Jobs-to-Be-Done Theory

Idea In Short

Start with the progress the customer is trying to make. Jobs-to-Be-Done Theory matters because customers do not adopt products simply because they belong to a demographic segment or match a profile. They adopt products when those products help them make progress in a particular circumstance. The immediate leadership decision is to define demand around situations, desired progress and trade-offs rather than around customer attributes alone. Executives often ask who the customer is. That question matters, but it is incomplete. The more revealing question is what the customer is trying to get done, under what conditions and why existing alternatives are insufficient.

Jobs-to-Be-Done Theory explains customer choice by focusing on the progress people are trying to make in a given circumstance. Instead of asking only who the customer is, the framework asks what the customer is trying to accomplish, what triggers the search for a solution and what trade-offs shape the choice. This makes demand easier to understand when demographic labels alone do not explain behavior.1

Why profiles alone are not enough

Two customers with similar age, income, or profession may choose different products because they are trying to solve different problems in different contexts. The same customer may also choose different options at different times depending on urgency, risk, convenience, identity, or available substitutes. Demographic similarity does not automatically produce demand similarity.

This is why product teams can misread the market when they describe the buyer but not the circumstance. A profile may tell the firm who is choosing. It does not fully explain why this solution is being chosen now over the alternatives. The job framing makes that reasoning more concrete.

It also reveals competitors that category-based analysis tends to miss.

How jobs clarify substitution and competition

Customers do not compare only products in the same formal category. They compare whatever helps them make the desired progress. A meal replacement may compete with a snack, a coffee, a skipped meal, or a routine. A collaboration tool may compete with email, meetings, spreadsheets, or a workaround. The relevant competitive set expands once the job is defined correctly.

This matters strategically because it changes where opportunities appear. The firm may think it is improving within a category while the customer is evaluating across situations. By studying the job, teams can see what triggers switching, which frictions block adoption and what emotional or social dimensions influence the decision.

That broader lens usually leads to better product design and better positioning.

Why the framework improves innovation

Jobs-to-Be-Done helps innovation because it points to unmet progress rather than to requested features alone. Customers may ask for incremental improvements because that is how they describe their current tools. But the real opportunity may lie in resolving a deeper struggle or in changing the circumstance more fundamentally.

For leaders, this means research should capture triggers, trade-offs and forces around switching, not just stated preferences. When a job is understood clearly, messaging becomes sharper, onboarding becomes more relevant and roadmap choices become easier to prioritize. The product can be shaped around real movement in the customer's life or work.

That produces a more durable basis for differentiation than surface-level segmentation by itself.

What leaders should do

Leaders should push teams to define demand in terms of the situation and progress sought. What was happening when the customer looked for a solution. What alternatives were considered. What anxieties slowed the switch. What outcome made the choice worthwhile.

These questions often reveal more than broad persona descriptions.

The framework does not deny the usefulness of customer data, segments, or personas. It places them in context. Those tools are most valuable when they help explain who experiences a job frequently, intensely, or profitably. The job remains the organizing logic.

That is the enduring lesson of Jobs-to-Be-Done Theory. Customers hire products to make progress in specific circumstances and strategy improves when the organization builds around that reality.2, 3

- 1Competing Against Luck
- 2Jobs To Be Done Theory
- 3Milkshake Example And Demand Theory

Summary

Jobs-to-Be-Done Theory remains useful because it shifts attention from category-centric thinking to progress-centric thinking. It helps teams understand substitution, hidden competitors and why the same customer may choose different solutions in different contexts. The framework does not eliminate the value of segmentation or data. It clarifies what those tools should serve. When leaders understand the job, they can design offers, messages, experiences and business models that fit the real circumstances of choice. The enduring insight is that demand is organized around progress, not just around profiles.