



International
Labour
Organization

Putting client insights into practice: Six springboards

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Introduction

When serving new market segments, many insurers are comfortable carrying out customer research. A wealth of tools is available and can be used cost-effectively to find out clients' needs and preferences. Tools for understanding the perspective of low-income customers include the ILO's tools, such as the [PACE tool](#) and [3D client value assessment for index insurance](#), and the wide range of tools in the [CGAP customer-centric guide](#). Where insurers often get stuck is putting those insights into practice.

Putting client insights into practice is not, at its core, a purely technical question. Rather, companies often struggle to put insights into practice because of internal issues like organization set-up, culture and processes.

These barriers cannot be overcome in one go, but many organizations have found that they can shift their approaches and internal set-ups to make it easier to regularly act on client insights.

This brief provides a range of strategies that can be used to do so – springboards towards a culture, structure and operations that are capable of responding to client needs. These approaches are practical methods used by insurance companies to gradually instill a culture of listening to clients and experimenting to meet their needs.

The insights are based on case studies conducted with various organizations working to put client insights into practice (see the table below), as well as interviews with experts. This brief presents companies' attempts to shift mindsets, engage staff and respond to customer needs, and what they have learnt along the way. The experiences of the organizations involved suggest that the six activities described in this brief are each powerful "springboards" towards putting client insights into practice. If you have lost momentum, give one or two of them a try.

Six springboards to put client insights into practice

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Appoint a dedicated voice of the client

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Use client research to change mindsets

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Invest in client personas

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Make a sprint of it

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Change little and often

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Connect client experience improvements to business goals

Organizations featured

Organization	Organization type	Location	Summary
AXA	Multi-national insurer	Global	AXA has a dedicated customer research unit based at headquarters that works with country offices. The team builds the capacity of AXA's country offices in listening to and responding to clients and is responsible for advocating for emerging customers at the company level.
AXA Mansard	Insurer	Nigeria	AXA Mansard aims to grow its business among emerging customers in Nigeria. As part of these efforts, the company put together a cross-functional team to carry out market research.
Bima Paraguay	Insurance intermediary	Paraguay	Bima has developed a strong culture globally of listening to customers and making changes based on their feedback. In Paraguay, feedback collected through telephone surveys has been particularly important in gradually improving product features and processes, such as tackling low claim rates on its life insurance product.
Britam	Insurer	Kenya	Britam conducted a segmentation study in 2017 to better understand its customers before developing new products and platforms for them. As a result of this analysis, Britam decided to focus on two segments with very different product and communications preferences: millennials and peri-urban customers.
CIF Vie	Regional insurer	Burkina Faso	To tackle poor sales for voluntary products, CIF Vie undertook an in-depth exercise with the ILO's Impact Insurance Facility to identify personas for each of the different client segments it served. The company used these personas to design new marketing materials, simplify product options, and improve training of agents at its partner microfinance institution.
Kifiya	Digital financial services provider	Ethiopia	Kifiya offers an index crop insurance product through a private-public partnership in Ethiopia. After its first season, Kifiya carried out a survey with farmers to understand their impressions of the product and to assess the accuracy of the index. Although the index was found to be highly accurate, the product was redesigned to include new perils based on customer feedback.
MicroEnsure	Insurance intermediary	Africa and Asia	MicroEnsure uses design sprints to quickly prototype and test ideas. Although MicroEnsure began using the classic Google Ventures sprint process, it quickly adapted the process to its own realities.
Pioneer Microinsurance	Insurer	Philippines	Pioneer is determined to ensure that the whole company is continually engaging with and learning from customers. Everyone from top management to front-line staff are required to conduct "immersion visits" with clients and learnings from these visits are used to reengineer processes and tweak products to deliver greater value to clients and partners. In particular, the company used client insights to improve renewals – an important goal for both business strategy and improving customer experience.



1 Appoint a dedicated voice of the client

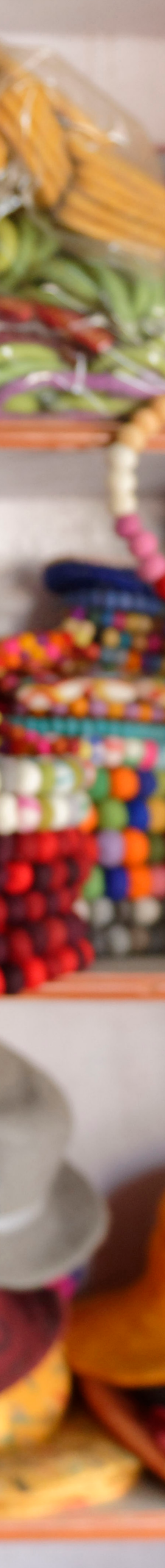
For clients' interests to be permanently incorporated into a company's operations, they need to be represented within the company's structure. This can be done by appointing a dedicated team to serve as the voice of the client. This group is tasked with advocating on behalf of the client in company meetings, product development processes and operational changes, making sure that their needs are met.

AXA has a dedicated customer research unit based at headquarters that works with country offices. The team defines itself as "emerging customer experts, not insurance experts" and offers expertise on engaging and learning from customers. The team builds the capacity of AXA's country offices in listening to and responding to clients and is responsible for advocating for emerging customers at the company level.

From 2018, **Bima** built a focus on clients directly into its structure. The company has a multidisciplinary central team that focuses on understanding and measuring client experience and level of understanding. This team sets the agenda for improving client experience globally and leads the country offices in investigating new aspects of client value or new product opportunities. The marketing managers of all country operations are part of this team, helping them to maintain a client focus and allowing learning between countries.

In addition, each country office has its own team focused on improving client experience – the market research working group. This group is in charge of measuring client satisfaction and improving products and processes. This cross-functional working group, led by the marketing manager, meets monthly to analyse the results of surveys and client feedback, and proposes solutions to improve customer experience. The chosen solutions are implemented the following month and the results are again analyzed in the next working group meeting, allowing continuous and gradual improvements to the customer experience. This structure has been important in reinforcing a culture in which staff members see their mission as meeting client needs rather than making sales and has ensured that managers constantly hear and make decisions based on client feedback.

Tip: Make sure the role of "voice of the client" is official. It should be included in the job description and targets of all staff appointed to the role.



2 Use client research to change mindsets

Client research is not only a tool to understand clients; it is also a tool to help shift the mindset of company and partner staff.

Many insurers outsource client research to specialized companies. However, without including a broad range of people in client research, it is hard to change attitudes and assumptions about customers that may lead to some stakeholders resisting and delaying change.

Companies often begin to conduct research in-house due to cost constraints, but in almost all cases in-house customer research has proven both richer and more likely to be put into practice. The most successful companies therefore build in-house client research capacity and use external experts or staff from headquarters to build capacity and provide specific expertise, rather than to carry out market research on a team's behalf.

Client research should be carried out not only by one team, such as the marketing team, but by a team made up of representatives of multiple functions. This increases buy-in across the company, builds empathy for clients, and results in practical solutions that can more easily be implemented by the company.

In particular, it is important to involve frontline staff, such as sales agents, who are often capable of understanding cultural subtleties and picking up on what goes unsaid in interviews or focus groups. Furthermore, agents should be included so that the final products make sense to those who will ultimately be responsible for selling them.

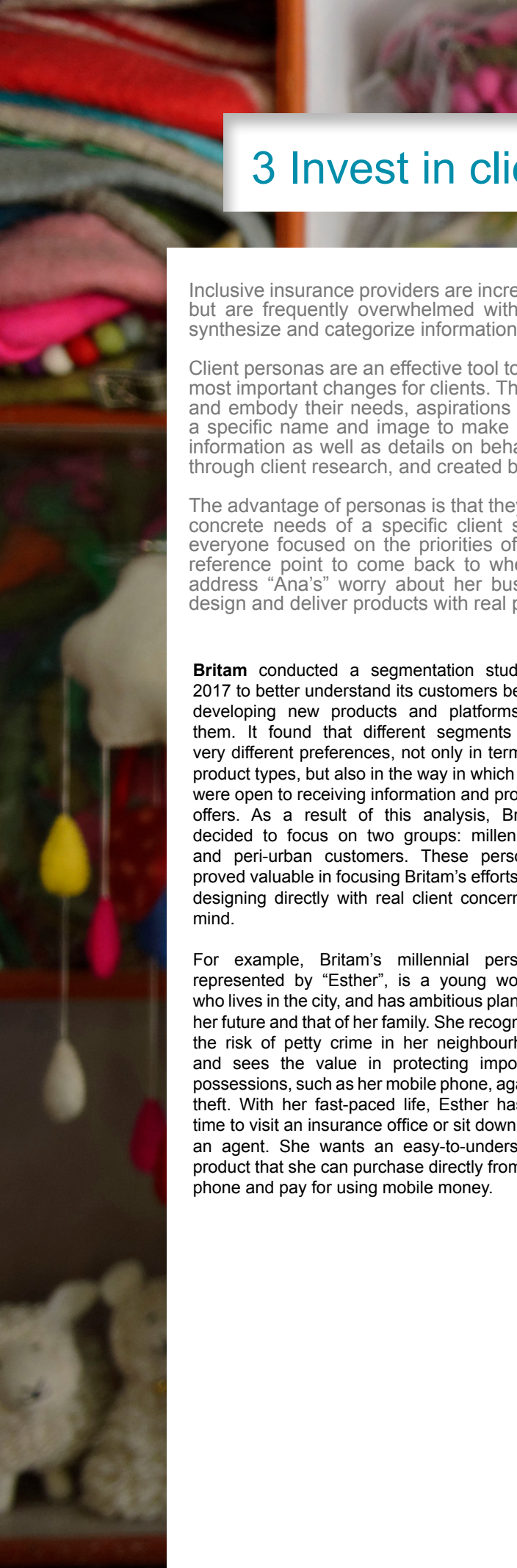
In-house customer research carried out by a cross-functional team (and ideally with the distribution partner) is a powerful tool to make sure that staff from a range of company functions, senior management, and new partners are fully on board, understand why the product matters through first-hand exposure, and are invested in its success.

Previously, **AXA Mansard** in Nigeria had outsourced market research, but in 2018 it decided to try carrying out one study in-house. To do so, it brought together a research team made up of staff from functions across the insurance value chain: from client-facing to various internal functions. This allowed for rich and detailed analysis of the insights gained from clients, and also provided an opportunity to demonstrate to staff members how their particular expertise and roles at AXA Mansard contributed to understanding and serving this new customer base. This helped generate buy-in and pave the way for later requests for support in implementing related activities.

AXA's global Emerging Customers team sees joint customer research as an engagement tool for staff and new partners. For AXA, success depends not just on some people understanding clients well enough to design a good product, but also on the understanding of the broad group of people required to ensure that product's success. As far as possible, they should all have a first-hand understanding of the clients served and the need for the insurance product.

Tip: Think of client research activities as a training and advocacy tool to get your team, management and partners on the same page.

Tip: Consider using outsiders strategically to provide alternative views and inspiration from outside of insurance, and to fill specific gaps in team capacity. A medical doctor might be brought in, for example, to help the team understand clients' experiences in clinics and specific medical issues.



3 Invest in client personas

Inclusive insurance providers are increasingly committed to carrying out client research but are frequently overwhelmed with the information they collect. They struggle to synthesize and categorize information and decide what to prioritize.

Client personas are an effective tool to organize data and help companies prioritize the most important changes for clients. These personas represent specific client segments and embody their needs, aspirations and behaviors. Each persona is presented with a specific name and image to make it memorable. They are based on demographic information as well as details on behaviors, worries, beliefs and aspirations collected through client research, and created by company staff, usually through a workshop.

The advantage of personas is that they allow everyone involved to rally around serving concrete needs of a specific client segment. This approach helps get (and keep!) everyone focused on the priorities of a select group of clients, providing a constant reference point to come back to when making decisions: “but would this message address “Ana’s” worry about her business cash flow?” They also remind teams to design and deliver products with real people and their needs in mind.

Britam conducted a segmentation study in 2017 to better understand its customers before developing new products and platforms for them. It found that different segments had very different preferences, not only in terms of product types, but also in the way in which they were open to receiving information and product offers. As a result of this analysis, Britam decided to focus on two groups: millennials and peri-urban customers. These personas proved valuable in focusing Britam’s efforts and designing directly with real client concerns in mind.

For example, Britam’s millennial persona, represented by “Esther”, is a young woman who lives in the city, and has ambitious plans for her future and that of her family. She recognises the risk of petty crime in her neighbourhood and sees the value in protecting important possessions, such as her mobile phone, against theft. With her fast-paced life, Esther has no time to visit an insurance office or sit down with an agent. She wants an easy-to-understand product that she can purchase directly from her phone and pay for using mobile money.

AXA sees client personas as the blueprint for developing its products and processes. Personas, especially when developed jointly with a distribution partner, are a powerful tool to keep both the insurer and the distributor aligned and focused on the client. They provide a common vocabulary and understanding of client needs which serves as an important foundation for the partnership. Furthermore, personas are useful for training frontline agents. Agents are not used to talking with customers about topics like death and accidents, so the personas provide a useful tool to help agents understand and respond to client concerns and priorities connected to such topics.

CIF Vie had significant success in providing credit-linked insurance but struggled to achieve scale for its two voluntary products. Clients did not identify with the communication materials and felt that the multiple product options were confusing. CIF Vie undertook an in-depth exercise with the ILO’s Impact Insurance Facility to identify personas for each of the different client segments it served. It used these personas to design new marketing materials and simplify product options. Furthermore, it used the personas to improve training of its partner MFI agents, teaching them to use stronger communication techniques and different messaging depending on the segment they were addressing. These and other changes, including to product design and agent incentives, resulted in dramatic increases of 150 per cent in voluntary sales in less than a year.



4 Make a sprint of it

Too often, innovative ideas based on customer insights die somewhere between design and actually getting to market. Internal processes are slow and convoluted, and expensive new product launches are considered risky. The traditional, linear approach of commissioning a major research project, followed by a long-winded product design and traditional pilot is time-consuming and costly. Information collected from customers can get lost along the way or may simply have been misinterpreted in the first place, resulting in a product not valued by customers.

The best way to overcome this is to deploy quicker, more iterative design and implementation processes. Such a 'test and learn' approach is based on the assumption that learning to meet customer needs is an iterative process. It involves testing an idea quickly, getting feedback from customers, tweaking the solution and repeating this loop until the team achieves a stamp of approval from customers. Through this process, companies are able to go to market much more quickly, and less expensively, with a product that clients have co-designed.

MicroEnsure [uses design sprints to quickly prototype and test ideas](#). Developed by Google Ventures, a design sprint is a practical process for answering critical business questions through designing, prototyping, and testing ideas with final users and customers, usually in just a week.

With only four days to prepare for a real-life customer product test, the team must work as quickly and efficiently as possible. MicroEnsure found this kept them focused on the most important aspects of the design and avoided delays and overthinking. But most importantly, the process allowed MicroEnsure to fast-forward to witness the finished product and customers' reactions to it before making any expensive commitments.

MicroEnsure found that it is important to make sure the prototype testing is a real test rather than just asking for feedback, since in many countries people tend to always give positive feedback, making it tough to judge if they would really buy the product later on. The team therefore decided to carry out tests by asking customers to pay real money for a fake product and then returning the money (and a voucher as an apology!).

Interestingly, although MicroEnsure began using the classic Google sprint processes, it quickly adapted the process to its own realities, slightly lengthening the time devoted to a sprint and adjusting the workshop formats.

AXA Mansard in Nigeria struggled with lengthy design processes, in which internal teams spent too much time creating a perfect solution, only to have a competitor launch a similar solution before them.

Given these difficulties in Nigeria and elsewhere, AXA developed an accelerated research, design and prototyping process. The company spends up to three days collecting qualitative and quantitative data together with its local distribution partner. It then carries out a half-day design-thinking workshop to develop client personas based on this research. It develops product and process ideas based on this workshop and the personas.

Some companies have struggled to instil a culture of simplicity and tend to generate over-complicated solutions, perhaps aiming to demonstrate a company's capacity for innovation. However, AXA insists on starting with the simplest possible answer to client needs and building from there. It has found that the simplest possible solution that meets one or more of the risks ranked highly by potential clients can be successful.

Tip: Do not be afraid to see the innovation process as an experiment itself and adapt textbook processes to your own needs and the realities of your company and team.



5 Change little and often

Research is often carried out in a reactive way – to understand why something has gone wrong or when a strategic exercise is taking place, such as designing a new product or deciding whether to continue a product beyond pilot stage. There are often no ongoing processes to collect customer feedback and insights.

There is a common misconception that client research is a one-off activity that provides ready-to-use answers. In reality, client insights are best collected through an ongoing and iterative process. Once collected, insights will require interpretation and testing to convert into useful product and process features, marketing messages and so on. Again, this is most successful when seen as an iterative exercise.

Using client feedback to highlight and quickly solve one small issue helps build momentum within the company for tackling larger problems. Unfortunately, many companies wait until the end of a pilot, or after receiving a large number of complaints, before talking to customers. At this point, problems with the product can be overwhelming and hard to solve. Making gradual, constant improvements and tweaks based on regular client feedback and inputs is both easier and more likely to be successful.

Bima makes extensive use of feedback gained through telephone surveys to make continuous improvements. In Paraguay, the company carries out approximately 500 telephone surveys per month, in addition to the information received through calls to the client helpline. This helps Bima actively seek out feedback and quickly identify common problems. It constantly analyses this feedback and other data to make improvements and find new business opportunities.

Solving common problems revealed through the surveys does not usually require expensive redesigns. Changes made on the basis of such feedback tend to be progressive and, in many cases, subtle. These include changes to product features and tweaking processes, improving communication, or simply reinforcing messages with clients. Bima has found that clients' understanding of a product is a key determinant of loyalty, so it puts significant efforts into monitoring and reinforcing product understanding among its clients.

Occasionally, more significant changes are required. **Kifiya** offers an index crop insurance product in Ethiopia. After its first season, Kifiya carried out a survey with farmers to understand their impressions of the product and to assess the accuracy of the index (how closely the benefit payments correlated with farmers' actual losses). Agents of cooperatives that were distribution partners carried out a simple survey with farmers.

The survey found that the index was highly accurate. Only two per cent of farmers felt that the result of the index did not match their experience. However, the field assessment revealed a separate issue: although farmers generally agreed with the results of the index, in many cases they did not believe that the right triggers were being measured. Farmers appreciated the drought cover but were concerned that the insurance did not cover other perils, particularly pests and diseases. These risks were top of mind for many farmers and could happen any year, whereas droughts were perceived as cyclical, meaning that farmers may lose interest in the product during periods of good rain.

Kifiya therefore decided to redesign the product to accommodate new perils. Its new hybrid product uses both the original index, based on satellite imagery, to measure drought and excess rainfall and a new area yield cover for pests and diseases. This has made the cover more attractive and has encouraged other distribution partners to join the scheme.

Pioneer is determined to ensure that the whole company is continually engaging with and learning from customers. Everyone from top management to front-line staff are required to conduct "immersion visits" with clients for three to five days every year. Learnings from these visits are used to reengineer processes and tweak products to deliver greater value to clients and partners.

Tip: Collect client insights regularly by leveraging existing touch points with clients, such as the distribution channel, customer helplines and online surveys.



6 Connect client experience improvements to business goals

Attempting to both meet specific client needs and follow overall company strategy can cause tensions, or at the very least result in projects ending up at the bottom of everyone's to-do list.

It is easier to gain ground when companies chose to focus on changes that match a business objective. In particular, to build momentum, it can be helpful to initially prioritise changes that also help staff members fulfil their existing targets.

To demonstrate that initiatives are benefiting clients and helping the business, it is important to measure the right indicators. These should be metrics that can be regularly assessed to help demonstrate that progress is being made and remind the whole team of the importance of the change being sought.

Pioneer realised that improving renewals could both greatly improve customer experience and help the company achieve its strategic aims. Improving renewals rates was a business goal, since it is more cost-effective to retain clients that find new ones. For Pioneer's customers, an improved renewal process gave them a better experience and saved them time. Measuring renewal rates helped to maintain a focus on this goal.

Tip: The right indicators can make a huge difference in ensuring a company focuses on clients. Have a look at how MetLife made [dramatic improvements in client experience](#) through new indicators.

Bima was concerned about low claim rates for its life product in Paraguay, as it knew that products with low claim rates tended not to be successful in the long term. In many cases, when claims are not made on life products, it is because beneficiaries are not informed about the coverage. Bima wanted to understand why beneficiaries were not informed, so it analysed claims data and carried out surveys. It found that clients generally did not feel comfortable talking with their families or loved ones about death. As a result, Bima improved communication during the sign-up process. Agents now educate clients on the importance of informing beneficiaries and how to bring up the difficult topic of death with them.

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