

Three Narrative Techniques for Engagement and Action in Design-Led Innovation

Abstract The design-led innovation framework enables organizations to systematically develop the design capabilities they need to pursue their innovation objectives. When a design researcher works in tandem with organizational stakeholders to implement the framework, the dynamic they create is complex. This article relates our efforts to apply narratives as a tool to effectively drive this process forward, given their demonstrated ability to sustain organizational innovation and frame new possibilities. During an eighteen-month action research project, we implemented the design-led innovation framework inside an Australian Airport Corporation. Our research revealed that three narrative techniques – low-fidelity narratives, realistic narratives, and strategy narratives – particularly supported several key stages of this creative innovation process. Narratives enabled us to surface internally-held assumptions and beliefs and test their validity with external customers and stakeholders; they established common ground among various stakeholders during the innovation process; they served to convince managers to pursue design-led innovation outputs; and they facilitated the co-creation and implementation of a company-wide strategy. This article contributes new knowledge and practical guidance for developing and applying narrative techniques during design-led innovation.

Keywords

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Storytelling

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Managers are no strangers to the idea that design can drive their efforts to innovate.¹ Changes in customer preferences, technologies, and market trends have exposed the pitfalls of existing business development methods and methodologies.² As a result, the business community, policy creators, and governments have all begun to harness design to shift away from existing methods of value creation.³ But organizations that seek to benefit from design can find it difficult to adopt and integrate design as a viable mechanism for value creation.⁴

Design-led innovation is a framework developed by Sam Bucolo, Cara Wrigley, and Judy Matthews to systematically develop design capability among organizational stakeholders as they pursue their innovation objectives.⁵ Studies focusing on its implementation inside various organizations have shown that it can successfully impact innovation performance.⁶ Wrigley has also identified the practices and principles guiding what she terms the Design Innovation Catalyst (the “catalyst,” or “innovation catalyst”) as expert implementer of design-led innovation.⁷ However, uncertainty still surrounds techniques that support framework implementation, given its fluid nature and the catalyst’s shifting role across organizational domains. Narratives can be useful tools for sustaining organizational innovation⁸ and framing new possibilities.⁹ Yet techniques to apply narratives during design-led innovation remain an area for exploration.

In this article, we present findings from an action research project in which we implemented the design-led innovation framework within an Australian Airport Corporation over a period of eighteen months.¹⁰ The research question underpinning this inquiry was, “How can narrative techniques support the different phases of design-led innovation implementation?,” a question that acknowledges the organization’s pre-existing desire to build design capability through design-led innovation. For the purpose of this study, the embedded action researcher becomes an innovation catalyst – an agent of change within the organization.¹¹

We begin this article by presenting the literature establishing design-led innovation framework and the Design Innovation Catalyst, together with a short critique of the framework. Next we review the literature on narratives and storytelling. Thirdly, we present the present research design and methodology, beginning with insight into the case study context before shifting to operational aspects of the methodology. After this, we report and discuss our findings after implementing three distinct narrative techniques intended to overcome temporality related challenges inherent to the framework of design-led innovation.¹² The article concludes with implications and directions for future research.

Design-Led Innovation and the Design Innovation Catalyst

In an increasingly competitive and uncertain world, an organization’s ability to innovate has become a means not only for growth, but survival. The relationship between design and innovation is well acknowledged as a beneficial one.¹³ Organizations that previously considered design as an extra component now look to the discipline as a source of innovation and leadership – the recent transformation of IBM is but one example of this.¹⁴ However, the journey towards increased design capability inside organizations has proven to be a challenging one, as the case-by-case nature of design – identified by Steven Kyffin and Paul Gardien¹⁵ – often conflicts with standardization efforts that underpin operations at performance-oriented organizations. These challenges often manifest in cultural resistance to design as a new way of thinking and doing.¹⁶

The design-led innovation framework (Figure 1) promotes the possibilities of design beyond the organization’s operational domain toward the territory of strategic design. The purpose of the framework is to help organizations develop

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