% of the issues found with human participants:



There are innumerable types of advanced studies used in the UX field and we must explore this over time. We must extend our methods to derive scenarios, environmental descriptions, and artifacts. I suspect there is still real value in observational research, in person interviews, and unobtrusive measures. I also think a serious UX Team needs such capabilities.

Studies such as onsite observation are still needed.



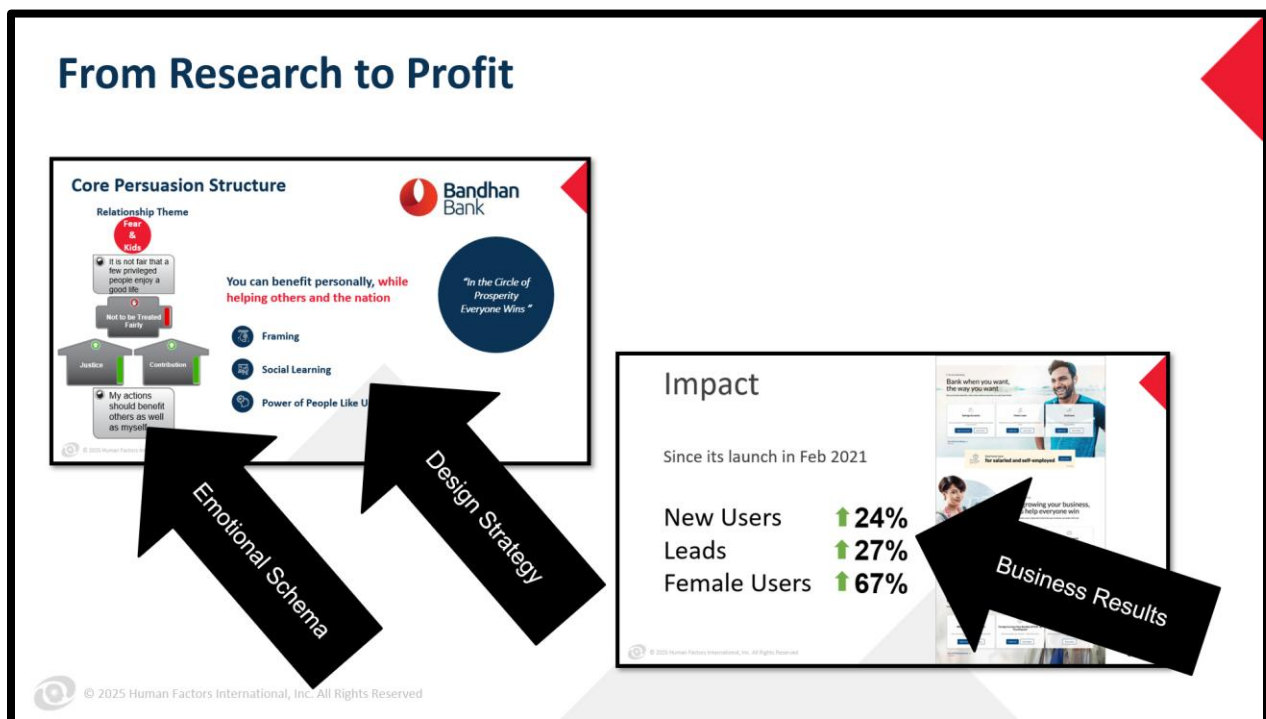
While I think there is always value in advanced data gathering methods, the need for UX staff to do rote research will be nearly eliminated; calling and asking a set of scripted questions and basic probes is handled by an AI agent.

### Results Evaluation and Sense Making

The AI agent is great at summarizing research findings. But I think there is still a critical role for the UX Team when understanding these results and conveying them to executives, product managers, and other colleagues. The work done in ecosystem research must be translated into business and design decisions. That means having advanced UX staff that can draw out key connections and do the critical job of storytelling and motivating action.

This has always been essential, as I've seen masses of valuable studies that are never leveraged properly into business results - the UX practitioners must ensure this happens.

Example of emotional focused research converted into business success:



### Curation and Dissemination of Sustained Ecosystem Model

Finally, there is a challenge for all substantial UX teams. In the past, research studies delivered their findings as a slide deck and those decks pile up on our desks or in inaccessible files.

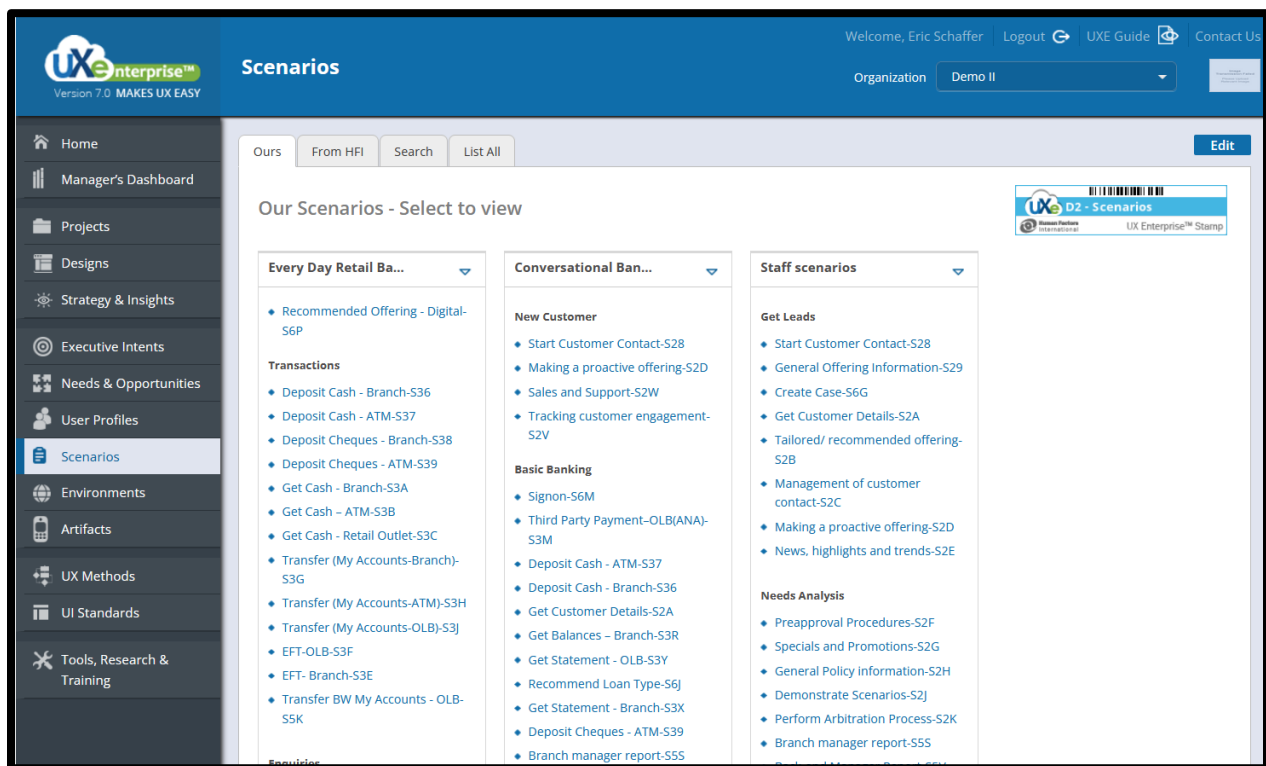
Actual access point to an organization's UX research findings:

What do you need to know to design for a family getting a first diagnosis of Type I diabetes for their daughter?

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Pouring the results into a Large Language Model makes them accessible - only if you know the right question. You might have data about social narratives and Hall's cultural dimensions, but you must ask the right questions to retrieve those insights. Therefore, I think the team must provide a structured and connected framework built around ecosystem knowledge that guides users to know what to review.

## HFI's UXEnterprise™ Environment Used to Accumulate an Ecosystem Model



We've been working on this problem for nearly 30 years. We have created a container with internal relationships wired in. This allows you to easily pull up the scenarios completed by a specific user in a specific environment. Now, I think we can power this with AI, as it is difficult to populate this container manually. But, even with AI support, we need UX specialists to curate and disseminate the insights from this model.

### The Future Staffing Needs in UX Research

There is going to be a significant drop in the people needed to just ask a set of rote questions and trivial probes. That is worrisome as we need an on ramp for new people in the field. At AT&T I wrote a user manual for the first six months. It was not much fun, but that documentation work taught me to think about human tasks and it got my UX career moving. Maybe new people should work on curating the sustained ecosystem models and promoting the insights from those models.

The key skills that a research team needs are to operate in an AI environment as a co-bot. They should guide the operation and provide advanced research inputs. They must also do sanity checking and sense making. The team is the focus for the research operation, as

well as the storytellers to disseminate the findings and ensure they are applied to business decisions and designs.



Dr. Eric Schaffer has been working in the UX field since 1977. At the helm of Human Factors International, Inc (HFI) and its precursor organization since 1981, Eric was the originator of HFI courses and related UX certifications. He was the primary author of *Institutionalization of UX* (Addison-Wesley) and has continuously run consultative and design programs in the field, addressing some of the most complex and high-stakes domains.

Currently, Eric is helping to drive HFI into a fully AI enabled UX operation, as he delivers sustained UX teams and staff that are AI-enabled. Eric is co-founder of the UX4 an AI UX research platform and serves as its Chief Scientist.