PRODUCT TEARDOWN

Activation Flow Analysis · Independent Coursework Portfolio Piece

Notion

Sign-up → first structured workspace

9
SCREENS OBSERVED

4
SCREENS DEEP-ANALYZED

3
TOP PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

PRODUCT	Notion
FLOW ANALYZED	Sign-up → first structured workspace
PERSONA	Mani, 24 — early-career Product Manager, job-hunting
PREPARED BY	Yash Todkari
DATE	September 2026

Independent analysis prepared for coursework / portfolio purposes.
Not an official Notion document. Inferred figures are labeled with a confidence level (H / M / L).

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STAGE 1

Frame

GOAL

Evaluate how effectively Notion's sign-up-to-first-workspace flow converts a first-time user into a structured and reusable workspace, in order to identify the specific moments where confusion, friction, blank-slate anxiety, or lack of guidance put that conversion at risk.

USER

Mani is 24 years old, an early-career Product Manager currently hunting for a job. He is comfortable with software such as Google Docs, Word, Google Sheets, and MS Excel, but has never used Notion before. He wants to manage and track his job applications and complete tasks on time with consistency. Initially, he compares Notion against a Google Sheet — his default alternative. He is under mild time pressure and wants to build a working system quickly, with minimal friction.

JOB TO BE DONE

When I am actively job hunting, my data is scattered across notes, spreadsheets, and to-do lists — and I need multiple ATS-friendly resumes tailored to each job description and company. I want to build one common workflow that helps me track applications, portfolio work, interview prep, and networking follow-ups, so I can stop losing track of things and feel organized.

Note on scope — Mani is a free-tier individual user, not Notion's direct enterprise buyer. This is deliberate: it surfaces a more interesting monetization question (indirect / future value, rather than immediate revenue) than a team-admin onboarding flow would.

STAGE 2

Map the business

WHO PAYS, AND FOR WHAT

Individuals, businesses, startups, enterprises, universities, solopreneurs, professors, and students who want to manage tasks, build a custom database or workflow, or boost their team's productivity. For Mani specifically: he may become a **direct** payer if he outgrows free-tier limits (e.g. the AI trial cap) for personal use. More significantly, an **indirect** path exists — once employed as a PM, Mani could advocate for and drive Notion adoption at his workplace, generating future team-plan revenue *(Confidence: Medium — a multi-step, unverifiable chain)*.

REVENUE MODEL

Freemium subscription, billed monthly per member (incl. tax): Free (€0) · Plus (€11.50) · Business (€28.67, or €285.48/year) · Enterprise (€34). No advertising.

WHERE DOES THE MONEY LEAK

(Inference — not confirmed.) The free AI trial (~20 prompts) does not require a credit card, making it possible to create multiple free accounts to repeatedly farm free AI prompts without ever converting — unrecovered AI compute cost with no corresponding revenue. Closest fit: **fraud / trial-abuse**.

FUNNEL POSITION

Acquisition → **Activation.** This flow does not yet touch Retention — it sets up the conditions for it. Predicted drop-off is evidenced on the Flow Map (next page).

METRIC INFERENCE

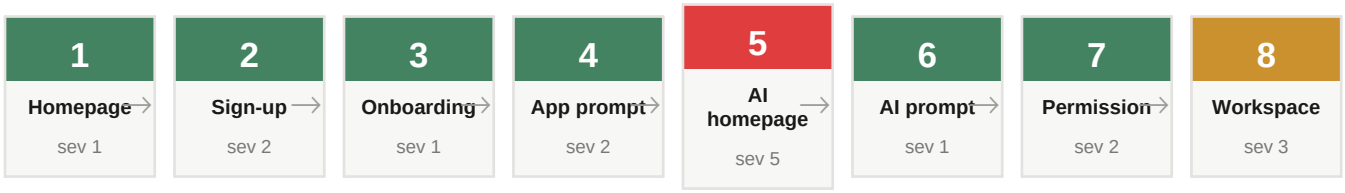
Layer	Metric	Inference	Based on	Conf
North Star	% of new signups who reach a self-built structured page within 24h, via any path (AI, template, or manual).	A user with nothing built after 24h likely hasn't hit their 'aha moment'; a user who has, likely has — and can relate the product to real work.	PLG/activation theory; own walkthrough.	M
L1	% of new users taking a meaningful action (path click, template, blank page/db, or AI prompt) within 5 min of landing.	Inaction signals confusion/lack of guidance; action signals orientation and momentum.	PLG logic (time-to-first-action); own walkthrough.	M
L2a	% of users who select any path and finish something usable (not abandoned).	Completing signals real value reached; starting-but-not-finishing signals friction or lost confidence.	PLG logic; own walkthrough.	M
L2b	% split of new users across template / AI / blank paths.	Shows which method feels most approachable, and where to invest design effort or fix an underused path.	PLG logic; own walkthrough.	M
Guard-rail	% of users who switch, delete, or heavily restructure their initial choice shortly after making it.	Rework shortly after choosing signals the fast choice didn't fit; sticking with it signals genuine fit.	PLG logic; own walkthrough.	M

Confidence is Medium throughout — grounded in established PLG/activation theory and one real walkthrough, but not confirmed by Notion-internal data.

STAGE 3

Flow map & drop-off prediction

The full 9-screen journey observed, in sequence, with severity scored 1 (no friction) to 5 (high activation risk). Colour indicates severity at a glance.



Funnel position: Acquisition → Activation. **Predicted / confirmed drop-off:** Screen 5 (AI-chat homepage) — the default experience does not disclose alternatives to the AI-chat path, the single highest-severity finding in this walkthrough.

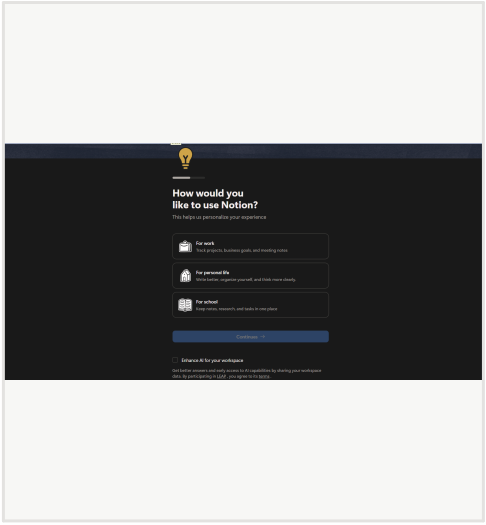
#	Screen	What happened	Friction / observation	Sev
1	**Homepage**	Landed on marketing homepage; “Get Notion free” CTA prominent.	Signup restricted to work email + Google/Microsoft/ChatGPT SSO — no Apple ID; minor.	1
2	**Sign-up form**	Google SSO worked as expected (briefly in Italian, per location).	Missing Apple ID; did not slow completion.	2
3	**Onboarding Q1**	Asked to choose: For work / For personal life / For school.	One extra question before reaching the product; low friction, plausibly useful.	1
4	**Desktop app prompt**	Prompted to download desktop app (“50% faster”); Skip available.	Extra decision point inserted before reaching the product.	2
5	**Homepage — AI chat**	Landed in AI chat with quick-start suggestions and a free-text box.	Default experience funnels toward AI-chat only, with no visible mention of manual/template alternatives.	5
6	**After AI prompt**	AI acknowledged the detailed prompt, similar to other AI chat tools.	None — matched expectations.	1
7	**Permission screen**	AI summarized the plan and asked “Ready for me to build this?”	Extra confirmation step where an immediate build was expected.	2
8	**Final workspace**	Job Applications pipeline, Resumes table, Tasks board created.	Output resembled a “basic sheet interface” rather than a polished dashboard.	3
9 (edge case)	**Template / blank path**	Two entry points found outside the AI-chat flow, leading to inconsistent menus.	Fragmented — one direct route, one via an intermediate menu; neither visually prioritized.	4

STAGE 4

Screen teardowns

Four screens were selected for deep, element-level analysis — chosen to cover the full arc of the flow (personalization → default path → alternate path → final output), and to prioritize the highest-severity moments identified in the flow map.

SCREEN 3 — Onboarding personalization



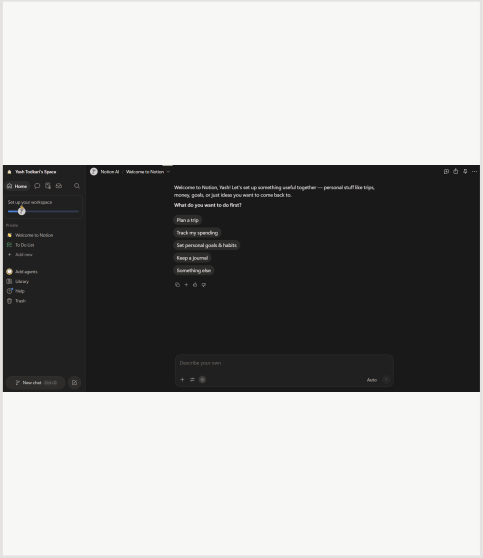
3 **Onboarding Q1**
"How would you like to use Notion?"

Element	Primary intent	Secondary	Verdict
Headline	Orient	—	Keep
Option cards	Extract	Orient	Keep
Lightbulb icon	Reassure	Orient	Change
Progress bar	Progress	—	Keep
Continue button	Progress	Orient	Keep
AI-enhance checkbox	Extract	Comply	Keep

Intent vs. execution — the lightbulb icon's likely *intent* is Reassure ("this is a thoughtful product, we've got you"), not merely Orient. Where it fails is *execution*: a lightbulb reads as "idea," not "question," so it doesn't actually deliver the reassurance it's aiming for. Distinguishing a flawed intent from a good intent poorly executed changes the fix — here it argues for **Change** (redesign the icon) rather than **Kill** (remove the reassurance attempt entirely).

Most interesting decision: *the placement and design of the "Enhance AI" checkbox — it puts the data-sharing decision genuinely in the user's hands (unchecked by default, non-blocking, with LEAP/terms links for context), and it's placed exactly where it's contextually relevant, not as a random popup elsewhere.*

SCREEN 5 — AI-chat homepage (highest severity: 5/5)

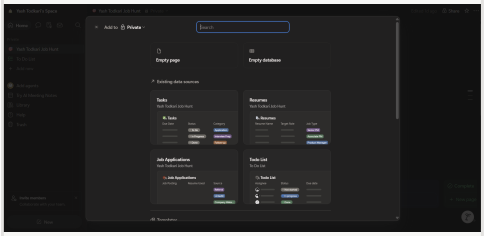


5 **AI-chat homepage**
Empty workspace, path choice

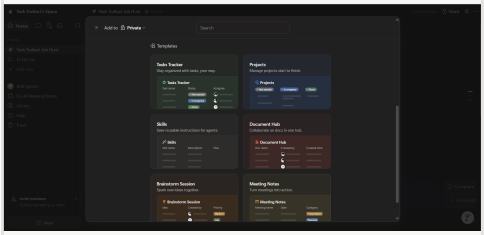
Element	Primary intent	Secondary	Verdict
Welcome message	Orient	—	Keep
Quick-start buttons	Orient	Progress	Keep
Text input box	Extract	Progress	Keep
Sidebar (“New chat” button positioned at bottom)	Progress	—	Change
Manual/template entry (buried at bottom, low visibility)	Orient (weak)	—	Move

Most interesting decision: *making the AI-chat interface the sole visual focus on first landing, while the manual/template entry point is technically present but buried at the bottom of the sidebar in a small icon, positioned well outside a first-time user's natural eye path — revealing a clear default bias toward AI as the “main” way to use Notion, leaving a first-time user unaware that a slower, more familiar alternative exists until they go looking for it themselves.*

SCREEN 9 — Manual template / blank path (edge case)



9a **Empty page / db picker**
Reached via “Add to”

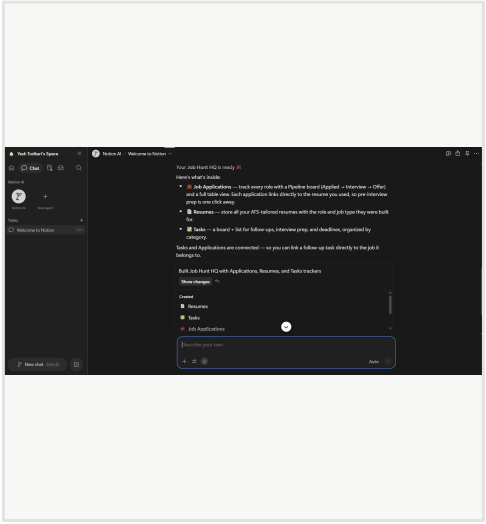


9b **Templates gallery**
Reached by scrolling further

Element	Primary intent	Secondary	Verdict
Search / header	Orient	Extract	Keep
Empty page/db cards	Orient	Progress	Keep
Existing data sources	Orient	Progress	Keep
Templates gallery	Orient	Progress	Keep
Fragmented entry points	Orient (weak)	—	Change

Most interesting decision: *the fragmented manual/template entry points — placed in a weak position and inconsistent, which can confuse new users without proper in-app guidance. A user will be unaware of these two ways — blank page and template — and will believe Notion is all about AI chat until they click on these entry points and experiment with the interface.*

SCREEN 8 — Final built workspace



8 **Job Hunt HQ**
Applications, Resumes, Tasks

Element	Primary intent	Secondary	Verdict
Title + description	Orient	Progress	Keep
Job Applications (pipeline)	Retain	Progress	Keep
Resumes table	Retain	Orient	Keep
Tasks board	Retain	Progress	Keep
Overall visual design	Reassure (failed)	Retain (at risk)	Change

Most interesting decision: *the overall visual design — the final output Mani receives is very basic, with no distinctive design or refined alignment, despite the tool feeling professional and capable while generating it. When asked to improve fonts, themes, and colour/style language, the AI returned the same layout with only minor alignment tweaks. Verified: no Notion plan (Free through Enterprise) supports custom fonts or colour theming — this is a platform-wide constraint, not a paywalled feature.*

STAGE 5

Friction log & problem synthesis

Raw findings from Stages 3–4 group into three root-cause themes. Two of the highest-severity findings (Screens 5 and 9) turned out to share a single underlying cause rather than being separate problems.

Theme	Root cause	Evidence
A — AI-first default hides alternatives	The product doesn't disclose or clearly structure its non-AI paths.	Screen 5 (sev 5): no mention of alternatives on landing, and the one working entry point (a “New chat”/edit icon) sits at the very bottom of the sidebar, outside typical first-glance eye path. Screen 9 (sev 4): two inconsistent entry points, neither visually prioritized.
B — Output quality vs. perceived capability	The AI implies a tailored, professional result, then can't deliver visual polish even when asked directly.	Screen 8 (sev 3): “basic sheet interface”; a direct redesign request produced no meaningful change; confirmed as a platform-wide constraint.
C — Stacked minor friction points	Several small decision points accumulate before real value is reached.	Screens 2, 4, 7 (sev 2 each): SSO gap, app-vs-browser prompt, and a confirmation step right before the payoff moment.

STAGE 6

Top three problems

IMPACT vs. EFFORT

	LOW EFFORT	HIGH EFFORT
HIGH IMPACT	**1 — AI-first default hides alternatives** Surface + unify entry points. Do first.	**2 — Output quality gap** Real theming is a large build; messaging fix is cheap.
LOW IMPACT	**3 — Stacked minor friction** Cheap UX tweak to the confirmation step.	—

PROBLEM 1	AI-first default hides alternatives
PROBLEM	The homepage funnels every new user into AI chat with no visible disclosure that manual/template paths exist. The one relevant control — the “New chat”/edit icon that opens a Page/Database/etc. menu — is positioned at the very bottom of the sidebar, below the fold of a first-time user's natural attention. When found, the two entry points to manual creation are also fragmented and inconsistently structured.
EVIDENCE	Screen 5 (sev 5): no alternatives mentioned on landing. Screen 9 (sev 4): one entry leads directly to templates, the other via an intermediate Page/Chat/Database/AI-notes menu.
STEELMAN	Notion has spent a decade being praised for flexibility and criticized for the same reason — its greatest strength (an infinitely open canvas) was also its biggest activation killer, the intimidating blank page. Framed this way, AI-first isn't merely a competitive bet against ChatGPT-style tools; it's Notion's first real answer to its own oldest, most-cited weakness. Defaulting every new user into AI chat looks less like an arbitrary UX choice and more like a deliberate strategic move to close the single biggest hole in their growth funnel.
WHY CHANGE IT	Even granting that AI-first is the right strategic fix for the blank-canvas problem, solving one activation killer by quietly creating a smaller one is still worth correcting. The evidence shows a user didn't know alternatives existed until actively hunting for them — a low-friction disclosure preserves the AI-first bet entirely while removing the confusion it introduces.
WHAT WOULD DISPROVE THIS	If usage data showed near-zero adoption of manual/template paths even after users are shown they exist, disclosure wouldn't matter.
VERDICT	Change · Intent: Orient (currently failing)
METRIC IMPACT	L1 and L2b both increase — more users act sooner; template/blank usage share rises from artificially suppressed levels.
TRADE-OFF	Slightly dilutes the clean, single-focus AI-chat first impression.
COUNTERARGUMENT	Notion may have already tested this and found AI-first without disclosure converts better.
IMPACT / EFFORT	High impact · Low–Medium effort

PROBLEM 2	Output quality doesn't match perceived capability
PROBLEM	Notion AI builds a structurally accurate workspace quickly, but the visual output is generic, and asking the AI to improve fonts/colours/design fails to produce meaningful change.
EVIDENCE	Screen 8 (sev 3): “basic sheet interface.” Direct redesign request tested — AI returned the same layout with only minor alignment changes. Confirmed via research: no Notion plan supports custom fonts or theming — platform-wide, not paywalled.
STEELMAN	Notion's core value is structure and flexibility, not visual design — a neutral visual system keeps the product consistent across use cases and avoids locking users into someone else's aesthetic choices.
WHY CHANGE IT	The gap isn't that Notion lacks visual flair generally — it's that the AI implies a tailored, professional result and then can't follow through when asked directly. That mismatch is a trust problem, not just an aesthetic one.
PHASED PLAN	Step 1 (low effort): ship the messaging fix — recalibrate the AI's promise language so it stops implying visual polish it can't deliver — and run Experiment 2 to test whether honest expectation-setting alone reduces post-build abandonment/restructuring. Step 2 (high effort, conditional): if Experiment 2 comes back flat — users still abandon or restructure even with honest messaging — that flat result is the evidence base for requesting the larger engineering investment in a real theming engine, since it would demonstrate the dissatisfaction is about capability, not expectations. The cheap fix functions as a de-risking test for the expensive one, not a separate alternative to it.
WHAT WOULD DISPROVE THIS	If research showed visual design has no measurable effect on activation/retention for Notion's actual users, this wouldn't be worth solving.
VERDICT	Change · Intent: Reassure (currently failing)
METRIC IMPACT	Improves the Guardrail metric (fewer post-build abandon/rebuild events); indirectly supports the North Star.
TRADE-OFF	Real theming is a nontrivial engineering investment; softening the AI's promise is cheap but doesn't fix the underlying gap.
COUNTERARGUMENT	Heavy customization could hurt readability/consistency in shared team workspaces.
IMPACT / EFFORT	Medium–High impact · High effort (real fix) / Low effort (messaging fix)

PROBLEM 3	Stacked minor friction points before reaching the product
PROBLEM	Several small decision points accumulate before a first-time user reaches real value: a desktop-app-vs-browser prompt and an AI confirmation step right before the payoff moment. A minor, lower-priority gap also exists at sign-up (missing Apple ID SSO), though it alone doesn't block completion.
EVIDENCE	Screens 4 and 7 (sev 2 each): app-vs-browser prompt; AI asks permission before building instead of building immediately.
STEELMAN	Each step serves a purpose: the app prompt genuinely improves performance; the AI confirmation step protects users from accidentally generating unwanted structures they'd have to undo.
WHY CHANGE IT	Individually reasonable, but stacked together in one short flow, they add multiple stop-and-decide moments for a time-pressured user — and the confirmation step sits at the moment of highest anticipation.
WHAT WOULD DISPROVE THIS	If removing the confirmation step led to more regret/abandonment or post-build edits, it would prove the step is protective, not just friction.
VERDICT	Change (confirmation step) · Keep (app prompt, SSO) · Intent: Progress (interrupted)
METRIC IMPACT	L1 and time-to-first-structured-page improve if the confirmation step becomes non-blocking.
TRADE-OFF	Removing the confirmation step reduces user control and could increase accidental builds.
COUNTERARGUMENT	The step may exist because instant-build testing showed more undo/regret actions — i.e. it may be deliberate and protective.
IMPACT / EFFORT	Low–Medium impact · Low effort

STAGE 7

Experiments

One falsifiable experiment per top-three recommendation, each with a primary metric, guardrails, and a pre-committed action if the result comes back flat.

EXPERIMENT 1	Surface alternative paths
HYPOTHESIS	If we add a visible one-line disclosure on the AI-chat homepage (“prefer to start from a template or blank page?”), then the path-split metric (L2b) will shift toward template/blank usage, because users currently avoid those paths simply because they don't know they exist.
PRIMARY METRIC	L2b — % split across AI / template / blank paths
GUARDRAILS	L1 (5-min action rate) and North Star (24h completion) should not decrease
AUDIENCE / DURATION	~5,000 new free-tier signups per arm (control vs. disclosure variant), 2-week window
IF RESULT IS FLAT	If the split doesn't shift, users are AI-path by preference, not by ignorance — deprioritize this fix.

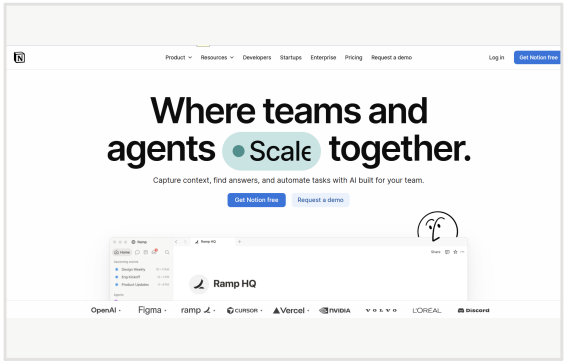
EXPERIMENT 2	Recalibrate the AI's design promise
HYPOTHESIS	If we change the AI's messaging to set honest expectations (“I'll build the structure — you can style it after” instead of implying full polish), then the Guardrail metric will decrease, because disappointment drops when expectations match delivery.
PRIMARY METRIC	Guardrail — % who delete/heavily restructure shortly after build
GUARDRAILS	North Star should not decrease
AUDIENCE / DURATION	~3,000 new AI-build-path signups per arm, 2-week window
IF RESULT IS FLAT	If restructuring rates don't change, that's the evidence base to request investment in a real theming engine — this experiment is Step 1 of a two-step de-risking plan (see Problem 2's Phased Plan), not a standalone fix.

EXPERIMENT 3	Reduce build-confirmation friction
HYPOTHESIS	If we replace “Ready for me to build this?” with a non-blocking “Building now — undo available” pattern, then L1 and time-to-structured-page will improve, because removing a stop-and-decide moment right before payoff reduces drop-off at peak anticipation.
PRIMARY METRIC	L1 — 5-min meaningful action rate / time-to-first-structured-page
GUARDRAILS	Guardrail — watch for a spike in immediate undo/delete after auto-build
AUDIENCE / DURATION	~3,000 new AI-build-path signups per arm, 2-week window
IF RESULT IS FLAT	If no improvement, the confirmation step wasn't the actual bottleneck — revisit friction earlier in the prompt-writing step.

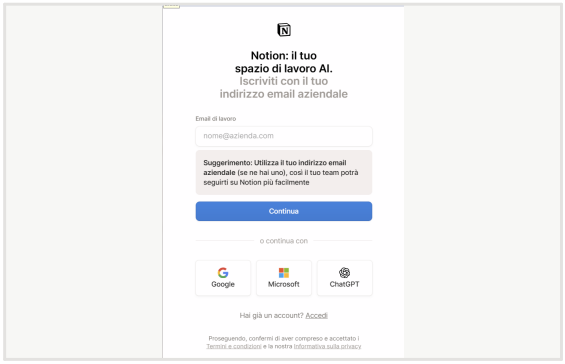
APPENDIX

Full screen reference gallery

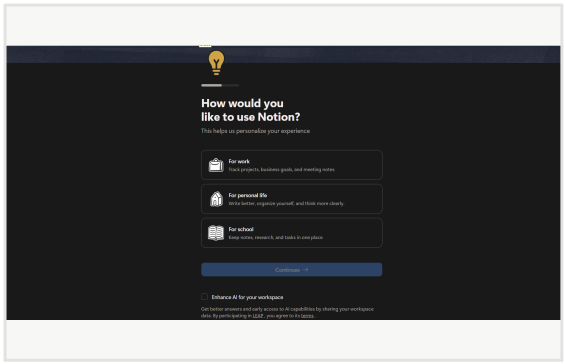
All screens observed during the walkthrough, referenced by number throughout this document.



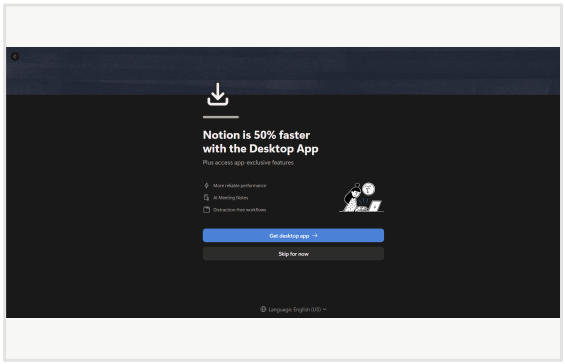
1 **Homepage**
Marketing landing page



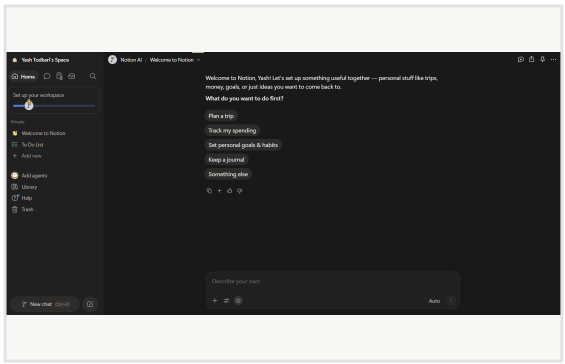
2 **Sign-up form**
Email + SSO options



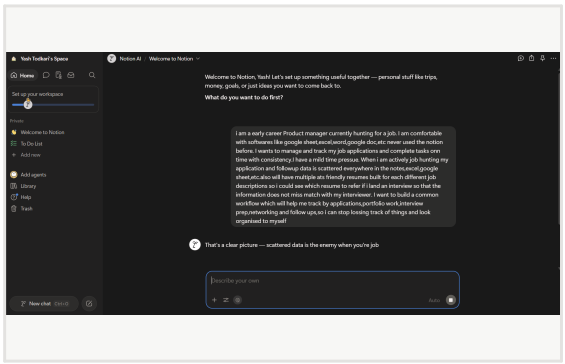
3 **Onboarding Q1**
Use-case personalization



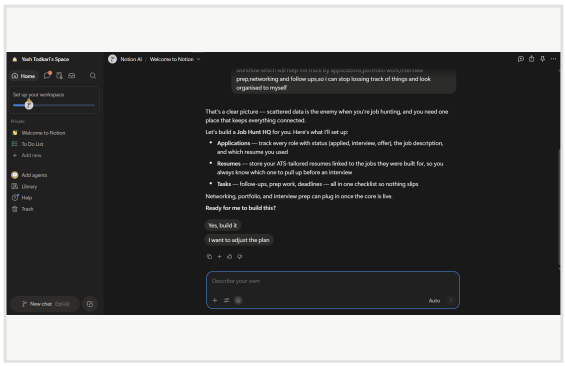
4 **Desktop app prompt**
App-vs-browser decision



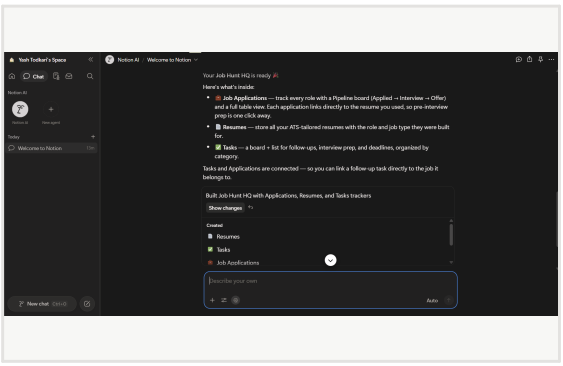
5 **Homepage — AI chat**
Empty workspace, path choice



6 **After AI prompt**
Context given to AI



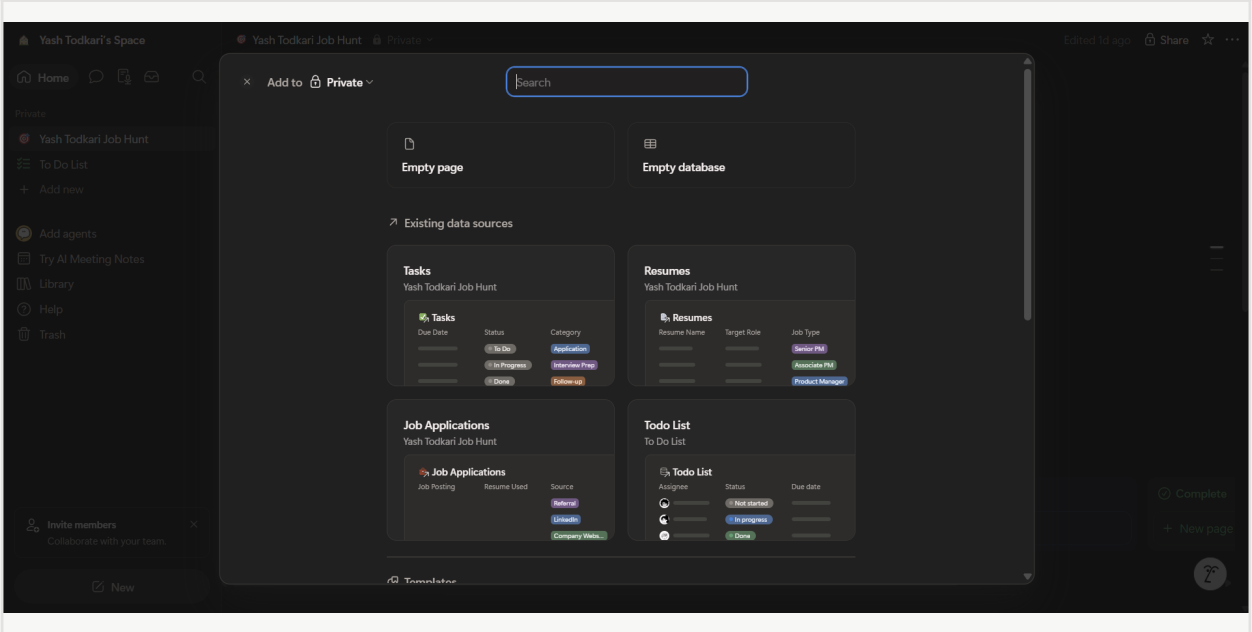
7 **Permission screen**
AI confirms before building



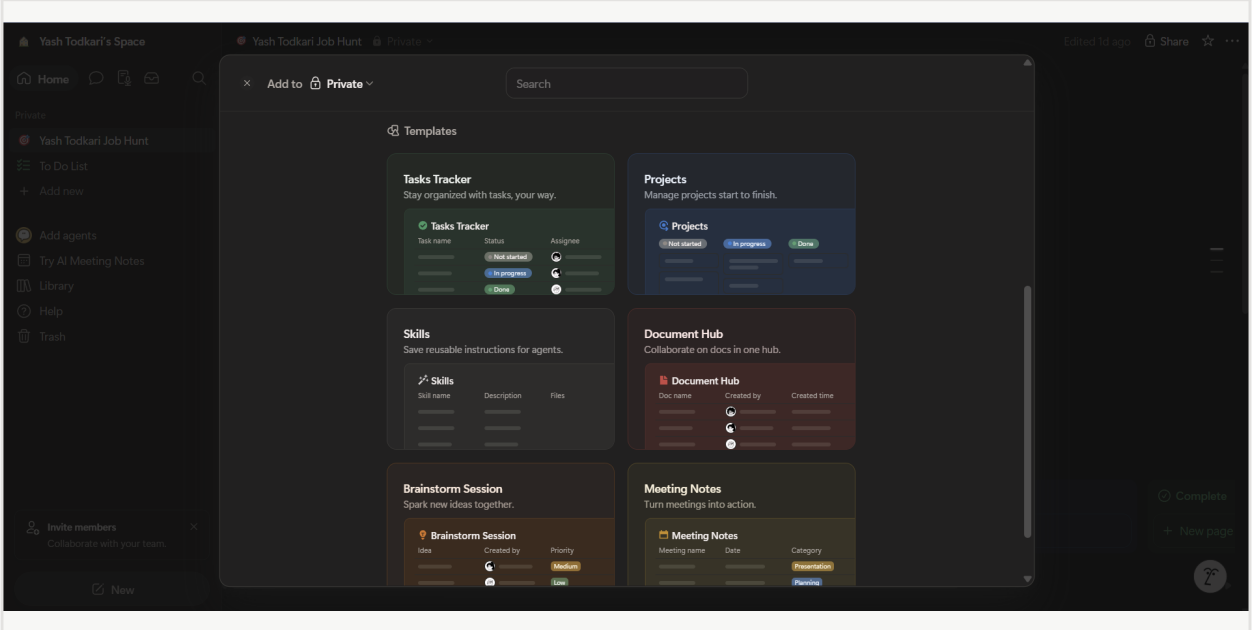
8 **Final workspace**
Job Hunt HQ, built

EDGE CASE — Screen 9 detail

Reached by navigating outside the default AI-chat homepage, via “Add to Private.” Two views: the empty page/database picker (with existing data sources already listed from the AI-built workspace), and the templates gallery reached by scrolling further.



9a **Empty page / database picker**
Reached via “Add to” — blank options + existing sources



9b **Templates gallery**
Pre-built templates: Tasks Tracker, Projects, Skills, Document Hub, etc.