Centre for Public Impact

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Briefing Bulletin:

Design for policy and public services

Why bother?

Traditional approaches to policymaking have left policymakers and citizens looking for alternative solutions. Despite the best of intentions, the standard model of dispassionate expert analysis and subsequent implementation by a professional bureaucracy has, generally, led to siloed solutions and outcomes for citizens that fall short of what might be possible.

The discipline of design may well provide an answer to this problem by offering a collection of methods which allow civil servants to generate insights based on citizens' needs, aspirations and behaviours. In doing so, it changes the view of citizens from seeing them as anonymous entities to complex humans with complex needs to match.

The potential of this new approach is already becoming clear – just ask the medical teams and patients at Norway's Oslo University Hospital. Women with a heightened risk of developing breast cancer had previously been forced to wait up to three months before receiving an appointment for examination and diagnosis. A redesign reduced this wait to just three days.[1]

In-depth user research identified the principal issues and pinpointed the lack of information about the referral process as a critical problem. The designers also interviewed 40 hospital employees of all levels to find out about their daily schedules and processes.

Governments have always drawn inspiration from fields such as sociology and economics. Design methods are not (yet) part of the policymaking canon, but such examples help explain why this may be about to change.

What's it all about?

Design (also called 'design thinking' or 'human-centred design') takes the lived experience of individuals as its point of departure. It begins with their myriad concerns and those of everyone else involved in providing a service (e.g. caregivers) or in running a system (e.g. civil servants). Design encourages empathy with those in the system (e.g. citizens and social workers). This empathy-driven approach may lead governments to find better and more human solutions.

In practice, this means that design methods encourage policymakers and bureaucrats to do something simple yet quite radical: listen to the 'user' of a system first, rather than only consult experts. This is, of course, something that social movements have long pressed for.

How does this work in practice?

Designing for services or policy isn't a well-defined discipline, but offers a set of tools with which to attack a problem. Most of these tools originate in commercial product and service design, which in turn take many of its cues from ethnography. While every design school, policy lab and innovation unit has its own design process, most follow three basic steps:[2]

1 Understand the human experience: understand the individuals you are designing for

2 Generate ideas and possible solutions: explore a wide solution space

3 Prototype and improve: create "low-resolution" physical manifestations of ideas and allow people to interact with them

THREE EXEMPLARY TOOLS:

1 Shadowing: closely observing 'users' in their own environment with a view to understand the emotions and motivations at play

2 Bodystorming: setting up an 'experience' (e.g. a counter at a citizen centre) with crude means (e.g. cardboard and chairs) to brainstorm around a half-formed idea

3 Prototyping: using materials of varying granularity (cardboard and pens, 3D printers) to test ideas

Can you give me an example?

Certitude, a UK-based charity which offers a range of services for people with mental health issues and learning disabilities across London boroughs, worked with the Innovation Unit, a design-led social enterprise, to help make communities more accessible, and modernise and transform the day services for people with mental health issues and learning disabilities.

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[1]For more details on this case study go to https://designit.com/cases/oslo-university-hospital-changing-the-lives-of-breast-cancer-patients
[2]Based on Mulgan, "Design in Public and Social Innovation", Nesta, 2014 and Sharing Experience Europe, "Design for Public Good", 2013

Innovation Unit's design team helped them better understand their service users by training them to deliver in-depth qualitative research in their communities, including co-designing workshops and prototyping sessions so that they could create something that fully reflected the demand of its users. Having completed the initial research, the team's 'reframed' challenge was to find a way to encourage independence and social interactions without creating another high-level service intervention.

The result was Connect & Do, a social networking site, where individuals can find groups and events in their local area, meet new people, share ideas, set up their own groups, and help other local people or groups. The aim is to build a supportive community movement which helps people with low confidence to get more involved in the things they love doing. Since the initial launch, the Connect & Do platform has been scaled to include five other London boroughs – with potential for more to come: a true public impact.[3]

Okay, I'm intrigued – can you tell me more about what this can do for me?

The design process encourages policymakers to deeply understand the root causes of what they are looking at and, if necessary, to reframe the problem. This alone is likely to improve citizen outcomes.

The design process also encourages a multidisciplinary approach and makes it easy to recognise the vantage points of all stakeholders, thereby improving their buy-in and support.

By prototyping possible solutions quickly and cheaply, design also bridges the perilous gap between policy and implementation. Making potential futures tangible helps de-risk implementation, helps avoid execution failures, and reduces the risk of expensive but unsuccessful pilot projects.

Even though design is a qualitative process, it is not in opposition to quantitative evaluation methods. Singapore's Ministry of Manpower, for example, uses design tools to generate hypotheses grounded in a fine-grained understanding of the needs of jobseekers. These

hypotheses (e.g. modifications to the counselling protocol) are then rigorously tested in a randomised control trial.

Design methods are very much aligned with a rigorous focus on outcomes. In this way, design sits within the wider context of efforts to bring innovative methods to the public sector, such as behavioural insights or other evidence-based approaches. They also impose humility by recognising how little we do indeed know about the world. Accordingly, all these approaches share a bias towards iterative experimentation and empirical testing.

Design's contribution is currently best understood when it comes to specific government services. Design advocates make a plausible case, however, that their methods can add value beyond discrete service and can be used to design policies and entire systems.

Organisations such as the Stanford's d.school, the Danish MindLab and OPM's Innovation Lab, among others, have been pioneers in spreading and applying design methods. Design advocates wish, however, to mainstream those skills and make them part of the policymaking canon.

What should I do next?

Policymakers and government officials interested in introducing design methods into their organisations should start small, invite an expert in and pick a problem that lends itself to the approach. This would likely be a service which is relevant, but where using an experimental approach such as design represents an acceptable risk.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION
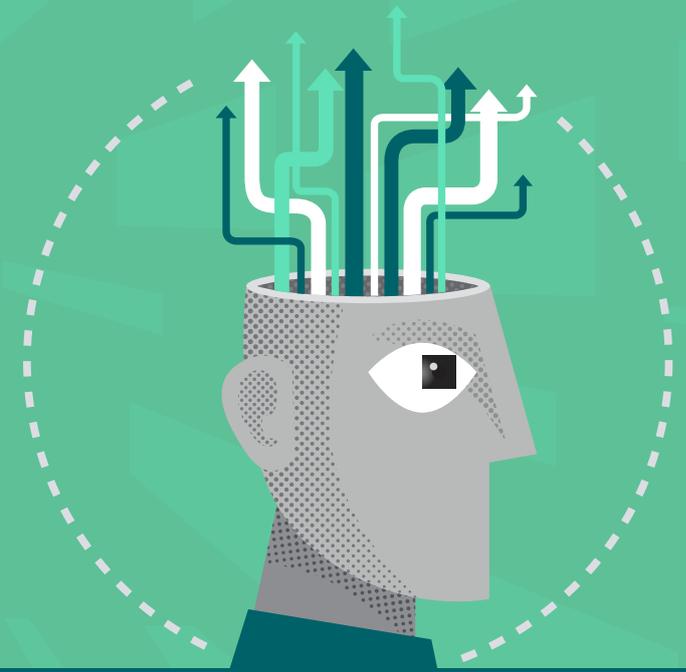
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[3]For more details on this case study go to http://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/article/inspiration-from-isolation

DESIGN
for **policy** and **public services**

Design puts humans at the centre of policy making and problem solving
It recognises that:

Humans are complex

&

Users of services are the experts, so are
· front line staff,
· service managers,
· policy makers,
· other service experts

Listen to them

Design for **policy** and **public services** in a three phase cycle

The **DESIGN** PROCESS

1

Empathise
Understand the human experience to define the real problem
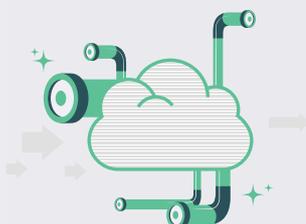
2
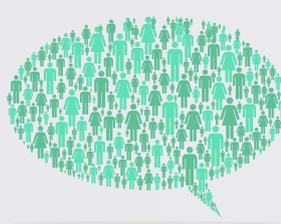
Brainstorm
Look for solutions with open minds

3

Prototype
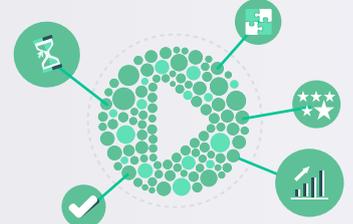Prototype ideas using simple props to show the solution in action

Examples of **TOOLS** TO USE

Shadow and observe users in the field using services

'Bodystorming' get up on your feet, interact with possible solutions

Play out the solution, observe all reactions and interactions