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Design Thinking for Public Service Excellence

How design thinking approaches can achieve public policy objectives

THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The 21st century experience highlights the widening gulf between the sophistication of contemporary challenges on the one side, and the ability of the governments' organizational, procedural and methodological tools to handle that sophistication on the other. Among the contemporary challenges are inter-connected and diffused economic and social patterns, more complex problems, blurred governance boundaries and reduced trust in public action.

Governments have so far tended to cope with these developments by engineering increasingly refined solutions without denaturing the intrinsic organizational and cultural rationale of public service. Governments are now required to work at the intersection of multi-disciplinary, multi-actor knowledge. To answer the right questions correctly, solutions are less likely to be found in any one single silo, however sophisticated it may be, but in a mix. Governments need innovative approaches, which is what design thinking offers.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF DESIGN THINKING

'Design' is what links creativity (the generation of new ideas) and innovation (the successful exploitation of new ideas). Design shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Increasingly, the notion of design is expanding into shaping public decisions – and this is when design becomes 'strategic'.

Design thinking puts end-users' needs at the centre of the policy formulation system. It is an explicit human and user-centred approach. It leads to solutions that are progressively refined through an iterative process of providing voice to end-users and engaging them in shaping decisions (professional empathy and co-creation); considering multiple cause of and diversified perspectives to the problems at hand (scaling); and experiment with initial ideas (prototyping and testing). Design thinking seeks to stimulate creative thinking within the decision-making process and accelerate the synthesis of increasingly effective and efficient policy solutions.

Figure 1: The design thinking approach

Source: d.School, Stanford University

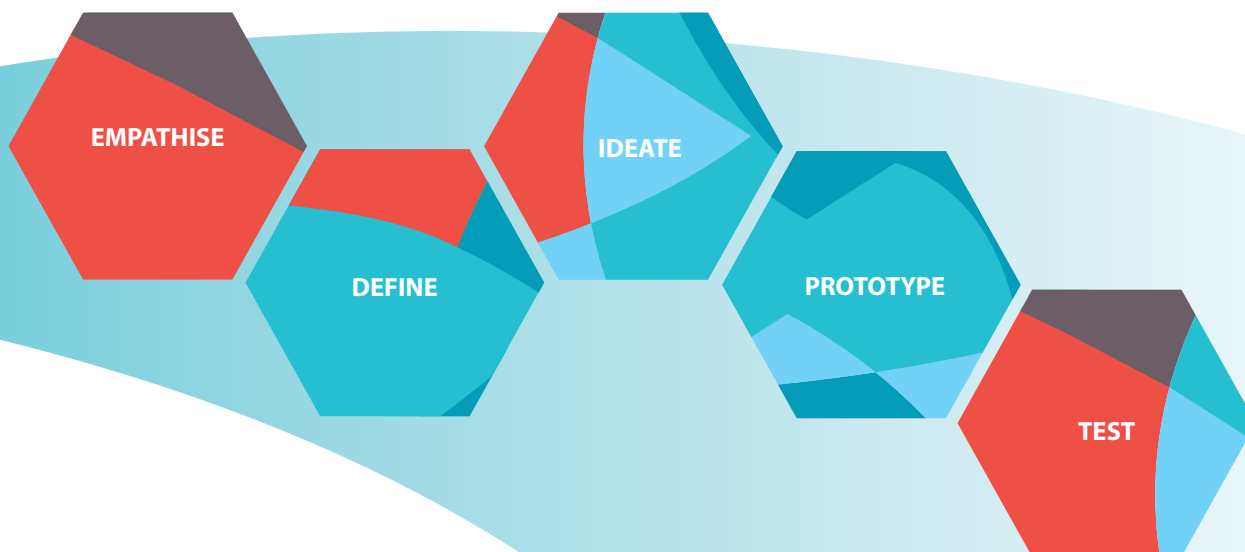
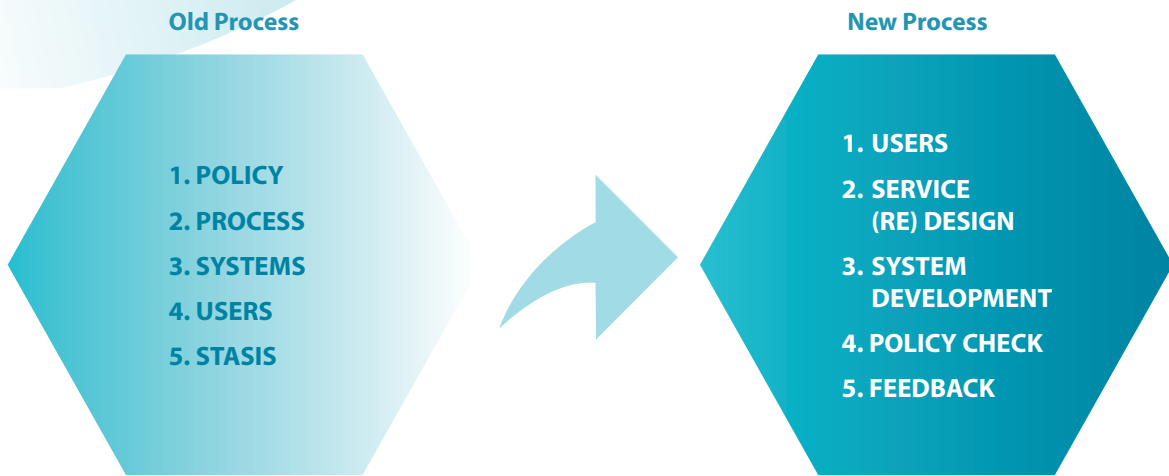


Figure 2: From the old to the new decision-making



Source: adapted from Bracken (2013)

DESIGN THINKING FOR PROBLEM DEFINITION

A decision-making process informed by design is more likely to be successful if strategic designers are brought in at the earliest stages of decision-making, when abstract and theoretical delineation meets with conceptualization geared towards more concrete outcome demands. Framing the problem correctly from the start is a pre-condition for the effective unfolding of the phases of policy formulation, development, adoption and implementation. Designers act as stewards¹ for enhanced interactions both across administrative compartments and on the interface between the public administration and the ‘real world’.

If implemented well, design thinking approaches helps improve decision-making, contributing to a more comprehensive problem definition; reduced risks of duplications, inconsistencies or overlaps; minimized unintended consequences and more legitimized and effective decisions.



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¹ ‘Stewardship’ is here defined as the core ability of agents of change to successfully translate ideas into practice to achieve the desired outcomes. The concept is preferred to the notions of ‘implementation’ or ‘execution’ because these imply that making designed ideas operational is not a neat, linear and unidirectional process. At the same time, stewardship is conceptually more than mere ‘facilitation’.

PUTTING DESIGN THINKING TO WORK IN ORGANIZATIONS

Design thinking has the potential to unleash a wide series of positive spiral effects with regard both to the unfolding of the internal organization (e.g. human resources management, leadership and career patterns, procedural and thematic coordination) and the external interface with stakeholders and end-users. Design thinking challenges traditional decision-making. It requires specific skills rarely available in public sector environments, such as ethnography, behavioural sciences, communication, design and architecture. It also breaks down organizational and procedural silos, contesting established hierarchies or bureaucratic categories.

How to address the challenges of institutionalizing design thinking

▶ **Advancing through iteration** – Design thinkers deny that the approach must lead to revolutionary change. The opposite is true: it cannot. Public sector innovators cannot develop new, parallel realities in isolation. Switching off healthcare or the financial system, while redesigning a new order from the outside-in, is not an option. Public sector innovation must ultimately be built amidst and within the old. Innovation laboratories advance on a 'project' basis, i.e. through typically small-scale and local (controllable) initiatives that deliver meaningful impacts, prove effectiveness and, possibly, create momentum. If fixing healthcare is a purposeful change, working with a specific community to redesign care for a specific disease or condition is a project. If addressing climate change is a worthy call to action, building a low-carbon community in a particular place is a clearly defined project. As such, projects allow the necessary iterative approach to progressively create framework conditions for institutionalized design thinking.

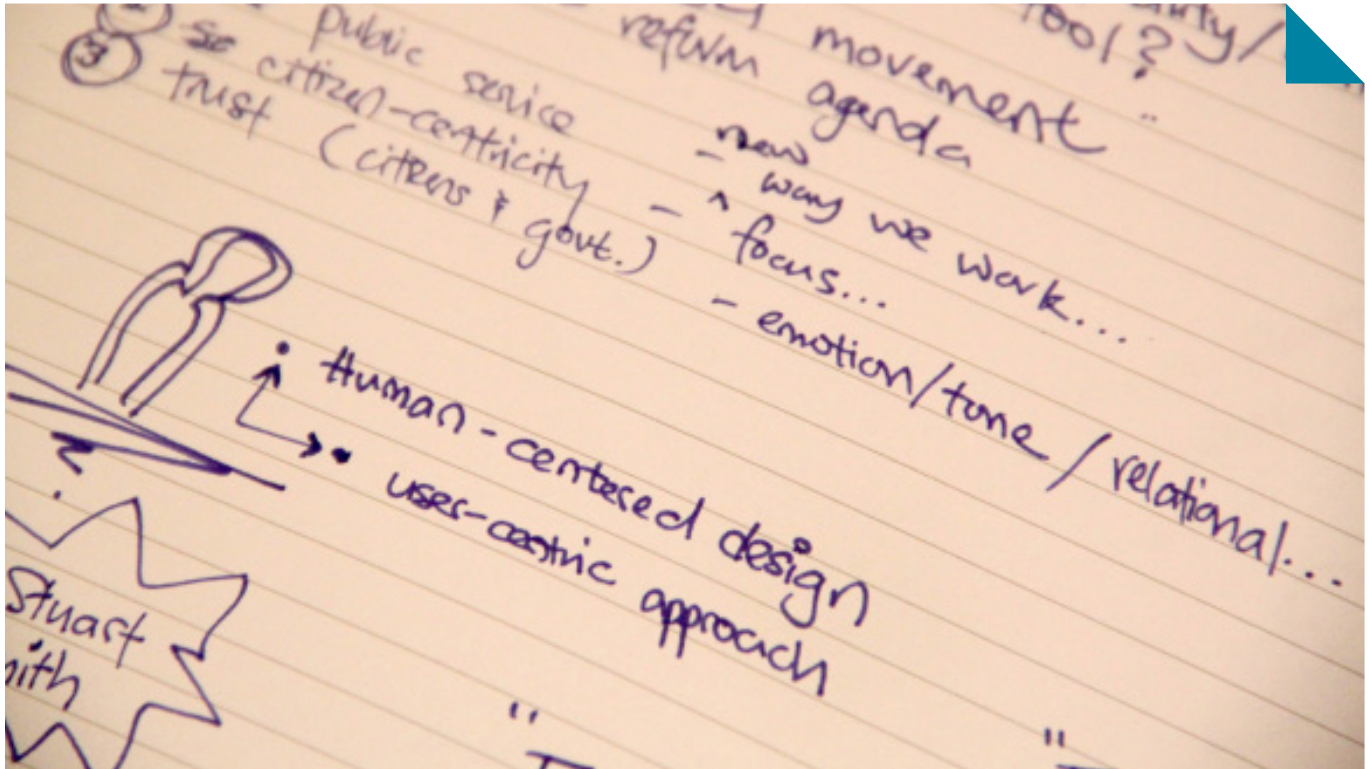
▶ **Design labs** – Design labs try to create free spaces where new behaviour can emerge. They disentangle the dominant bureaucratic culture informing the public sector. Examples of visible design thinking labs can be found in Australia, Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States as well as in non-Western countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand. Direct affiliation with the government is an asset but not a precondition. How labs approach decision-making is more important than the end-result, although successful projects bear significant potential for lesson-drawing and the progressive institutionalization of design thinking. For this reason, the logistical arrangements of design labs are as relevant as the type of expertise they manage to mobilize.

▶ **Focusing on public service delivery** – A critical juncture in mainstreaming design thinking practices appears to be the distinction between applying decision thinking to public service delivery as opposed to policy formulation. A number of concrete public service delivery projects applying design thinking are carried out at the local level. Regarding policy making, however, where more uniformity and legal certainty are arguably required, the institutionalization of design thinking in decision-making still appears as a goal to aspire to.

▶ **Addressing values** – Existing tools might be used to support the mainstreaming of design thinking, including for example regulatory impact analysis. Yet design thinking is likely to become more institutionalized if it results from a new social contract arrangement in which there is more trust in the well-intentioned nature and effectiveness of the 'trial-and-error' and 'learning-by-doing' approaches. One of the main preconditions for successfully institutionalized design thinking is being comfortable with 'uncertainty'. It also requires a system of adequate incentives for bureaucrats to engage in this experimental mode, for which failures are to be considered and valued as much as progress in the quest for effective solutions. At present, most bureaucratic paradigms hamper civil servants' entrepreneurship. A public manager taking risks for innovative solutions tends to gain little individual reward (benefits are diffused and indirect at best) even with positive outcome, yet faces considerable individual blame (for not following administrative procedures and rules) in case of failure.

“Systemic and inter-connected problems need systemic and inter-connected solutions.”

Brown/Wyatt (2010:35)



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Design thinking does not seem to necessitate specific preliminary governance capacities which, if lacking, would prevent developing countries from embracing it. However, design thinking requires skills that developing countries might find particularly challenging to exploit within the public decision-making process. A number of factors may affect the propensity of emerging societies to appreciate the nature and benefits of design thinking, including political and social resistance, degree of maturity and self-awareness of individuals and civil society as a whole, deference to authority; and power distance between the state and citizens. In many contexts, citizens prefer or are used to being guided and taken care of by the state. In many transition countries, individual entrepreneurship has been repressed for decades. In emerging economies, civil society and citizenship are not as mature as design thinking would envisage. Also, where the framework conditions appear to be favourable, there might be specific contexts in which innovative approaches are resisted. Values must also be factored into the innovation equation.

Expectations about what design thinking can deliver must be managed. This requires informed communication strategies to explain the nature and role of design in decision-making to citizens, stakeholders, policymakers and agents of bureaucracy. Training and concrete involvement in projects are key – literally bringing public administrators outside their office, confronting them with real-life situations; and helping them directly grasp users' challenges and expectations.

For a more detailed coverage of Design Thinking please refer to the full paper, authored by Lorenzo Allio (Director, allio|rodrigo consulting).