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Design Research with Service Design Mindset: Co-Creating Stakeholders' Experiences

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This article highlights the current changes in the design research practice and new responsibilities for researchers. The article discusses the importance of adopting a service design mindset within any research project, e.g. UX design or product design, in response to these evolvments.

It outlines how this mindset will empower a research team to cover end-to-end stakeholder needs and experiences through holistic thinking and consideration of associated touchpoints. This holistic mindset is founded on an interdisciplinary approach and participatory models. It advocates for the active presence of design researchers throughout the design process by illustrating techniques to develop innovative solutions, emphasizing data visualization. It validates the stakeholders' involvement in the design process as early as possible to create greater ownership, investment, and commitment from all the involved parties.

Finally, the article describes the practical strategies to onboard clients to this comprehensive approach. Using strategies like depicting the bigger picture and providing time-framed solutions researchers can gain clients' trust and build long-term relationships.

Keywords: *Design Research; Service Design; Holistic Thinking; End-to-End Experiences; Stakeholder Empowerment; Co-creation; Mapping Techniques*

Introduction

In the recent years, the design thinking approach has gained remarkable popularity among different sectors in industry and government. Acquisition of Fjord by Accenture, and Adaptive Path by Capital One, the world's biggest in-house design team at IBM (Fabricant, 2014), and applying human-centered design in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (Kalil, 2015) are among a few examples.

Consequently, the design research practice, as a foundation for designing innovative solutions that meet human needs and business values, has been applied to a wide range of projects such as finance, healthcare, citizen-centric government services, climate change, and social innovation.

This growing popularity, a broad spectrum of projects, and performance in leadership positions has extended a researcher's responsibilities. As researchers, we need to work with multiple stakeholders with different backgrounds who may not be familiar with the design thinking process or perhaps may be used to working in-silo. We need to support a client's team members to express their thoughts and to build a consensus. We also need to transfer the research findings in a digestible and actionable manner. These and many other new responsibilities require a flexible research approach and an advanced set of communication and facilitation skills accommodating effective collaboration with all stakeholders. To meet these expectations, beyond the foundational research role, researchers also need to perform as a part strategist, part designer, part facilitator, and part storyteller.

Meanwhile, trends such as IoT, circular economy, immediate e-commerce, and ethical purchase have been maturing customer expectations and disrupting traditional market rules. Customers' expectations have transformed to "Liquid" expectations (Evenson, 2015), where they expect more connected experiences with the same level of quality in different fields. In response, providing desirable customer experiences has become the forefront of competition in the market.

Fueled by these social and technical changes, we face more "Wicked Problems" of a multi-layered nature and multiple stakeholders (Rittel and Webber, 1973). To maintain the relevance and momentum of our design research community, we need to evolve our practice and invest in new forms of education. The Service Design and the Design for Sustainability of Savannah College of Art and Design, the Design for Service, the Design for Social Innovation, and the Transition Design of Carnegie Mellon University, the Transdisciplinary Design of Parsons School of Design, and the MBA in

Design Strategy of California College of Art and Design are among pioneer programs in the USA.

One of these growing fields that can support researchers with the new required skills is the service design discipline. 'Service design is about designing with people and not just for people...people are the heart of services and the goal is to provide united experiences for them' (Reason, Løvlie, and Polaine, 2013).

Service design with a multi-level approach enables a team to consider all involved entities. Service designers act as orchestrators of touchpoints making sure front stage and back stage are working well together to create smooth experiences for all stakeholders.

According to Cameron Tokinwise: 'Services are, by definition, encounters between people...service design, rather than the design of things for people...involves some designing of people. Service designers script interactions...this is why all responsibly done service design projects involve extensive change management processes (Tokinwise, 2016).' Services are co-produced real-time by customers and employees while service designers design both groups' responsibilities and experiences. This dynamic and unique nature provides an agile approach.

This paper describes the benefits and associated strategies of adopting a service design mindset within any research project. Adopting holistic thinking, reinforcing a co-creative mindset throughout the design process, and conducting research through analytic, creative, empathetic, and strategic lenses are among the key benefits of the service design approach.

Benefits

Marc Stickdorn and Jakob Schneider in their book, *This is Service Design Thinking*, introduced five main principles of the service design discipline: human-centered, evidencing, co-creative, sequencing, and holistic (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2012). Human-centered is already the foundation of design research with the premise of empathy and user empowerment. Adopting and/or augmenting the other four will have the following benefits for researchers.

1. Holistic Thinking

Studying the entire ecosystem of a project grants a researcher comprehensive knowledge of customers' needs as well as other entities and their relationships within the system. Relying on this holistic knowledge and visualization techniques, researchers will be able to reveal end-to-end

customer experiences and associated opportunities; therefore, if a client approaches the research team with a specific problem, they will be able to reveal more areas of opportunities providing the client with a competitive edge in the market.

Moreover, people’s needs are constantly evolving. Holistic thinking enables researchers to consider future implications of these changes not just in the project’s field, but also the adjacent fields shedding light on upcoming opportunities.

Holistic Thinking

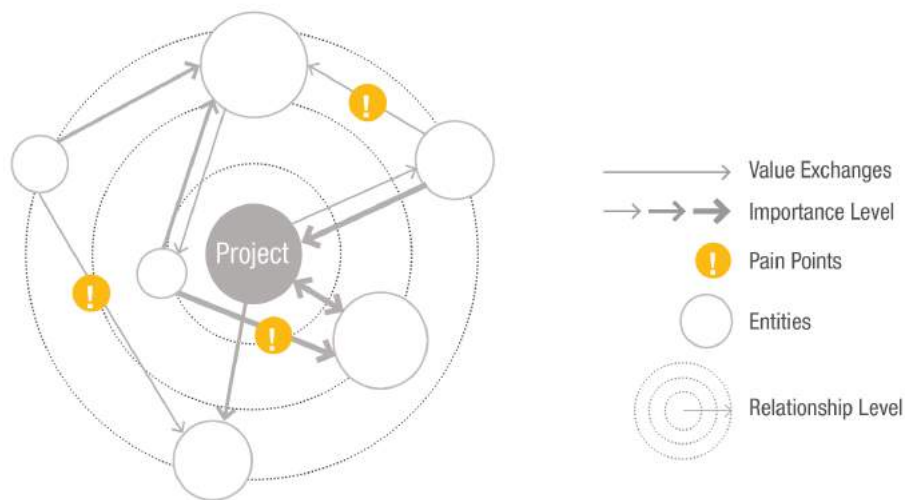


Figure 1 Studying the entire ecosystem of a project. (Adapted from Reason, et al. 2013). Each circle represents one of the entities within the project ecosystem, positioned based on its relationship with the project. The size of each circle represents the entity’s impact level on the project.

2. Thought Partner

According to Rania Anderson: ‘A Thought Partner is someone who has information or a way of thinking that provokes you to innovate or otherwise leads to value creation in your business, career or life’ (Anderson, 2012).

Service designers have an extended thought partnership role since they are present in all phases of a project from research, to design, to delivery; therefore, throughout a project, a service designer advocates for all stakeholders and promotes innovative solutions.

This thought partnership results in gaining a client’s trust and fostering long-term relationships. As researchers, we always advocate for user voice;

however, from the service design perspective, we should be empathetic to all stakeholders and increase our empathy efforts starting with clients and learning their language.

'We are designers, but we are also facilitators and teachers, conflict managers and we have to learn the language of our clients. They have already learned our language' (Mager, 2015).

Understanding a client's culture and organizational processes empowers researchers to be aligned with their expectations and dynamics. This empathetic approach will also provide researchers with knowledge about previous or simultaneous relevant projects and initiatives within the client's organization.

3. Co-creative Mindset

Pioneers like Liz Sanders and Ezio Manzini have been promoting the benefits of a co-creative mindset in design research for more than a decade. In her book, *Convivial Toolbox*, Sanders defines "Co-creation" through three perspectives: A mindset as the broadest, a method, and finally a technique within a method (Sanders and Stappers, 2013).

Compared to the service design thinking, which focuses on the co-creation as a mindset, the latter two perspectives are currently more popular in the design research practice.

Embracing a co-creative mindset throughout a project requires integration of stakeholders as early as possible. It will transform a researcher's role to a creative facilitator who immerses stakeholders in rich nuances of data and supports them to co-create solutions reflecting user needs, business values, and trends. This hands-on nature results in more engagement among stakeholders.

4. Analytic, Creative, Empathetic, and Strategic Research

In summary, researchers can engage and create a common thread among all stakeholders, make the invisible visible, and play a key role in all phases of a project by adopting a service design mindset. To be able to put all these different hats on, service designers adopt methods from different fields such as visual design, theatre, and business. This interdisciplinary mindset empowers them to tackle a project with a unique approach combining analytic, creative, empathetic, and strategic perspectives.

Analytic, Creative, Empathetic, and Strategic Research

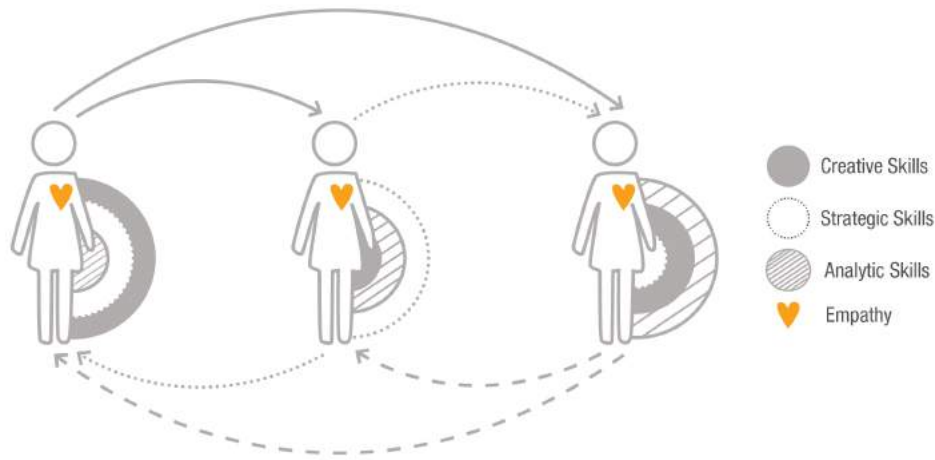


Figure 2 Fueled by an interdisciplinary mindset, researchers will be able to put on different hats.

Strategies

1. Interdisciplinary Research Team

The first strategy and the foundation for adopting the service design thinking is building an interdisciplinary team. A research team should reflect the co-creative character of service design, consist of members from a broad spectrum of disciplines, and promote a collaborative culture. This interdisciplinary approach fosters a knowledge integration mindset where the whole is more important than the individuals.

Bringing people together requires a culture where everyone feels valued and heard. According to Karen Hershenson, the leader of the Clay projects of Procter & Gamble, people’s work is a reflection of themselves (Hershenson, 2016); therefore, fostering diversity and respect for individual’s uniqueness results in members who complete and challenge each other leading to successful projects.

2. Multi-Modal Research and Communication

In response to the complexity of projects and influenced by technology and interdisciplinary training, researchers need to equip themselves with a diverse set of knowledge and techniques.

The “Evidencing” principle of the service design thinking emphasizes bringing the intangibles and hidden knowledge to life - making the invisible

Design research with service design mindset: Co-creating stakeholders' experiences visible. The “What People Do, Say, and Make” research model by Liz Sanders can support researchers with the evidencing strategy. It expands researchers’ data gathering abilities and provides access to stated as well as latent knowledge of participants like their attitudes and rituals (Sanders and VanPatter, 2003). By following this model, the rich data gathered through ethnographic methods like observations and interviews, on what people do and say, can be taken to the next level with making activities such as collages and maps.

Multi-Modal Research and Communication

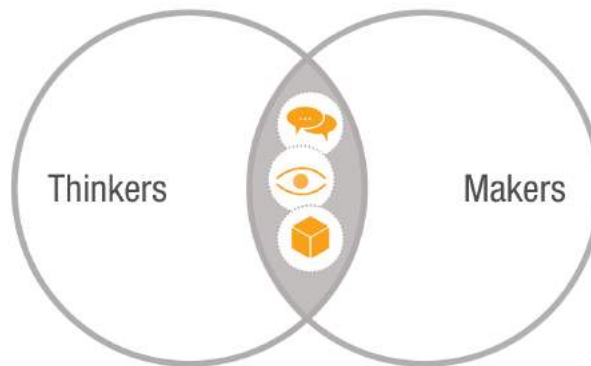


Figure 3 A combination of verbal, visual, and physical tools and techniques will challenge researchers to step out of their comfort zone and increase the level of engagement from participants with different backgrounds.

Service designers also borrow techniques from theater and conduct improv sessions where they provide participants with props like context and roles. In results, participants can reflect on user and business needs and create valuable experiences (Reason, et al. 2013).

This combination of verbal, visual, and physical tools and techniques challenges researchers to step out of their comfort zone and increases the level of engagement from researchers and participants.

One of the powerful evidencing methods for making the invisible visible are maps that can be used in different stages of a project to capture and/or communicate data. A map has a layered structure that can illustrate information with a strategic perspective empowering people to zoom into the details and out to the whole system simultaneously. A large-scaled map is a powerful storytelling tool for communicating insights and opportunities

to different departments within an organization. It will allow a client's team members to comprehend customer experiences holistically and to own the research findings.

All these making methods support researchers and stakeholders from different backgrounds and capabilities in expressing their ideas and exchanging knowledge.

3. Design Research Expansion

Inspired by the service design's co-creative mindset and a combination of thinking and making skills, researchers should participate in the design and delivery phases of a project as well. This active role bridges their typical presence gap between the initial exploratory phase and then, the evaluative phase of a project timeline. It also extends their presence to the launch and continuous augmentation phases.

Design Research Expansion

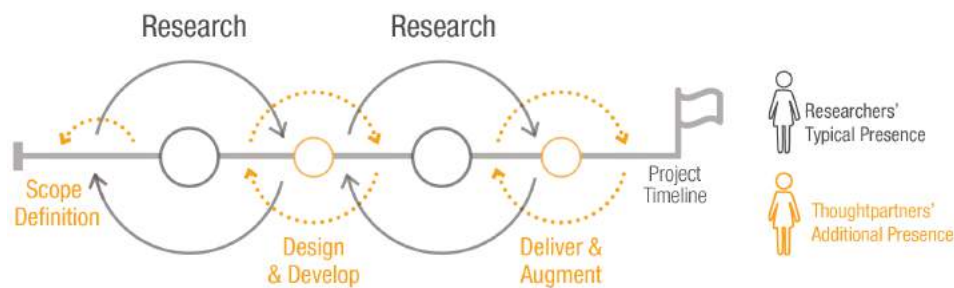


Figure 4 Thought Partners are actively present throughout the entire design process advocating for all stakeholders.

In the design phase, as researchers, we should facilitate opportunity and concept generation workshops with participants representing all stakeholders from client internal departments to users to front-stage employees while promoting fruitful dialogues.

Ezio Manzini, in his book *Design, When Everybody Designs*, reflects on co-designing sessions and the role of facilitators with design expertise (a combination of thinking and making skills). He believes besides consensus building; a design expert can act as a creative facilitator who actively perceives larger scenarios and triggers conversations among participants to generate new ideas (thinking). An expert can also visualize these ideas

Design research with service design mindset: Co-creating stakeholders' experiences supporting participants to solve complex problems (making) (Manzini and Coad, 2015).

Relying on the service design mapping techniques, researchers can communicate their knowledge in a comprehensive and actionable format and ensure solutions grounded in research findings. A stakeholder map can show all entities within a system, their attributes, and value exchanges. A persona can illustrate detailed stories about user archetypes and compare their goals, attitudes, and behaviors. A customer journey map should accompany a persona to support participants to generate ideas for the before, during and after-purchase phases resulting in end-to-end customer experiences. A blueprint enables the team to consider front stage and back stage resources and processes and to create systematic solutions for each touchpoint within a customer journey. A desktop walkthrough, roleplaying, and bodystorming are among other playful service design methods inspired by theater that can also enrich researchers' facilitation skills and participants' engagement level.

In the delivery phase service designers, with the support of other team members, measure the impact of a solution. They consider desirability for all stakeholders and viability for the business resulting in continuous augmentation of services. This active presence builds strong long-term relationships with clients and a rich human-centered culture.

In this phase, inspired by service designers, researchers can act as strategists, facilitators, and orchestrators by studying the life cycle of customers and monitoring the solution performance. Direct collaborations with clients and gathered knowledge on the organizational processes and culture will allow researchers to engage required internal resources for the implementation phase. A value web, strategy roadmap, and business canvas model are prescriptive methods enabling the team to define resources and the value exchanges among them to bring a solution to life.⁹ Relying on their making skills, researchers can illustrate the flow of these value exchanges and their level of importance. Researchers can be key assets in this phase empowering each stakeholder to express her/his voice and define necessary steps in achieving milestones. With the trends foresight, researchers can support the team to predict new strategies, such as targeting a new customer group, sustaining the client's success in the market.

⁹ For further definition of the above methodologies refer to these books: *This is Service Design Thinking*, *Service Design: From Insight to Implementation*, *The Service Innovation Handbook*, and *Service Design 250 Essential Methods*.

4. Onboarding Clients

There are a broad group of strategies to get a client's approval for adopting a more holistic research practice with an interdisciplinary team and direct collaboration among all stakeholders. These strategies range from understanding a client's context, to seeking advocates within a client's organization, and communicating the benefits in a client's language, which in sequence are harder to implement and more rewarding. These strategies are complementary and need to be built upon each other, where one does not have priority over another.

The fundamental starting point, which might seem obvious, requires the research team to do their homework and get familiarized with the client and the relevant field. What does the industry or sector that the client is working in look like? How can we map the client against the competitors and complementors? What are the trends? What are the prevalent terminology and language? What are the associated key values and success criteria? The gained knowledge will give the research team a systematic perspective on a client's context and position within the current and future market.

In the second step, the research team should dive deeper and learn about the client's organizational culture and goals, which may not be possible to do independently; therefore, the team can rely on an internal advocate from the client side who understands the value of design research and/or the team can conduct a kick-off session as an introductory workshop. The workshop will be a great opportunity to map the client internal resources and the value exchanges among them and to create alignment on the project objectives and success criteria. Researchers should also engage the client to reflect on a pre-defined long-term plan with details on benefits, risks, resources, and time implications for each phase. An interdisciplinary research team provides different levels of the required skills and perspectives empowering the whole to successfully perform all the above strategies.

Onboarding Clients

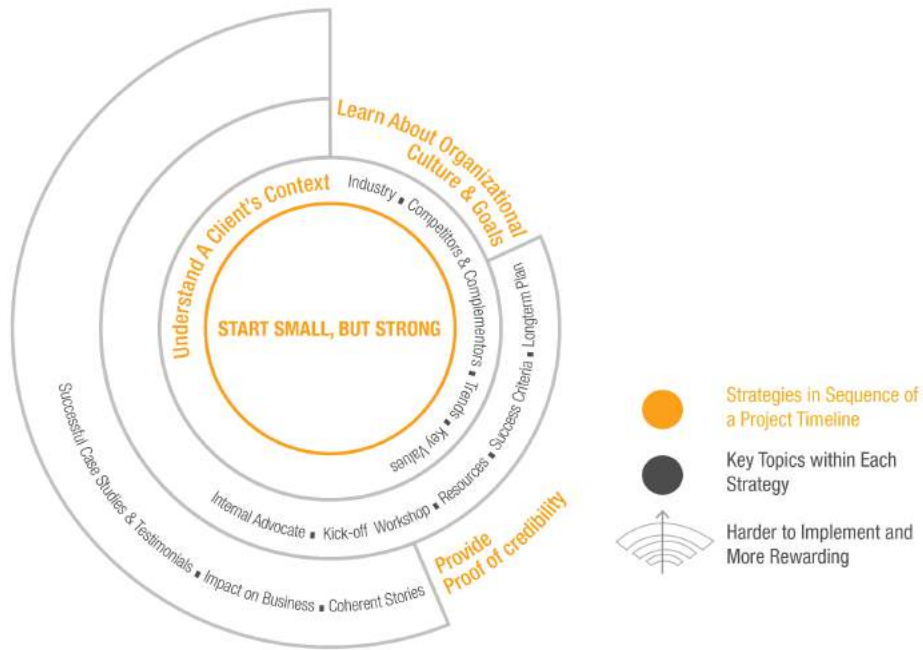


Figure 5 Strategies to get a client's approval for adopting a more holistic research practice.

In this workshop and throughout the project, the research team should provide proof of their credibility. Successful case studies and testimonials are great starting points that should be accompanied by presenting the impact of the proposed process on the business and not just the process and methodologies alone. The team should illustrate the current customer pain points and how the proposed approach will alleviate these friction points and improve business from different perspectives. Telling a coherent story about the benefits of the service design thinking, namely a holistic and collaborative approach, transmitting the ownership to the client, and long-term augmentation of solutions is another necessary step to gain a client's trust.

Researchers should master the art of communicating large amounts of information in digestible and grounded in user and client voice formats. Illustrating the bigger picture and milestones toward the final goal and highlighting each client team member's needs and roles will enrich individuals' connections to the proposed approach.

The most imperative step is being empathetic and flexible to start a project small, but strong. Selling the benefits of service design thinking in research requires a systematic strategy. The key is to show the vision and steps to achieve it; however, be willing to start with small steps to gain the required trust.

Conclusion

Service design discipline is on the rise as the key asset for innovative solutions through creating memorable experiences for customers. The service design mindset will definitely improve the outcomes of a design research project and shift the focus from individual offerings to a system perspective and co-created values. This holistic approach supports the research to end up with novel models of interactions and disruptive innovations as well as customer centricity (Sangiorgi, Prendiville, Jung, Yu, 2015).

By focusing on transcending interactions toward a co-creative approach, researchers can foster valuable long-term relationships with clients. The service design thinking supports researchers to validate the role of stakeholders in the design process, thereby creating shared ownership and increased engagement, investment, and commitment to the findings and solutions.

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