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Design Research and Practice for the Public Good: A Reflection

Abstract Public sector managers and policymakers have begun to work with design researchers and design practitioners in an effort to create citizen-centric polices and user-centered public services. What role can design play in the approach taken by the public sector in organizational development and innovation? This paper reflects on an innovation project at a Brazilian Ministry where human-centered design was chosen as an approach to integrate innovation efforts among different government agencies and ministries. It offers an example of how human-centered design approaches can support efforts by civil servants to change their own design practices.

People, Products, Change

Organizational change remains a key issue for management and a challenge for leadership. Richard J. Boland and Fred Collopy[1] position managing as a design practice, while scholars like Richard Buchanan[2] demonstrate why management theories constitute design theories. Their insights are relevant not only for the private sector—they are increasingly relevant for public administration and management. Design research and design studies offer a new path to organizational change and development by shedding light on organizational design practices, principles, and methods across all organizational forms.[3] A deeper understanding of design is beginning to inform public organizations and governments looking to change the way they go about their business.

Both our notion of design and our understanding of its role and relevance to organizational change continue to advance. Even though researchers approach these issues from different disciplinary perspectives, there is increasing agreement on the need for research into the relationships between people, processes, structures, and purpose. Some are asking what constitutes a resource and what makes a product a product.[4] Others are looking into organizational development methods that will lead to innovation and cultural change and enable organizations to remain afloat in the unchartered waters of ongoing digital transformations and global and local challenges.[5] Consider engineering researchers Rodrigo Magalhães and Henderik Proper, who seek to integrate the social and technical architectures in sociotechnical systems, and overcome

> "the ongoing divorce between people who develop and maintain the technological architectures, those who develop and maintain the social architectures, those who make the associated investment decisions, and the social actors that (are to) play a role in the resulting ActorWebs."[6]

A close read reveals a call for more human-centered design approaches. Many people now understand that technological applications and systems can only fulfill their promises to contribute to a sustainable environment worthy of human living when they pay attention to human experiences and human interaction. This in turn requires us to begin with an inquiry into human situations and people's life experiences. As one of my colleagues at the i-homelab (Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts) put it,

> "In my work, I am conceiving technological applications for the home, for independent living for other people to use. When I had to care for my elderly mother over the past months—who is living on her own—it was obvious that she should be wearing one of the emergency call buttons around her neck, like the ones we have developed. But she won't. It was then that I realized I would never wear one of these things myself and that we need to come up with better ways to develop stuff people can and want to use."[7]

This is in line with the writings of Donald A. Norman and Pieter-Jan Stappers,[8] who say that the shortcomings of people expected to benefit from a technology are not the reason a technology fails.

> "There is a tendency to design complex sociotechnical systems around technological requirements, with the technology doing whatever it is capable of, leaving people to do the rest. The real problem is not that people err; it is that they err because the system design asks them to do tasks they are ill suited for. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to blame people for the error rather than to find the root cause and eliminate it. On the whole, complex sociotechnical systems are poorly designed to fit the capabilities and powers of the people who must operate them."[9]

1 Richard Boland Jr. and Fred Collopy, eds., *Managing as Designing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

2 Richard Buchanan, "Worlds in the Making: Design, Management, and the Reform of Organizational Culture," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 1, no. 1 (2015): 5–21, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2015.09.003.

3 Sabine Junginger, "Organizational Design Legacies and Service Design," *The Design Journal: An International Journal for All Aspects of Design* 18, no. 2 (2015): 209–26, DOI: https://doi.org/10.2752/175630615X14212498964277.

4 Examples include Jay Kandampully, "Innovation as the Core Competency of a Service Organisation: The Role of Technology, Knowledge and Networks," *European Journal of Innovation Management* 5, no. 1 (2002): 18–26, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1108/14601060210415144; and Richard Buchanan, "Human-Centered Design: Changing Perspectives on Design Education in the East and West," *Design Issues* 20, no. 1 (2004): 30–39, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/074793604772933748.

5 For example, see Robert G. Fichman, Brian L. Dos Santos, and Zhiqiang Eric Zheng, "Digital Innovation as a Fundamental and Powerful Concept in the Information Systems Curriculum," *MIS Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2014): 329–43, DOI: https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2014/38.2.01; or Jeanne Liedtka, "Learning to Use Design Thinking Tools for Successful Innovation," *Strategy & Leadership* 39, no. 5 (2011): 13–19, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1108/10878571111161480.

6 Rodrigo Magalhães and Henderik A. Proper, "Model-Enabled Design and Engineering of Organisations and Their Enterprises," *Organizational Design and Enterprise Engineering* 1, no. 1 (2017): 2, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s41251-016-0005-9.

7 Comment made during a team meeting for another project I am involved in, March 29, 2017.

8 Donald A. Norman and Pieter Jan Stappers, "DesignX: Complex Sociotechnical Systems," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 1, no. 2 (2015): 83–106, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2016.01.002.