

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Use case generation, variation, and anticipation in innovation projects: Analysis of current industry practices based on interviews with international innovation experts

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**Abstract** • Use case scenarios play an essential role in innovation projects and influence the design of technologies. In this research article, I examine how use cases are generated, varied, and anticipated. To do so, I analyze interviews with international innovation experts ( $N = 14$ ), e.g., Chief Technology Officer, Innovation Director, or User Experience Researcher. A heterogeneity of practices for the design of use cases, the creation of use case variants, and the anticipation of a possible extension of use cases can be identified. Anti-personas and worst-case scenarios are tools specifically aimed at identifying malicious use cases. A surprising result is the absence of special AI-based procedures for use case generation, variation, and anticipation, indicating untapped potential for innovation projects.

**Generierung, Variation und Antizipation von Anwendungsfällen bei Innovationsprojekten: Analyse aktueller Industriepraktiken anhand von Interviews mit internationalen Innovationsexperten**

**Zusammenfassung** • Anwendungsszenarien spielen in Innovationsprojekten eine wesentliche Rolle und haben Einfluss auf die Gestaltung von Technologien. In diesem Forschungsartikel untersuche ich, wie Anwendungsfälle generiert, variiert und antizipiert werden. Dazu analy-

siere ich Interviews mit internationalen Innovationsexperten ( $N = 14$ ), z. B. Chief Technology Officer, Innovation Director oder User Experience Researcher. Für die Gestaltung von Anwendungsfällen, die Erstellung von Anwendungsfallvarianten und die Antizipation einer möglichen Erweiterung von Anwendungsfällen lässt sich eine Heterogenität von Praktiken feststellen. Anti-Personas und Worst-Case-Szenarien sind Instrumente, die speziell auf die Identifizierung böswilliger Anwendungsfälle abzielen. Ein überraschendes Ergebnis ist das Fehlen spezieller KI-basierter Verfahren zur Generierung, Variation und Antizipation von Anwendungsfällen, was auf ein ungenutztes Potenzial für Innovationsprojekte hindeutet.

**Keywords** • innovation, creativity, use case, artificial intelligence, technology

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## Introduction

Societal implications of innovations, especially technological ones, get ever more visible and cannot be underestimated. Innovation can be understood as “the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization or external relations.” (OECD and Eurostat 2005) The procedures, methods, and tools applied during innovation projects impact the final innovations, and con-

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sequently the daily lives of users (Falahat et al. 2024). Therefore, the industrial processes leading to innovations (so called ‘innovation projects’) gain growing societal attention and scientific interest. This leads to the specific role of use case generation as one of the building blocks of innovation concepts. This article looks at innovation projects from a communicational perspective, focusing on current communication and collaboration practices (Albastaki et al. 2022; Cicek 2024).

Use case generation means to describe a precise situation in which an innovation gets used, by whom, under which circumstances, to what benefit, and the emotions that motivate it, eventually including other information necessary for understanding the given innovation concept. Use cases are used to communicate an innovation concept to stakeholders and to test it with potential users. The involved teams aim at defining the innovation concept as precisely as possible and elaborating the probability of the innovation’s larger diffusion (Rogers 1983).

There are certain usage extensions that are not only creative but malevolent. Socioeconomic actors show an interest in anticipating such cases as early as possible. The goal of this article is to identify cross-sectorial procedures to develop, vary, and anticipate use cases, and to understand their participation in the creation of new technologies. Industrial innovation practices undergo significant transformations, especially linked to AI tools. I expect to find manifestations of these trends via the chosen research design.

## Research questions

How do innovation teams generate, vary, and anticipate use cases? Furthermore, which coping strategies are mobilized to address and avoid certain use cases (especially malevolent ones)? The first question is exploratory, aiming to identify any existing procedures, practices, methods, or tools, as well as personal preferences and opinions. The second question represents the logical consequence of the first. Among the variety of different use cases, some are classified as favorable and others as non-favorable by the innovation team. The question is intended to identify how innovation processes are set up to reinforce certain usages and avoid others. I aim to approach these questions in an exploratory manner to gain first insights into the transformation of innovation practices, and especially use case generation, via AI-based tools. Quantification and representativity shall be addressed in upcoming research.

## Methodology

During October and November 2023, I conducted semi-structured interviews with highly-qualified, cross-sectorial, international innovation experts ( $N = 14$ ). The profiles included Chief Technology Officer, UX Researcher, or Innovation Consultant in the automotive, consulting, chemical, IT, fashion, heavy man-

ufacturing, or public services sectors. Focusing on a particular type of innovation project would have required fewer interviews, but I preferred a cross-sectorial approach to search for procedural patterns in a larger sense (Guest et al. 2006). The experts are based in Europe, Africa, North America, and the Middle East. The interviews were held in English, French, and German, took approximately one hour, and occurred online via Microsoft Teams. The experts were recruited through LinkedIn Sales Navigator and were not compensated for the interview. The interview guide aimed to understand the personal experiences and opinions of the experts instead of official procedures. It included four major sections: 1. Home Office, 2. Human Body, 3. Creativity, 4. Use Cases. The first three sections aimed at understanding the experts’ working conditions, applied methods, creativity tools, and physical routines. The fourth section was focused on use case generation, variation, and anticipation. The first section included the perceived transition towards home offices, their ergonomic setups, collaboration tools, and relationships towards colleagues. The second section included physical habits, physical imaginaries/stereotypes of the user, and ergonomic norms/reference systems. The third section included the overall project setup, applied methods, and more specifically, creative methods/rituals. The fourth section included use case generation practices, procedures for identifying malevolent use cases, and the integration of AI-based tools. The interview was introduced via a short research description and technical information from the author. The experts were then asked to describe themselves, their professional roles, and backgrounds. The interview was concluded by asking for any last remarks, associations, ideas, or topics.

## Results

### The new normal – innovation via distance

The experiences of the innovation experts vary greatly. I can identify a heterogeneity linked to their personal circumstances, professional profiles, the sectors of the companies, and the companies’ policies concerning remote or hybrid working modes. For example, employees of international tech firms were already in remote settings before COVID-19. They were used to online collaborations when COVID-19 hit, remaining remote during and after the lockdown. Nevertheless, they indicated the importance of in-person meetings for specific activities and project phases. Other innovation experts were employed in the heavy manufacturing sector, where physical presence is naturally more important, even though for the experts, physical presence was not an obligation since they held positions for which it was not required (in the management or innovation department). Experts from the fashion sector insisted on the importance of in-person meetings for creative sessions. Currently, their companies make physical presence obligatory. The obligation of 100% in-person work was a rare case in our panel. The majority was fully remote during the lockdown and is currently working under different hybrid modes.

The challenge these remote and hybrid modes set for managing the projects is to decide which activities are realized in which collaboration mode. Are there some meetings that require in-person attendance? Or is an always-remote option accepted? The hybrid mode creates several challenges for the participations during meetings (especially creative ones). The collaborators who are physically present tend to engage more with each other, whereas the colleagues connected online tend to be more passive than they are usually when engaging with the same group of colleagues on site. Several experts stated that the interruption culture is different when collaborating in hybrid modes and perceived this as linked to the absence of physical dimensions of inter-individual communication. To respond to the challenges of remote and hybrid working modes, some innovation managers stated that they require certain meetings to be in person, most often the kick-off meeting, especially when the colleagues do not know each other beforehand. For other innovation managers, physical presence remains always optional. Other types of meetings for which they partly insisted on physical presence were meetings with sensitive information, those concerning conflicts, or creative sessions.

The home office was perceived to increase efficiency by reducing travelling time and costs and providing more comfortable working settings. Other aspects were perceived as posing problems, for example by creating difficulties when onboarding new team members. Navigating the variety of different online collaboration tools (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Miro) and choosing the right modalities for each project phase was perceived as an essential management challenge for innovation projects. These circumstances led to considering the home office setup of the involved team members more thoroughly.

When asked about their personal preferences concerning their home office setup, many experts stated that ergonomic comfort is a key variable. A large screen (or several ones), eventually a modulable screen arm, a sit/stand desk, a comfortable chair, sufficient space, and a dedicated room were perceived as essential. These findings resonate with what I found in the current literature concerning ergonomic best practices in the home office (Gallagher et al. 2024). Remote and hybrid work environments have several impacts on the communication between colleagues and on the circulation of ideas during projects, letting new interpersonal and creative practices emerge. Several times, the experts expressed a certain nostalgia for physical collaborations, comparing for example online Miro sessions with a Whiteboard session in the office “Well, it’s just not the same. You know, you can do anything on Miro, but you know, it’s still not the same.” (UX Researcher, public services).

### Applied methods and creativity practices in online collaborations

The previous section described the current collaboration setup for innovation projects. To address the particularities of innovation projects, different methods and tools are applied. Some methods are the same as before COVID-19, while for others the communicational support has changed to be online. The most common

methods stated by the experts are widely known innovation methods such as persona, design thinking, brainstorming, user journey, agile, stage gate, ease of use, Customer Effort Score, Net Promoter Score, and Problems-Concerns-Opportunities to name a few. Different customer acceptance tests are applied throughout the projects, as well as different objective and subjective measures. Some experts insist on the importance of physical check-in exercises for in-person, remote, and hybrid meetings (for example, breathing exercises, awareness techniques, or diverse mental representations exercises). Particularly for creative sessions, they underlined the importance of undisturbed attention of all participants to exploit the highest creative potential. This includes closing the laptop or putting the smartphone upside down. They primarily practice this not out of obligation, but by themselves as an example – leading by inspiration.

The innovation sector depends greatly on creativity (Paris 2008; Sawyer and Henriksen 2024). This is why there are specific positions for idea scouting: surveilling internal and external landscapes for ideas and filtering the most potential ones. But more than that, there are moments during innovation projects when creativity becomes crucial for each team member. Therefore, I asked what the innovation experts do to get, collectively and individually, into a creative state. Some stated that a creative mindset would be a permanent state they are in: “You know, I’m generally a creative guy, it’s not like a different gear my brain gets in. I’m permanently thinking creative, so I don’t have like any specific rituals or something” (Open Innovation Manager, automotive sector). Others do have specific habits when preparing for creative tasks. Examples of such routines are listening to music, walking around inside or outside the house, reading books, petting their cat, or having a dedicated, inspiring room for a creative mindset. Some explained that it depends on each situation and the associated emotions. Other rely on subconscious thinking. They familiarize themselves with the given task early on to internalize it, potentially leading to the famous Eureka moment in the shower or in bed – places experts also mentioned when it comes to creative moments. For others, a hyper focused tunnel vision mode is important, including turning off push notifications and email software. Several underlined the importance of a positive affective state. Positive affects were repeatedly stated as creativity enhancing, especially for interactions with colleagues.

### Use case generation, variation, and anticipation

Use case generation is applied in innovation projects to define the concept precisely, to assure that the concept meets user needs, to communicate the concept to stakeholders, and to test it with the potential target group. Several use cases are generated, representing slightly different variations of the concept. Innovations are sometimes used in ways that were not intended by the involved teams. This can become a source of inspiration for new business opportunities. In other cases, it can lead to malevolent use cases. Therefore, innovation teams show an interest in anticipating different use case variations during an early project stage. An ap-

proach representing a general attitude of the innovation teams towards reinterpretations of the major use case is *‘Celebrate the pivot!’* when an innovation concept undergoes an essential redefinition. This can be any use case variation becoming the major use case and does not necessarily represent a malevolent one. Other procedures to search for possible negative use cases is the identification of dark patterns and worst-case scenarios: “what would be the horror usage that can happen with that concept?” (Innovation Consultant, educational sector) Another procedure for identifying malevolent use cases is the definition of anti-personas. Certain innovation experts apply this procedure as an extension of the widely known persona method. It aims to identify anti-hero plots and negative use cases. This procedure is specifically dedicated to identifying malevolent use cases. During brain-

storming sessions or group discussions, team members discuss which malevolent usages could occur with the innovation concept. This is the procedure aimed most explicitly at anticipating malevolent use cases according to our panel. Other common methods such as brainstorming or reverse brainstorming are used to identify possible usage extensions. Reverse brainstorming is used to turn positive use cases into negative ones. According to the innovation experts, this method aims at widening the list of generated ideas, not specifically at identifying possible negative use cases: “I think, again, it’s, it’s thinking around, you know, multiple scenarios and leveraging those scenarios to identify the key variables and now plotting those key variables from a negative angle and seeing what the potential impact could be.” (Digital Innovation Manager Global, finance) Other experts test their concepts with a variety of user groups to observe possible usage extensions, aiming to create a large variety of possible use cases.

use cases. This is not the case. In the interviews with the innovation experts, I could not identify specific cross-sectorial practices representing a higher degree of rationalization than for example the design thinking process. The same holds true for use case anticipation. I could not identify specific procedures used to anticipate malevolent cases. They were covered by practices such as describing an anti-persona. This was mainly done to search for new ideas and not specifically to avoid malevolent use cases. Other practices covering the aspect of use case anticipation were general creativity practices such as brainstorming or reverse brainstorming.

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variation, or anticipation.*

Surprisingly, according to the innovation experts, AI-based tools do not yet play a notable role in use case generation, variation, or anticipation. The innovation experts do use AI, but

not specifically for the generation, variation, or anticipation of use cases. This is interesting because the currently available AI tools offer a high potential for these parts of innovation projects. Use case generation could be automated via AI narration tools (e.g., ChatGPT) in combination with visualization tools (e.g., Midjourney). Some experts stated that they could envision the integration of these tools for this task but that it is not yet done. Currently, these tasks are still completed manually by the relevant innovation teams. This point represents significant potential for the automation of innovation projects. Innovation ideas could develop into a multitude of different versions, becoming associated with corresponding use cases that get scripted and visualized in an automated, time and cost-effective manner. The absence is surprising considering the tremendous industrial potential for generative AI applications (Chui et al. 2023). Concerning the impact of AI on creativity see Dufour (2023), Grilli and Pedota (2024) and concerning its impact on an individual’s well-being see Montag et al. (2023). Regarding the overall trend of process automation, I expected to find more specific AI-based procedures to generate use cases and use case variation in a more automated manner. It leaves room for discussion why this aspect of innovation projects has not yet seen a more profound impact by AI procedures. It is possible that this study was conducted too early, since AI narration and visualization tools have seen rapid progress during recent months. Indeed, the innovation experts did not describe notable applications of the Metaverse as a collaboration tool. This aspect is surprising considering the remote and hybrid nature of innovation projects, which could harness the potential of the Metaverse for online collaborations (Canivenc 2023). It should be expected that corporate innovation collaboration practices in particular (Sacépé

## Discussion

Innovation projects are an economically important endeavor for companies, as they are indispensable for growth and staying competitive in saturated markets. I witness a high degree of ongoing differentiation and rationalizations during these projects, creating certain tensions when it comes to creative tasks (Habermas 1981). Consequently, the perspectives on this matter vary greatly according to different disciplines and personal preferences. I expected to find specific processes aimed at streamlining creativity during the use case generation and variation phase of innovation projects, for the anticipation of usage extensions, and especially for the identification of potentially malevolent

2019) will become more widely transferred to the virtual sphere. I expect such a tendency for the upcoming years, along with an increase in AI-based use case scenario development tools, keeping in mind that this might not be a particularity of innovation projects but an overall technological tendency. I assumed that AI assistants such as Microsoft's Copilot are spreading quickly and consequently would impact innovation projects and use case generation. It seems that it was too early for this study to find significant traces of such applications. It should be kept in mind that a rising integration of AI-based tools emphasizes the importance of screening for malevolent potential use cases. Since more aspects of use case generation and variation might become automated, the supervision of these scenarios might decrease. This becomes especially important for malevolent use cases.

Use case generation, variation, and anticipation represent the potential to direct possible usages of innovations. They imply the responsibility to promote or avoid certain use cases, including malevolent ones. This aspect seems underrepresented in the responses of our sample. The societal impact of innovation starts to get shaped during use case generation, even though the effective usages and societal implications of technologies remain difficult to anticipate (Rogers 1983). Regarding the growing societal importance of innovative technologies, the anticipation of use cases also becomes more important, especially regarding industrial and private AI applications (Mazzone and Elgammal 2019; Osei-Mensah et al. 2023). Usages guided by malevolent creativity with negative societal impacts are a specific case of usage extensions (Crompton et al. 2008). Current examples are the malevolent usages of the Metaverse, such as misinformation, financial crimes, or sexual harassment (Lepage and Mettrie 2022;

The experts did not discuss cross-sectorial procedures for the anticipation of malevolent use cases. This may be due to the heterogeneity of the panel. The cross-sectorial design turned out as the major weakness of the applied methodology. The setup was chosen to identify general procedures, but the diversity of practices is too large. Either the quantity of conducted interviews should be increased, or the target group should be narrowed down. For the anticipation of malevolent use cases more specifically, I propose a research methodology focused on business-to-customer and product design innovation projects, where this phenomenon may be more easily visible.

## Conclusion

I analyzed innovation practices based on interviews with cross-sectorial, international innovation experts ( $N = 14$ ), asking about specific procedures that they use to generate, vary, and anticipate use cases. I indicated the current remote and hybrid nature of innovation projects – an aspect that can be seen not as a particularity of the innovation sector but as part of a broader technological tendency, accelerated via the COVID-19 crisis. This creates challenges for the management of innovation projects, especially for professional communication and for creativity sessions. Innovation practices vary greatly according to business-to-business vs. business-to-customer, product design vs. web design, and industrial vs. governmental projects. Anti-personas and worst-case scenarios are the procedures most specifically aimed at identifying malevolent use cases. Beyond them, the discourse of the experts did not enable the identifi-

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Dwivedi et al. 2023). The procedures, methods, and tools applied during innovation projects, such as use cases, impact the final innovations, and in consequence the daily lives of users and their physical and affective dispositions (Martin-Juchat 2015), and therefore society at large. Regarding the growing societal impact of technological innovations, the different procedures involved in innovation projects are gaining research attention. In previous research, we analyzed the role of innovation methods and tools in general (Henke and Martin-Juchat 2021; Henke 2021), whereas this article focuses specifically on the role of use cases and the underlying communicational particularities.

The communicational structures underlying innovation practices have changed dramatically during the last years, greatly accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis. This article documents current practices as described by international innovation experts.

of cross-sectorial procedures for anticipating malevolent use cases. Generally, a multitude of use case variations is created during the process of use case generation, mostly aimed at widening the diversity and amount of concept ideas, and only in rare cases aimed specifically at identifying malevolent use cases. I could not identify a dedicated procedure that uses AI-based tools for use case generation, variation, and anticipation. This led to recognizing the unexploited potential of automating this part of innovation projects. Applying AI could allow innovation teams to generate, visualize, and evaluate a variety of different concept variations rapidly. The innovation experts noted the research potential of streamlining this idea towards an operational process.

The societal impact of innovation, especially technological innovation, is ever more increasing, necessitating further scien-

tific research to understand industrial practices and their societal consequences. The societal meaning of technologies depends not only their usage, but also the development process (Habermas 1968; Honneth and Sutterlüty 2012; Doerre et al. 2015). It therefore becomes important to understand the underlying industrial practices and preferences of the involved innovation experts. This article clarified the role of use case generation, variation, and anticipation in current innovation practices, adding complementary thoughts concerning AI and the Metaverse, which indicate promising research directions for upcoming studies.

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