



EXPERT ROUNDTABLE

Who Owns the Customer?

Authority, AI & the Rise of DIY Research

A High-Level Synthesis

From a Cross-Continental Dialogue

23 April 2026

Nordics & Asia-Pacific

Presented by **Cognit Consulting LLP** in partnership with **Leanlab**

The Conversation at a Glance

On 23 April 2026, five practitioners from the Nordics and Asia-Pacific gathered for a 90-minute intimate dialogue on a question that has become increasingly urgent: as AI tools and democratized research platforms proliferate, why are organizations making faster decisions with weaker customer understanding?

This was not a debate. The panelists were not asked to argue positions or arrive at consensus. They were invited to surface tensions, share candid experiences, and reflect on how the same forces are playing out differently across regions, industries, and design disciplines. What emerged was a rich, sometimes contradictory, and ultimately pragmatic set of perspectives on the state of customer understanding today.

This summary is intended for those who attended the session, those who could not, and the broader community of design and research professionals grappling with these questions. It captures strategic themes, areas of alignment,

and the productive tensions that remain unresolved, because they are, in truth, unresolvable. They are the terrain we now operate within.

The Strategic Tension

KPMG's 2025 CEE Report signals that customer experience quality is falling, with 97% of customers rethinking loyalty amid poor insights. Simultaneously, McKinsey's 2025 research highlights regulatory shifts, cookie deprecation, mobile identifier restrictions, that are dismantling the traditional infrastructure of customer targeting. Organizations are caught in a squeeze: they need deeper customer understanding than ever, even as the easy paths to get it are closing.

Strategic Themes from the Dialogue

Theme 1: The Authority Problem

The Observation: Customer insight authority is fragmenting. Research teams, historically the stewards of customer understanding, are increasingly bypassed, not necessarily out of malice, but out of speed pressure, stakeholder overconfidence, and the seductive immediacy of AI-generated answers.

What Emerged

- **A shift in the type of questions being asked.** Shaza observed that research questions are moving from user-segment specific to multi-market and global. Clients increasingly ask about emerging trends in comparable markets a few years ahead of theirs, research is becoming more strategic and less tactical.
- **The problem isn't new; AI has just accelerated it.** Garick offered a pragmatic reframing: corner-cutting in research has always existed. What AI has changed is the speed and the veneer of legitimacy. Organizations now believe AI is a "silver bullet", a way to have both rigor and speed without trade-offs. The challenge becomes educating non-research stakeholders on what AI can realistically deliver versus traditional methods.
- **The rise of "proof of value" culture.** Bala highlighted a significant shift in how clients engage with discovery. Rather than sequential upstream research followed by downstream design, clients increasingly ask for rapid prototypes as the vehicle for gathering insight. AI has accelerated this, speed to tangible output has become its own form of validation.
- **The Nordic parallel.** Vivek challenged the assumption that flatter hierarchies protect against these patterns. In his experience, teams that historically skipped discovery are simply skipping it faster now, using AI dashboards and synthetic data to confirm pre-existing biases. The cultural and process debt that existed before AI has been amplified, not remedied.

The Productive Tension

Panelists were aligned that authority has fragmented, but their views on how to respond diverged meaningfully. Garick leaned toward educating stakeholders to manage expectations around AI's realistic capabilities. Shaza, interestingly, argued for a more radical position: rather than defending research ownership, she has "switched camp" toward democratizing insight access entirely, believing gatekeeping is itself part of the problem. Vivek held a more sobering view: the real issue predates AI and lies in organizations that were never taught what genuine discovery looks like.

These are not competing answers. They are different responses suited to different organizational realities, a useful palette for practitioners to choose from depending on where their organization sits on the maturity curve.

Theme 2: Why We Skip the Double Diamond

The Observation: The Double Diamond is taught in every design program and referenced on every agency website, yet the first diamond, discovery, is routinely collapsed or skipped. KPMG data identifies personalization as the leading driver of customer loyalty, yet personalization is impossible without the depth of understanding that proper discovery produces.

What Emerged

- **Speed pressure is not the root cause.** Garick traced the pattern: research is inherently intangible compared to the visible excitement of prototypes and MVPs, which creates structural disadvantage. Internal advocates often find themselves defending discovery against stakeholders who have already decided what they want, using data selectively to confirm, rather than discover.
- **The confirmation bias problem has a new accelerant.** Vivek observed that teams who historically skipped discovery are now generating five prototypes instead of one, testing them with synthetic users, and calling it research. The behavior hasn't changed, only its surface area has expanded. Without training in how to ask open-ended questions, more tools simply enable more confirmation at greater speed.
- **The case for continuous, not episodic, learning.** Ville reframed the entire debate. The question, he argued, should not be "should we do research?" but "what is our continuous learning cadence?" His work through Leanlab's Customer Lab model demonstrates how private customer advisory panels enable teams to move from a few research rounds per year to two or three per month, fundamentally changing the relationship between discovery and delivery.
- **The Nordea Life case study.** Ville walked through how one client used a 400-customer private lab to derisk an app redesign, from inspiration gathering and preference testing through to communication testing that caught a near-miss in Android user instructions. The power was not in any single activity, but in the accumulated learning across the Diamond, enabled by continuous access.
- **Redefining "proof of value."** Vivek offered a critical reframe on Bala's earlier point: proof of value is not just about running faster, it is about running better. The hiking metaphor he used is apt: athletes measure themselves on recovery and sustainability, not distance. Product teams should apply the same logic, speed without method degrades long-term capability.

The Productive Tension

The panel held genuinely different views on whether prototype-first approaches constitute discovery. Bala presented them pragmatically, clients want proof of value, and AI makes early prototyping cheap enough that it has become the vehicle for insight. Vivek pushed back firmly: without the habit of defining the problem first, prototyping more options just amplifies pre-existing blind spots. Ville's continuous learning framework offers a middle path, discovery need not be a gate; it can be a rhythm.

Theme 3: The AI Empathy Deficit

The Observation: AI creates the illusion of customer understanding without the actual work of it. A confident, well-structured response from a large language model can feel like insight, but it is, at root, a statistical average of text patterns scraped from the internet. The danger is not that AI is used in research; it is that AI replaces the discipline of genuine customer contact.

What Emerged

- **Synthetic data is not inherently dangerous, unvalidated synthetic data is.** Shaza offered the most extensive deconstruction of the synthetic data debate. Her team builds synthetic users from validated research data, base role, cognitive layer, and crucially a cultural layer. They deliberately engineer the constructs to resist easy agreement, addressing the common complaint that synthetic users tell you what you want to hear. The result is not a replacement for real users, but a tool for stress-testing research questions and operationalizing dormant research assets.
- **Context determines what synthetic data can and cannot do.** Bala grounded the conversation with a sharp counterexample: his team designs for high-stakes command center environments used by 10-15 operators in shift rotations. In these contexts, contextual inquiry and observation across shifts is irreplaceable. Synthetic data has near-zero applicability where the work is specialized, high-consequence, and behaviourally nuanced. The generalizability of synthetic approaches is itself domain-specific.
- **Behavioural nudges, not preaching.** When a stakeholder arrives with AI-generated customer insights, Vivek advocates for a teaching-by-doing approach: ask them to query the AI about its sources. Direct them toward more rigorous prompting. Change the behavior gradually, because the box is already open and outright rejection is no longer realistic. Small shifts in how people interact with AI tools accumulate into better practice over time.
- **Meet curiosity with curiosity.** Shaza's approach when clients present AI-derived insights is instructive: she engages with genuine interest, examines their data, then openly names the gaps and offers a cost-benefit case for closing them. Shutting down a client's enthusiasm is self-defeating; guiding that enthusiasm toward better practice is the work of a trusted advisor.
- **AI as counterbalance, not replacement.** Ville's framing captured the emerging consensus: AI works when it serves as a counterbalance to genuine customer voice, not a substitute for it. He compared AI to "a good intern", useful, but requiring scrutiny before reaching the CEO. In Leanlab's practice, AI supports planning, prompts moderation, and accelerates qualitative analysis, but the core dialogue with customers remains human.
- **The AI advisory board concept.** Ville described a UK client building virtual AI advisory boards grounded in validated segmentation data. The value is in operationalization, a small marketing team of ten can now quickly iterate segment-based landing pages and messaging without extensive workshopping. The risk, he noted plainly, is if teams stop circling back to actual customers for bigger decisions.

The Productive Tension

The panel diverged thoughtfully on how enthusiastic to be about synthetic users and AI-mediated research. Shaza and Ville presented concrete applications where the approach has delivered genuine value; Bala and Garick emphasized the contexts where it fails or is dangerous; Vivek focused on the root behavioral problem that persists regardless of toolset. These positions are not incompatible. Read together, they form a maturity model: synthetic approaches succeed when built on validated foundations, applied to appropriate use cases, and never treated as a replacement for human contact.

Key Takeaways for Practitioners

Five strategic positions emerged from the dialogue, not as prescriptions, but as working propositions for design and research leaders navigating this moment.

01

The problem is older than AI. Own that reality.

Corner-cutting, overconfidence, and confirmation bias predate generative AI by decades. AI has not created the authority problem; it has amplified existing organizational debt. Interventions aimed at AI alone will miss the deeper cultural and process issues.

Shift the question from "should we do research" to "what is our learning cadence."

02

Episodic research is easy to skip. Continuous, structured customer learning, through private customer labs, advisory panels, or embedded dialogue, changes the conversation entirely. The goal is not more research. It is perpetual proximity to customers.

Democratize access, protect rigor.

03

The most productive stance is not defending research as a gated function, but widening access to validated insight while maintaining standards for what counts as valid. Gatekeeping creates resentment; rigorous democratization creates capability.

Synthetic data earns its place through validation and context.

04

Synthetic users built from real research data, shaped by cultural context, and used for hypothesis generation rather than decision-making can extend research capacity. Applied to high-stakes, specialized, or culturally specific contexts without grounding, they are actively harmful.

Treat AI as counterbalance, not substitute.

05

AI is best positioned as a complement to real customer voice, accelerating analysis, supporting planning, enabling operationalization. The discipline of human contact remains foundational. When speed is applied to the wrong phase, research loses its point; when applied to the right phases, it expands capacity without eroding depth.

A Closing Reflection

What made this dialogue valuable was not convergence. It was the willingness of five experienced practitioners to share where they have landed, tentatively, provisionally, sometimes contradicting each other, after years of working through these questions in the field.

The democratization of research tools and AI capabilities is genuinely powerful. It has opened customer understanding to roles and functions that historically had no access. It has compressed cycles that used to take months. It has made experimentation cheap.

But without discipline, without the culture, processes, and habits that make customer understanding a practice rather than a task, these same forces enable organizations to take confident wrong decisions at scale. That is the strategic risk of this moment.

The path forward is not to resist the tools. It is to rebuild the muscle of genuine customer contact alongside them, continuously, structurally, and with a clear-eyed view of what each mode of understanding can and cannot do.

This was the first in what we hope will be a continuing series of such intimate, cross-continental dialogues. We are grateful to the panelists for their candor and to the attendees for their engagement.

The Distinguished Panel

Five practitioners across the Nordics and Asia-Pacific, each bringing a distinct lens to the question of customer understanding.

Ville Österlund

Founder & CEO, Leanlab

Finland · Nordics

Ville founded Leanlab to solve the fundamental blockers he observed in customer research: speed, participant experience, and the episodic nature of traditional discovery. His Continuous Customer Learning framework and the Customer Lab platform enable organizations to move from a few rounds of research per year to multiple weekly cycles. His perspective throughout the dialogue focused on operationalizing insight, making customer voice a rhythm rather than an event.

Vivekanandhan Vijayachandran

Senior UX Strategist & Product Designer

Sweden · Nordics

Vivek brings a cross-continental lens, having practiced in enterprise environments across the US, predominantly Wall Street, before moving to the Nordics. His contributions centered on the cultural and behavioral roots of why teams skip discovery, challenging the assumption that flatter hierarchies alone produce better research practice. His framing of "proof of value" as running better rather than just faster was a recurring anchor in the conversation.

Shaza Hakim

Co-Founder & UX Principal, Stampede

Malaysia · Asia-Pacific

Shaza leads Stampede, a design consultancy working across fintech, telco, and government sectors in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Her team runs an AI-supercharged design thinking program and has developed a rigorous approach to building validated synthetic users grounded in cultural context. Her articulation of the "switched camp" position on research ownership, moving from gatekeeping to democratization, was one of the most provocative threads of the session.

Garick Kea

Managing Director, Insights Table

Singapore · Asia-Pacific

Garick brings two decades of experience across the client side and the research side, now leading Insights Table in Singapore, a market he characterized as operating at an almost religious pace of speed-to-insight. His pragmatic framing of AI as neither silver bullet nor threat but as a force that has amplified pre-existing organizational tendencies provided critical grounding throughout the dialogue. His warnings on synthetic data, "garbage in, garbage out", echoed across multiple themes.

Bala Sivagnanam

Co-Founder & CTO, BalanceFlo AI

Singapore · Asia-Pacific

Bala brings a rare cross-disciplinary trajectory: Computer Science engineering, followed by a Master's in Design from NUS Singapore, and a career spanning frontend development, UX design, and now ergonomic design at BalanceFlo AI. His clients include Singapore government agencies and high-stakes command-center environments. His perspective offered ground-truth on where AI and synthetic approaches work, and where specialized, observational, contextual inquiry remains irreplaceable.

The Moderator

Aveek Majumdar

Founder, Cognit Consulting LLP

Malaysia · Asia-Pacific

Aveek leads Cognit Consulting LLP, working with organizations across strategy, innovation, and transformation. His moderation of this roundtable reflected a deliberate choice to prioritize depth over breadth, five panelists, three themes, and the space for honest exchange rather than performative certainty.

About the Organizers

Cognit Consulting LLP

Strategize. Innovate. Transform.

Cognit Consulting LLP works with organizations navigating the intersection of strategy, customer understanding, and transformation. We convene practitioners, surface tensions, and help leaders think clearly about the choices that shape their markets. This roundtable represents our commitment to creating spaces for honest, cross-continental dialogue on the questions that matter most to our profession.

Leanlab

Continuous Customer Learning, Operationalized.

Leanlab provides organizations with the platform and framework to build private customer advisory communities, enabling them to move from episodic, burst-driven research to continuous, structured customer learning. Through its Customer Lab methodology, Leanlab helps product, marketing, design, and research teams share validated insight on demand while maintaining rigor at every stage of the double diamond. Learn more at www.leanlab.co

For more information, to share feedback, or to explore future roundtables:

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