Re-designing government innovation
Why digital government transformation must be design-led, not technology-led
Governments and their agencies are under pressure – from citizens, businesses and from within – to transform public services. Many are moving to digital channels as a way of increasing speed and efficiency while lowering costs.

However, public service leaders are finding that as they move further into the digital age they need to orientate their entire organisations around their end users, or else their investments in digital are likely to fail. This is why leading agencies are turning to design-led innovation, or design-thinking.

The concept of design-led innovation is driven by a deep understanding of user needs and an ethos of shaping an organisation, service or product around that user. This is done using research, rapid prototyping, constant feedback and experimentation, to deliver quick, effective results.

It is no fad: design thinking has become a proven approach to complex service or organisational issues in the private sector. But it is often at odds with traditional approaches, policies and the typically risk adverse culture found in the public sector. However the approach is starting to take hold in some governments and is being endorsed by the likes of the European Commission, the United Nations Development Programme, and the World Bank as a way to deliver public service outcomes. Initiatives such as Mindlab in Denmark, plus 18F, GDS and Digital Transformation Office in the US, UK and Australia respectively are among those leading the way.

As agencies begin to harness design thinking to meet their digital transformation goals they quickly find it challenging to implement. Success depends on embedding substantial cultural shifts in leadership, changing attitudes to risk and failure, and driving openness to collaboration.

Power and influence: oxygen for design-thinking inside government

Any change as wide-ranging as the shift to design-led thinking requires support from the top. Where this exists, the results can be rapid and substantial. For example, in Auckland, New Zealand, the mayor’s office championed and entrenched design thinking into their organisation in a drive to become the world’s most liveable city.

Within 17 months, the initiative transformed the city’s entire approach to governance and planning, sparking new collaborations with business and involving over 15,000 citizens. The results have included award-winning redevelopment projects, such as the Auckland Art Gallery and Wynyard Quarter waterfront, and pedestrian-friendly shared spaces that have increased retail hospitality takings by more than 430% in places.

Research is increasingly highlighting how those at the top of design-led organisations need to be experimenters, improvisers and networkers who work in partnership with other members of the organisation – rather than commanders, policing fixed plans.

As Steve Jobs once said: “It doesn’t make sense to hire smart people then tell them what to do – we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.” Creating this kind of cultural shift is never easy. Fortunately, there is enough momentum behind design thinking that leaders can witness real results and know they are shifting to a proven practice.

A design skills gap?

Of course, a successful design-led organisation also needs skilled individuals to execute innovation. Such talent is in short supply and few governments are in a financial position to outbid private sector firms on pay. But the public sector does have something to offer that companies, most often, do not: the ability to do meaningful work for the public good. It is precisely this appeal that has allowed the US government to attract a substantial number of high-profile Silicon Valley names to its US Digital Service.
Hiring, of course, is only one source of talent. Public sector bodies also need to upskill their current employees. Learning should not just be through traditional training but, as with design-led innovation itself, more about learning by doing – a process where partnering with outside design experts can be particularly effective.

Multidisciplinary government innovation units are also emerging with mandates to build design capabilities, such as the UK’s Cabinet Office Policy Lab and Sweden’s Experio Lab. But it is not just about developing internal competencies. Design-led innovation fundamentally involves collaboration with other people and organisations to leverage skills and insight from a host of sources.

No risk, no reward

Perhaps the most difficult part of adopting a design-led approach is accepting that there is no such thing as a mistake-free learning environment. For government agencies in particular, it can be challenging to embrace a culture of experimentation and trial and error – where prototypes are launched as soon as functional and failings are welcomed as opportunities to learn. This way of working runs contrary, not only to the thinking of most risk-averse public sector bodies, but also their processes, where extensive planning is meant to reduce failure. As the UNDP’s Global Centre for Public Excellence has highlighted, a public service manager that takes innovative risks only gains minor individual rewards for positive outcomes, but can count on generous blame for failures.

For design-led innovation to flourish, this kind of culture needs to change. Agencies should recognise that failings in early prototypes can actually save millions while costing comparatively little – weeding out problems at the roots before good resources are ploughed into bad ideas. Designing structures and polices to support this culture is therefore a critical issue – one that several governments have begun to prioritise.

One example comes from 18F, the US Government’s digital services agency. They are developing a new Blanket Purchase Agreement to suit rapid and iterative development cycles typical of design-led innovation. Rather than large, long contracts, agencies will be encouraged and enabled to make (and break) many small, short contracts.

This opens up new possibilities for quick experiments and essentially sets up an expectation for testing, learning and evolving. Also, instead of a typical formal tendering process, potential vendors will often need to deliver a live or near live demonstration at short notice (sometimes just 24 hours).

This reduces the time and expense involved in traditional procurement, and provides a tangible outcome that can be validated with users.

Design-led innovation will become the new normal

A desire to change exists in many government organisations and many realise the old way of doing things is not sustainable. Agencies need a more intimate understanding of their citizens and other end users. They need to deliver services faster, collaborate widely, seek continuous feedback and iterate.

Digital technology provides many answers to these challenges but design-led innovation must be at the heart of this shift. Nurturing the right design skills and culture to support this change will be critical to long-term success in delivering public service for the future.
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