FEATURE
Co-creation in service design

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Table of Contents

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When we look at design in all of its many forms, we find numerous examples of manifested, perceivable objects that demonstrate the vision of the designer. Sitting in an Arne Jacobsen chair, holding a William Morris fabric, or using the latest piece of technology from Tokyo, Seoul, or Cupertino, we are acutely aware of the sensibilities of the designer (or design team) that informed the form and the function of the thing with which we are interacting. Interactions like these lead to the notion of "genius design," where the designer plays the role of an absolute authority whose natural instincts produce a considered, desirable experience.

Genius design may well work for something that will be built—whether software, hardware, furniture, an environment, or any other tangible form our design might take. But how well does it work when we design for less tangible experiences? If there is nothing that can be seen, touched, or used that clearly embodies the whim of the designer, how does the role of the designer change?

The (relatively) recently developed practice of service design seeks to address exactly these types of problems, concerning itself with applying the thinking learned from crafting well-considered, tangible experiences to those that do not terminate in a single product at a single moment in time, such as our experience of interacting with our cell phone provider, using our bank account, or when we visit a hospital.

At first glance, the process involved with a typical service-design project doesn't look too different from that of any other design project. Broadly, there are phases of discovery (learning about the context in which the service will be delivered), design (ideation and design of the service itself), and delivery (delivering the new service concept to the client, and working with the client to implement it). In a project where the end result is a somewhat "static" experience, this usually results in a fairly clear set of end deliverables [1].

Services present a different challenge, however. They are produced and consumed in the same moment—an interaction with a service does not exist until a customer initiates it by phoning a call center or sitting down in a restaurant. In their book *Total Design: Managing the Design Process in the Service Sector*, Gillian and Bill Hollins outline exactly what differentiates a service from a product. A key distinction is that "the 'people side' of design is more important in a service product and must be

considered right at the start of the process in the specification [2]." The point here is that the quality of a service experience relies, to a huge extent, on the people who will be involved in its delivery. Since very few—if any—services exist that don't involve a person-to-person interaction at some point during the customer's journey through it, it is vital to ensure that those interactions are as carefully considered as any other digital or physical touch point.

So what implications does this have for how a design team works within the context of a service-design project? Because of the nature of the work itself—applying techniques and thinking learned from interaction design to business processes in order to deliver a customer-centric experience—the deliverables are often quite strategic and high level in nature. (Bill Hollins also points out that "whichever form it takes, it must be consistent, easy to use, and be strategically applied [3]," "it" in this context meaning the service-design engagement itself). Typical deliverables of a service-design engagement include service blueprints (a document that "describes a service in enough detail to implement and maintain it carefully"), customer journey frameworks (that describe key stages in the customer's journey through a service and the most important touch points at each of those stages), and a service ecology map (that describes the "system of actors and the relationships between them that form a service"). All of these deliverables could fall under the umbrella of "strategic," intended for senior stakeholders within an organization. There may be communication vehicles (such as filmed scenarios) that clarify the aim of the design project, but these are likely to be pitched as more of a "vision" rather than something that can be easily shared throughout the entire client organization.

The design process itself determines the success or failure of a service-design project. Simply delivering a set of documents to management and hoping that a design's intention somehow filters down throughout the organization is no guarantee that the service experience will be as good as it can be when it eventually reaches the point of delivery. The key role of the design team, then, must be to attempt to engage with all levels of the client organization, from key stakeholders at senior levels right down to those involved in provisioning the service at the point of use. Moreover, focusing on the so-called bottom of the organizational pyramid provides vital insight—the individuals who work at the point of service delivery are among the best resources for learning how well a preexisting service functions. To ensure the best possible service experience, these staff members should be included in the design process on an even deeper level—they should be empowered as co-creators who contribute to the process of innovation itself.

In the "Make It Work" project for the Sunderland City Council, London-based service-design consultancy live|work studio enabled a design process that did exactly this. Agencies and workers, who provide employment support services, were empowered as the co-creators of service concepts. live|work facilitated this by running "engagement events" with the people who would eventually end up providing these services to those who needed them. And by doing this, the support agencies felt a much greater level of ownership over the concepts.

First, some context: Sunderland is a city in northern England, with a manufacturing-based workforce. It has seen increasing levels of economic depression over recent years, coinciding with rising levels of unemployment—26 percent of the working-age population is "economically inactive." The Sunderland City Council engaged live|work to explore how the long-term unemployed—those whose special personal circumstances (for example, health issues) make it difficult for them to find work—could be better engaged by services that supported them back into work.

During the discovery phase of the project, live|work learned that the long-term unemployed tended "not to volunteer themselves for government employment programs [4]." There were already such programs in place provided by central government and the Sunderland City Council, but these tended to be aimed at the wider unemployed community and unable to support the specific needs of the long-term unemployed. Therefore, there was a real need for this group to be engaged by the local communities who understood the challenges they faced and who could provide the level of support necessary to rehabilitate them back in to society and subsequently back into work. The most important part of the discovery phase, however, was talking to those support agencies that already worked within the community and offered exactly the sort of assistance that the unemployed needed. live|work discovered these agencies were all trying to provide valuable and necessary support, but there was often overlap in their offerings, as well as a lack of communication between agencies,

possibly hampering the progress of their clients.

To solve this, the live|work team outlined a five-stage client journey that detailed how a long-term unemployed person would reenter the world of work, from "wellness" to "sustained work," and provided a high-level framework within which each agency could map their involvement.

The most crucial part of the project was a series of "engagement events" organized by the design team. In these sessions, live|work gathered all of the support agencies in the Make It Work program, presented their findings from the research phase and suggested themes to be explored, and then moderated breakout sessions for generating program concepts.

These breakout sessions proved especially valuable. Rather than the "genius approach" of designers generating concepts in the studio or inviting a client in for a brainstorm session, live|work team members facilitated a design process that brought together workers from different agencies who delivered care. During these concept-generation sessions, the agency staff members directly addressed how they felt service could be improved, based on the research that live|work presented. They brainstormed outside of the constraints of their work environment, freeing them to consider a broader set of options.

Another issue this innovation exercise addressed was the disconnect between the agencies live|work had observed—by mixing workers from different agencies and having them work collaboratively, live|work enabled the formation of new connections between staff at different agencies that had not previously communicated well. The new networks, enabled by the process of co-creation, formed much of the foundation for successful service delivery and allowed for the development of a cohesive, connected set of support services.

The Make It Work project ultimately acted as an umbrella, bringing support agencies together, enabling communication between them, and unifying the client's experience of service delivery. The program is ongoing and expanding, and the results so far are impressive: In one area of Sunderland alone, 966 people are currently moving through the program at different support agencies, and 206 have found work.

As Gillian and Bill Hollins remind us, "Everybody can be creative. It is simply a case of teaching people how to be open to experiences beyond their own.... Allow them the opportunity to use their creative skills and give them the environment in which they can be creative [2]." In this sense, live|work's approach to the Make It Work project demonstrates that when designers take the backseat and actively involve individuals from all levels of an organization in the innovation process—empowering them as co-creators of service concepts—they can develop a more cohesive experience at the point of use. Following the genius design approach of a design team that maintains control over the innovation process before handing off deliverables at the end of the project would have meant missing vital nuances. By opening up the design process in this manner, live|work identified crucial factors that led to the project's continued success.

↑ Acknowledgments

With great thanks to Richard Telford and the rest of the live|work family.

↑ References

1. I use "static" here with advisement—the inference being that the user experience remains largely unchanged from one interaction to the next (I'd hope that my chair behaved the same way each time I sat in it.)

2. Hollins, G. and B. Hollins. *Total Design—Managing the Design Process in The Service Sector.* London: Pitman, 1991.

3. Hollins, B. "What is Service Design?" *Design Council*, 24 November 2006.

4. live|work Studio. "Sunderland: Make It Work Case Study." Accessed 16 November 2008. <http://www.livework.co.uk/case-studies/sunderland-make-it-work>

↑ Author

Ben currently works as an interaction designer at IDEO in Palo Alto. He has facilitated workshops at Adaptive Path's UX Week, spoken at the Berkeley iSchool, and was an invited participant and speaker at Design Engaged. Prior to IDEO, he spent time designing future mobile interactions at Samsung Design Europe, creating services for public and private sector clients at live|work Studio, and building multi-channel digital experiences in one of the UK's first full service agencies, Oyster Partners.

↑ Footnotes

↓ Figures

Figure. One of the Make It Work engagement events in action.
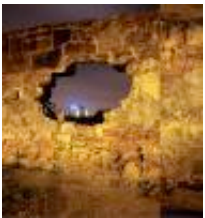
Figure. The city of Sunderland, on the northeast coast of England, has been the site of rising unemployment. Local officials engaged live|work to study how best to serve and recapture workers who have endured long-term joblessness.

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