

# Moving towards user-centred services in the public sector

**A movement has begun in the Irish public sector to embed Service Design as an innovative approach to conquer political and cultural divides in public organisations. Service Design utilises practical and scalable tools and techniques to address everyday problems by creating services which are more useful, usable, efficient and user-centred. There are many steps on the road to introducing Service Design as a sustainable approach to the point that it becomes instilled into the culture of an organisation across all departments and staff levels. This article examines approaches to enable public sector organisations to embrace and implement Service Design tools and methodologies as demonstrated through two stories; one from a higher education institution and the other a local county council.**

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## Introduction

Public service organisations are currently under pressure to change and become more responsive to user needs, particularly in the areas of policy development, program design and service delivery (McPhee, 2009). Every organisation, whether private or public, has a unique culture with practices and traditions, which influence improvement and success (Kezar and Eckel, 2002). Design is a major contributing factor in the transformation of products and services for all types of organisations. Design led innovation can make public services more efficient and effective and at the same time deliver faster, clearer services that meet real user needs. It can help to change both the customer and organisation's behaviour through practical problem solving which can shape both the user and provider's experience with a service over time. Organisations of this kind can become more effective by using design techniques to influence change (Brown, 2009) but the complexity and changeability of them makes it difficult to garner a clear path (Cameron, 1978). In order to discuss how to embed Service Design in the public sector, first we must examine what Service Design is.

## What is Service Design?

Service Design is a holistic, integrative approach that uses a wide range of tools and methods to deliver more value primarily to the end user but also creating a more efficient and effective organisation in the process. User experience and the

involvement of users in the co-design process is paramount to what Service Design stands for (Holmlid, 2009; Moritz, 2005). The Service Design process begins with initial information and insight gathering, through to defining the right problem and delivering a solution to fix this problem.

There are a number of challenges when introducing a new methodology and Service Design does not happen in isolation. It involves changing mind-sets, reframing problems, changing existing work practices, encouraging more collaborative cross-functional activities and ultimately cultivating a more human-centred and creative culture. Indeed, Martin (2009) points out that an organisation needs to build skills to change organisational processes and norms over time and 'sow *creativity across traditionally administrative functions*'.

A key issue with Service Design seems to be the difficulty in selling it to organisations. Due to its intangible nature and high variability, designers themselves find it difficult to explain what Service Design really is. Brown (2009) observed that he spent far more time explaining and justifying to clients what design was rather than really doing it. Kimbell (2011) acknowledges that even those that support the application of design thinking have difficulty explaining it. Non-designers feel uncomfortable with the flexible non-linear approach that Service Design brings (Marino, 2011). Martin (2007)

maintains that many business leaders find the lack of structure and predictable outcomes hard to deal with and they have difficulty understanding the language of design. The word design can often bring a sense of mystery to a process and the challenge then is to encourage employees not to be afraid of design and eliminate the perception that they have to be highly creative people to use design tools and techniques. So how can public sector organisations overcome the challenge of using Service Design to transform their organisational culture and achieve user-centred change?

Due to the changeability of the services provided and the culture in which the services operate, there is no single answer to how to effectively embed Service Design methodologies within the public sector. However, through application and evaluation of two applied case studies, the authors propose an approach to the effective introduction and sustainable application of Service Design methodologies within the public sector.

#### The case studies

Action research, as the name suggests, refers to a class of research methods where interventions are part of the research process. It stems from the basic contention that complex social processes can be best studied by introducing changes into these processes and observing the effects of the changes (Porter et al., 2012). The action research case studies discussed in this article took place in two distinctly different areas of the public sector.

Fingal County Council (FCC) is a local authority north of Dublin with offices at Swords and Blanchardstown. They serve a geographical location of 452.sq km which spans rural, urban and suburban communities. They are consistently seeking new ways to both engage with the community and to efficiently and effectively meet their customer's needs. Service Design offered the potential to provide new and adjusted services in an innovative way.

FCC was involved in an intensive one day workshop, which aimed to provide an introduction to Service Design methodologies, taught through the treatment of a specific issue. Tools were

taught to a sufficient level to allow application and development beyond the scope of the workshop. The workshop was used to address and explore two key areas:

- Development of an integrated customer service centre: What are the effects of a single point customer service desk on back-office operations and what resulting changes are required to facilitate this new approach?
- Redesigning the foyer: How can the foyer space be utilised to further engage with the customer and improve their overall customer experience?

It quickly became evident that the use of a single point customer service desk would have a significant effect on the delivery of services and would require the consideration of its effect on each of the services provided. Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) is a publicly funded higher education provider. It is the largest of Ireland's network of thirteen Institutes of Technology and currently has in the region of 15,000 registered students. As part of CIT's plan to transform and streamline services for students in a higher education institution, a pilot project was initiated to re-design some key business processes within the student lifecycle.

The RECAP project (Review and Enhancement of CIT's Admissions Processes), aimed to make some of the services for part-time students more useful, usable, efficient and student-centred. The project focused on reviewing and improving the part-time student experience from offer accepted to in class, ready for learning. At CIT, each stage of the student lifecycle, from prospect to alumni, was treated as distinct separate interactions. Prior to the project, the flow of the student and their experience through the lifecycle had not been considered from a service point of view. Each department worked to provide a service to a student at that particular point in time without considering the overall customer experience. Many students were directed from one helpdesk to another and wandered around campus in a muddled state.

So drawing on these case studies, what can we learn about adapting Service Design methodologies for application in the public sector? How can we overcome the barriers of an unfamiliar methodology to create true

user value provided in a more efficient and effective way?

#### Embedding Service Design in the public sector

As Service Design is a new practice, its implementation needs to ensure that this new approach becomes how we do things rather than a one-off project. It is important to embed design thinking into an organisation but this cannot happen overnight and will take time, effort and careful structuring. By capturing learnings from a range of projects, and illustrated through two case studies, the authors will provide five recommendations for applying a Service Design approach in the public sector.

#### 1. Limit Service Design lingo

Service Design methodologies initially evolved to establish and develop services for private organisations. As such, the terminology used often reflects this. Beckman & Barry (2007) define design thinking as a problem solving process that involves actors from many disciplines using tools, methods and language that are diverse from normal everyday business function. For example, the use of phrases such as customers and value proposition, which may not be appropriate for the public sector and can cause an immediate barrier when first approaching public organisations to undertake the Service Design process. This is further exasperated by a lack of familiarity with Service Design specific terminology, for instance Customer Journey Mapping or Personas. By adapting the lingo to reflect what is typically used in the participating organisation, the understanding of the overall Service Design process can be simplified.

For example, in the FCC case study, staff referred to their service users as members of the public and so this phrase was used throughout the workshop. When reviewing the current service provision, rather than mapping the journey, workshop participants were asked to capture the current service process. Although the formal service terminology was verbally referenced, terminology used throughout the workshop was tailored to reflect that already used in the organisation. This both prevented confusion and facilitated the understanding of the Service Design approach in the context of their own organisation.

Indeed, when workshops were conducted at CIT, the customers became students and the language of design was toned down. As an institute, the intent should be to fulfil the needs of students, which can sometimes mean treating them as customers. Previously when implementing change at CIT, words like process and streamline and re-engineering were used. This language needed to become more user-centred so that it was understood by everyone. Swapping these words for a softer lingo: simple steps, good experience, easily understood, clear actions, improve the experience, provide an efficient service for, support staff and students are phrases that were used on the road to transformation.

## 2. Get management buy-in

Convincing management that Service Design tools work, bringing people together and helping them to focus on delivering more value is a big step on the road to change. Leaders can encourage more experimentation, and by using Service Design as a tool, they can develop value for customers at every touchpoint. The service interface as mentioned by Moritz (2005) is made up of a number of touchpoints that the user of the service has with an organisation. A touchpoint is an interaction point with one of the elements of the service offering.

The difficult part is getting people to believe the message and that can only come from a credible design leader, someone who has earned trust and a reputation for delivering change, based on the needs of the participants. Liedtka (2010) underlines that designers, managers and leaders need to work together, helping each other to innovate and build expertise and competency to create a modern organisation. It is recognised that unless management are driving change through the use of these new design techniques then adoption will be difficult. To get positive buy-in and support from senior management, you need to demonstrate that a Service Design approach can help to:

- define and solve challenges
- stimulate innovation
- transform the organisation into a more agile, proactive, and efficient one

Ultimately, the best way to get buy-in is to demonstrate the results and benefits; the outcomes should speak for themselves.

In the FCC case study, high level management were the instigators of change and committed their time to the workshop and implementing change. They realised the need to engage with staff to gain insight into the current service and build staff support for future change. At the beginning of the workshop, it was made clear that it was a neutral space, where all opinions were valid. Information and opinions provided were strictly confidential and staff were encouraged to voice their opinions. This gave management an opportunity to hear from staff in a structured format and then take their ideas and co-develop them into real solutions. This openness of management to engage with and listen to staff demonstrated both the value they placed on their staff's expertise, and their willingness to implement change. This was appreciated by staff who took the opportunity to share their experience of the service and where they felt improvements could be made.

At CIT, the initial requirement for change came from staff who were frustrated with the existing process because of the downstream inefficiencies it created. After surveying part-time students who also voiced their frustration with the existing process, this evidence was used to convince management that a new approach was required and to formally initiate the RECAP pilot project. It was clear after this first project that Service Design was an obvious solution for many of the problems CIT faced. The project generated a buzz and excitement that had not been seen in the past. It was clear that steps needed to be taken to keep this momentum going and to gain commitment from management to this new way of working. This was not as easy as expected and ownership of the steps and improvements was not clear when the following cycle of part-time student induction came around.

## 3. Involve front and back-office staff

When designing services it is important to consider both front-office operations (those elements of the service which come into direct contact with the user), the back-office operations (those elements of the service which the user does not typically interact with) and the overlap between them. Due to the typically large size of public sector organisations, it can be difficult to gain a

clear view of a service in its totality. In order to effectively capture and redesign a service, both front and back-office staff participation is required, at all levels, including management. This captures the complete service comprising both formal and informal operations which can have a substantial effect on the final service design. This is especially required in bigger organisations where there may be a significant gap between the management who can change the service format, and the front-line staff who provide it. Harris & Albury (2009) consider that current methods of innovation are not fit-for-purpose for several reasons but mainly because they do not include actors in the co-creation process such as front-line workers and customers. As such, it is imperative that, when undertaking a service re-design within a public organisation, all stakeholders involved in the delivery of the service must participate.

During the FCC workshop, eleven employees across six areas participated (Organisational Development; IT; Architecture; Administration; Planning; Operations). Key insights were provided by the front-line staff in relation to informal lines of information and reoccurring issues reported by service users. For example, switch board staff were located directly behind the reception area. It was suggested by management that they be moved away from the front desk to a back-office operation. However, front-line staff noted that the current location of the switch provided them with up to date information which facilitated them in their service provision. This informal line of discussion would have been missed if not for the front and back-office staff contribution during the workshops.

Focusing on the front-stage is extremely important but ignoring the back-stage processes is detrimental to the success of delivering a great user experience. At CIT, it was realised that collaboration across silos and between front-stage and back-stage staff was essential to designing better services. Workshops that are properly facilitated make great use of people's time during the design process. Workshops were used to engage participants to creatively look at a particular problem which enabled cross-functional conversations. These initial workshops to map the existing process were attended by a

wide variety of academic, administrative and technical staff. A total of 52 staff attended three sessions and included everyone from department managers to department secretaries, programme co-ordinators, front-line admissions and fees staff to IT services technicians. The workshops provided a suite of tools to the participants that would allow them to exploit their own knowledge, experience and creative potential resulting in the ability to create relevant, innovative and practical solutions in their own work. The consequence was a multi-disciplinary creative and collaborative process bringing all people together engaged with a common challenge.

#### 4. Adapt the toolset

A methodology needs to be in place to guide the designer and participants through the stages of a typical process. There exist many toolkits that enable groups to work together to create solutions, the Collective Action Toolkit from FROG Design, Double-Diamond from the Design Council, Stanford D.School Methods and the Service Design toolkit from the SPIDER European project. Although a methodology and toolkit are not essential for designing a new service, they do provide a framework for being more open and collaborative and can be used in conjunction with existing practices. Tools such as Customer Journey Mapping and Service Blueprinting represent the existing journey of a user while Personas and Stakeholder Maps help to build up a profile of a typical customer.

The process of embedding Service Design can be complicated by many differing opinions on what constitutes a service provider. For instance, in FCC where they produce guidelines for the public, some staff may consider this a service, while others, due to the physical leaflet produced, may not. To facilitate a united understanding of what is actually being provided, it is often necessary to expand the perspective of what a service is. In the leaflet example, it can be argued that the service is the generation and capture of the knowledge within the leaflet which holds the true value, rather than the leaflet itself. In order to broaden the perceptions of the service, a combination of appropriate tools must be used which expand the concept of what the service is. Additional tools can then be used to explore what the service could be.

At FCC, each tool was carefully chosen to allow it to build upon its predecessor. Staff learned how to use each tool by directly applying them to their specific issue. The objective of using the initial SPIDER tool Framing: Context and Objectives, was to create an agreed consensus on the attributes of the current service, the key service users involved and the future aims of the service. This both broadened staffs perspective of what constitutes a service, and placed the Service Design process within the context of their own organisation. The second SPIDER tool, Service Concept: User Journeys, was used to capture the current service provision, including formal and informal processes from the front and back-office perspective. Solutions were then brainstormed and a draft of the potential solution presented through a second iteration of the Service Concept: User Journeys tool. This structured approach provided a logical and relatable structure to the Service Design process and allowed staff to see the potential for their own organisation.

At CIT, new tools were introduced to stakeholders and were well received and understood. Initial interaction at workshops was slow but improved later during the Customer Journey Mapping and Ideation workshops when users became more collaborative and focused on the common goal of a positive student experience. The innovative approach to break down barriers was to engage these stakeholders to draw up a Service Blueprint, viewed entirely from the end-user perspective. The use of Service Design techniques, in particular, Service Blueprinting can support this service view and aid in innovating and transforming the student experience within higher education (Bitner et al., 2012). The touchpoints were analysed and using swim-lanes, all front and back stage operations were identified and the features of the service were laid out, perhaps for the first time, in its totality. Service Blueprinting has been used in many projects at CIT, as the layout and simplicity of the tool allows participants to quickly map out the existing process by separating the front-stage and back-stage operations by way of a line of visibility.

### 5. Get the quick wins

A quick win is an improvement that is obvious, has instant impact, and can be

delivered quickly. With any change initiative, achievable, short-term targets need to be set that, once accomplished, will motivate people to persist and keep trying. The celebration from quick-wins will create buy-in for future change projects. It is important to consider current work habits and communication styles of individuals and groups, and attempting to change these to leverage more sophisticated alternatives. Existing research seems to differ in relation to whether a change initiative should start as a small scale innovation or a large-scale cultural transformation. Change takes time and should be nurtured over a number of years and it is important to note that the public sector does not have the resources to deal with an all-or-nothing approach. These small quick-wins must have the support of management otherwise they will fail. In the FCC case study, identifying bottlenecks in the customer journey which could be quickly remedied through well thought out signage offered a simple but effective quick win. Similarly, brainstorming ways to encourage community engagement through an adaptive space also proved fruitful. This space could be quickly and easily adapted to provide private meeting spaces, a display space for local community groups or FCC developments. The adaptability of the space allowed sustainable engagement to fulfilling customer needs.

At CIT, some simple quick wins included training for front-line staff and department managers and sending information to new students by email rather than by post. Other changes included a new campus map, improved signage for our IT helpdesk, which many students previously did not know existed, and a new virtual campus tour. A QuickStart guide was designed and implemented in both online and printed formats. There was a step-by-step journey required for new students to become in class, ready for learning and each step contained short two-minute how-to videos such as how to enrol for modules online. Many staff members also found these guides useful.

### 6. Plan to measure your success

Evaluating the effectiveness of services can be difficult as certain elements are simply a matter of opinion. For example, how do you measure the atmosphere of a restaurant or the approachability of staff? In

order to measure the success of any project, there is a need to collect baseline data in a planned and structured way. It is important to consider what is being evaluated (e.g. efficiency, customer experience, customer loyalty, adaptability), how best to evaluate it (e.g. surveys, focus groups, workshops, service blueprinting) and when is it most appropriate to gather the data (e.g. immediately after the service, annually, at the front-office).

At FCC, staff were keen to gather feedback on the new service and structure changes. A feedback box was already placed at the reception, but had limited use, either because of its location or the format of feedback (customers were unwilling to complete the slip). Instead, staff proposed to proactively seek feedback through direct engagement with customers. Front-line staff were asked to informally gather information from customers during the service. This was supported through a suggestions box, placed in a prominent position in the foyer. Trends, both positive and negative, would be gathered and shared back to management to allow amendments if necessary.

At CIT, there were some obvious efficiencies and triumphs such as queues at the part-time office being reduced by 50 per cent on the previous year and student portal traffic up by 24 per cent mainly because students were now being directed online to find key information. Opening hours of central services were extended until 7:00pm when most part-time students were on campus. The Kick-Off @ CIT fold-out guide that was produced for part-time students, with information on contact details, key calendar dates, FAQs and library information, was a huge success. This was used as part of a new induction process that was introduced for part-time students and not only did new students benefit from it but part-time staff also found the information invaluable. Everyone now had the right information at the right time.

#### Conclusion

Although Service Design can help organisations to design and implement new kinds of value in the public sector, the transition to using its tools and approaches can be difficult. The aim is to ensure that the Service Design process used to implement change becomes how we do things rather

than a unique event. It is important to embed design thinking into the organisation but this cannot happen overnight and will take some time. Removing the initial barriers by reducing unfamiliar terminology and using an appropriate toolset, allows Service Design to be placed in the context of the organisation. Its use within the public sector is then clearer, and staff are more comfortable using it to both generate and implement ideas. Involvement of staff at all levels, from management to front-line, ensures that the service is understood in its entirety, and the support is there to implement true change in a collaborative way. In the short term, quick wins provide incentives to continue with the process, despite any challenges which may occur. In the long term, evaluation provides feedback on improvements from the larger customer market, while highlighting any service elements which still may require change.

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