Cognitive Load Audit / Guide

Evaluating the agent's impact on a user's mental effort to ensure its design is intuitive, clear, and respects diverse cognitive styles.

Auditing the total mental effort (Cognitive Load) your agent demands is paramount to ensure diverse ways of thinking and acting are respected.

01 / Inventory

Instructions

01 Identify all tasks, decisions, and information a user must process when interacting with the agent.

02 For each item, list the type (e.g. recall, decision, search) and the context in which it occurs.

03 Then rate the cognitive effort on a simple scale (e.g. Low, Medium, High).

04 Plot those on the matrix.

05 Finally, combine tasks with high load: can we simplify, automate, defer or restructure to reduce the overall mental effort and shift the balance toward more intuitive user performance?

Methodology

This methodology profiles how cognitive load auditing reveals the real cost of the agent's UX. It helps designers characterize how the agent's information architecture, conversational patterns, and decision-making demands affect a user's ability to think clearly, act confidently, and maintain an appropriate level of control. Identifying when, the agent overloads users with choices, context switches, ambiguous cues, or high-frequency interactions leads to a cognitive overhead or low readability of the interface and its ability to support efficient and intuitive user performance.

02 / Prioritize

Instructions

01 For each item listed in the first step, plot the corresponding data point in the matrix.

02 Place each item according to whether it is "primary or secondary information" and whether it is "mandatory or optional".

03 Then rate each one by its importance and impact.

04 Plot those on the matrix.

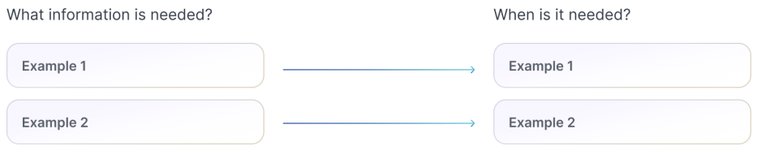
05 Finally, combine tasks with high load: can we simplify, automate, defer or restructure to reduce the overall mental effort and shift the balance toward more intuitive user performance?

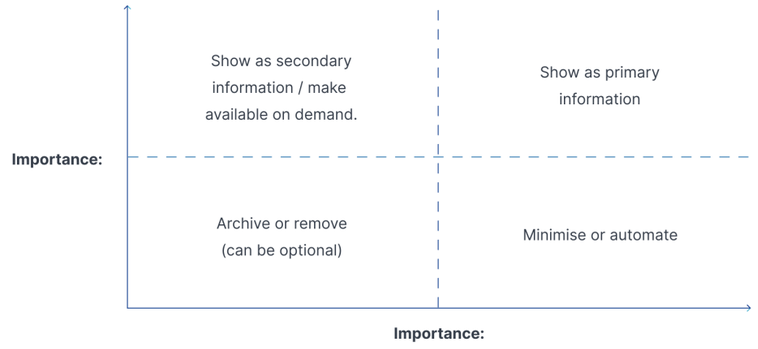
Methodology

This step moves from the cognitive load inventory to a strategic prioritization. After cataloging the information the user processes, the matrix maps each item by its nature (primary vs. secondary) and its role in the workflow (mandatory vs. optional). Plotting items into these quadrants lets designers visually identify what is essential to the core experience, what supports efficiency, and what may be safely deferred, hidden, or removed. The goal is to build an information architecture that reduces cognitive friction by surfacing only what matters most at each moment, respecting the user's limited cognitive bandwidth and ensuring that the agent's design does not overwhelm but instead supports efficient and intuitive user performance.

Visuals

First step: List





Using these worksheets

The inventory expands the source's information / timing list with fields requested in the instructions: type, context, and cognitive effort, plus IDs and classification columns.

Source clarification: the source matrix labels both axes "Importance". This worksheet uses Importance horizontally and Impact vertically, matching the two concepts defined in the source text. All four recommendation labels are retained.

Keep primary / secondary and mandatory / optional as item classifications. Use the matrix for the separate importance / impact assessment.

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Cognitive Load Audit / 01 Inventory

List what users must process, when it is needed, and the effort it demands. Use the item IDs on the prioritization matrix.

Designed for / agent	*Designed by / team*	*Date*	*Version*

Start here: capture one task, decision, or information item per row. Record type and context; rate effort Low, Medium, or High.

ID	What information is needed?	When is it needed? / context	Type	Primary / secondary	Mandatory / optional	Effort Low / Med / High
01						
02						
03						
04						
05						
06						
07						

Reduce high load

Which items can you simplify, automate, defer, or restructure?

Use the matrix next

Carry item IDs to page 3. Keep effort separate from importance and impact.

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Cognitive Load Audit / 02 Prioritize

Plot item IDs by importance and impact. Use their classification and effort ratings to decide what to surface, defer, simplify, or remove.

Designed for / agent	*Designed by / team*	*Date*	*Version*

Impact / LOW to HIGH

Show as secondary information Make available on demand.	**Show as primary information**
Archive or remove (can be optional)	**Minimise or automate**

LOW — **Importance** — HIGH

Importance: How essential the information is in accomplishing task or decision? Impact: How information affects overall user workflows?

Design decisions

Item IDs / simplify, automate, defer, or restructure / expected change / owner

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