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Challenges facing service design practitioners: a pilot study

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Abstract

This paper presents the result of a pilot survey study about challenges faced by practicing service designers. Challenges include: 1) low awareness of what service design is and how to use service design in organisations; 2) issues with involving people in the design process; such as getting the right stakeholders on board and doing user research; 3) assessing the business and organisational value of service design and the extent to which it is able to actually change roles within organisations; 4) design in the organisation where silos, culture, maturity, willingness to change and acceptance of design can all limit the usefulness of service design, 5) obstacles to implementation and 6) designer identity and how it can impact expectations. While some of these challenges are inherent to design approaches, others keep recurring in studies of (service) design practice and should be given more attention and taken seriously by academia.

Keywords: challenges, design practice, survey

Introduction and background

Research that aims to be useful for practitioners must be tailored to match the reality and needs of those practitioners. While practitioners may be familiar with theoretical concepts, frameworks and methods from academia, they may choose not to adopt them in their practice. The nature of their practice determines what research outputs they consider valuable. For instance, practitioners may not have the time required to analyse field data using complex theoretical frameworks from academia (Rogers, 2004). In order to be valuable and successfully adopted by design practice, research needs to be based on a thorough understanding of the design practice it aims to support (Stolterman, 2008). Hence, it is important that research which aims to contribute to practice is based in reality. One such notable example is Lucy Kimbell's (2009) study on what service designers do.

As service design grows as a research field and in practice, research outputs that are developed for practitioners should remain in touch with the reality of practice. For instance, while the value of service design in service innovation is acknowledged in academia (Ostrom et al., 2015), implementing service design as an approach remains challenging in practice. The introduction of a service design approach is fraught with frictions and embedding service design in organisations has been a topic of research in both the commercial (Kurtmollaiev et al., 2018) and the public sector (Bailey, 2012), and previous studies have illustrated challenges associated with both sectors respectively (Aricò, 2018; Junginger, 2014; Junginger & Bailey, 2017). The concept of design capability has been explored in the public (Malmberg, 2017) and commercial sectors (Aricò, 2018) to comprehend how the organisation's understanding of design develops. The explorative and playful nature of a design approach can be deemed risky, especially by civil servants (Salinas et al., 2014). Thus, to fully embed service design, both developing design capability and management support are needed in equal measures (Holmlid & Malmberg, 2018). Besides the introduction of service design as an approach, implementing the outcomes of service design projects has proven to be challenging as well (Sangiorgi et al., 2015). To address this challenge, researchers have studied which factors influence service implementation (Weisser et al., 2018) and suggested ways in which designers contribute to implementing the outcomes of service design projects (Raun, 2017). Recently, a survey among service designers in Sweden (Wedin, 2019) revealed that designers face challenges such as

the value of design not always being acknowledged or understood, as well as organisational culture clashes. The survey shows a trend from a maturity level where design is being embedded in the organisation to lower maturity levels, where the organisation is invested in or committed to design (ibid., 2019).

While there are similarities between service design research and practice, there are also significant disparities in terms of the challenges that practitioners face and the topics that service design research addresses. In light of these tensions, it is essential to align academic and practice views of the challenges facing service design. This would help identify opportunities for service design research that are also valuable for service design practice. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no such systematic endeavour has yet been undertaken within the academic field of service design. This paper presents preliminary findings from a pilot survey conducted to scope out topics and themes for a more in-depth study on the subject in the future.

Method

A pilot survey was conducted to get an initial impression of challenges faced by people who identify as service designers. The questionnaire was posted in fora for professional service designers on Facebook and LinkedIn over a period of four weeks between March and April 2019. The survey included the following questions:

1. How do you currently use service design in your work?

2. How long have you been working with service design?

3. What challenges do you face when working with service design?

4. Professional Title

5. Additional comments

In total 29 people responded to the survey, with all responses able to be used. The participants' experience in the service design industry ranged from periods of six months up to 20 years.

Since the survey consisted of open-ended questions, a deductive micro-coding approach was used. This yielded six broad themes on the challenges facing service design practitioners (see Table 1). The results of the survey are subject to limitations arising from the small size of a convenience sample. Respondents may also be subject to bias in answering the challenges question, relying on most recent or most memorable events. Other than the respondent's professional title, no data such as location, size of organisation, embeddedness of design or type of organisation were collected. This limits the insights that we can draw in relation to factors that might affect perceived challenges. However, since this study is meant to be a pilot test, it does not pose a threat to reliability or validity. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw and were assured anonymity and the confidentiality of their data.

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Challenge	Aggregate theme
Lack of understanding about service design and what it can do.	What actually is service design?
Getting the relevant people on board	Involving people
Conducting user research	
Working with organisations whose understanding and use of design is limited	Design in the organisation
Dealing with an inhibiting organisational structure	
Incorporeal aspects of the organisation	
Unfavourable attitude towards design	
Articulating the impact and value of service design on organisations	Assessing the value of service design
Arguing for the financial value of service design outputs	
Applying service design concepts, tools, methods and approaches in practice	
Facing resistance to change	Challenging the status quo
Realising service transformation	
Clarifying the role and work of service designers in the organisation	Design Identity

Table 1: Practitioner given challenges mapped to themes

Findings

What actually is service design?

Many people lack understanding of service design and what it actually means. The interviewees have a hard time explaining to clients or colleagues what service design is and does (we have used ID:number to de-identify the participants of the research while attributing specific

quotes): "It's [a] general lack of understanding of what Service Design is among our partners, users, customers and clients" (ID:77). Differentiating service design from other existing, seemingly similar approaches is particularly required for the uninitiated and is closely coupled with several other challenges.

Involving people

In second place are challenges related to getting people within the organisation involved as well as reaching users. For instance: "Getting the money to do research and getting to the right people" (ID:49) is a problem mentioned several times in different words. It indicates that fitting service design with other organisational processes can be difficult. This problem is amplified by a reported lack of knowledge and the position of design in the organisation.

Design in the organisation

Most of the issues mentioned by the respondents can be traced back to organisational development and support. The siloed structures within organisations and unreceptive attitudes still cause trouble for designers who want to work across organisational boundaries.

Another experience echoed in the study is that the organisational culture makes it challenging to prove the value of service design – "it goes against the company culture which is very internal facing, and heavily laden with politics" (ID:76). Developing structures for design in the organisation as well as the design capabilities of its employees has been suggested in order to improve the knowledge and use of design in organisations (Holmlid & Malmberg, 2018; Aricò, 2018), which leads to the next theme: assessing the value of service design.

Assessing the value of service design

The fourth main challenge relates to the value of service design. Several informants referred to a difficulty in articulating the business value and overall impact of service design. One informant (ID:88) states: "to convince clients to spend money on a process that doesn't promise a specific output or short-term ROI." This has been partly addressed by previous service design research, specifically the ServDes 2018 conference, where one of the tracks addressed: "how to measure the multifaceted contribution of service design in service innovation" (Foglieni

et al., 2018, p.490). Part of the issue lies in the difficulty in showcasing the value of service design through realisation of service transformation. The impact of service design on the organisation remains unclear and its value is not fully harnessed.

Challenging the status quo

This theme relates to organisational inertia and resistance to change. Organisational structures can prevent implementation of service design outcomes: "Getting to implementation, […] - when the change has to come no one is willing to change" (ID:49). The implementation challenge has started to receive more attention in academia over the past few years, both in general and at ServDes in particular (Yu & Sangiorgi, 2014; Lee, 2016; Almqvist, 2018). However additional research is still needed in order to better understand the different aspects of successful service transformation, as well as how design and designers can contribute to framing and addressing service transformation (Overkamp, 2019).

Design identity

Lastly, some informants commented on challenges related to the disparate notions of what designers (can) do. For instance: "too strong focus on interdisciplinarity (often meaning knowing little of everything) instead of building focused skill" (ID:99). Many people see the service designer as a jack of all trades. This makes it difficult for people working with service designers to have a clear view of what service designers can and cannot do. In addition, it seems unclear where the work of (in-house) service designers ends and the work of their colleagues begins: "[I]t's more like I'm an alien there and can do miracles of understanding around end-to-end services, but people don't connect it to their work." (ID:76). The multi-disciplinary nature of service design likely contributes to any existing confusion about its role.

Discussion and next steps

Research that aims to support design practice needs to be built on a thorough understanding of that practice (Stolterman, 2008). Our pilot study is intended as a starting point for developing such an understanding of the challenges that service design practitioners face in their work. In our pilot study we have identified challenges that practitioners face that relate to: 1)

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communicating what service design is and does; 2) involving and engaging people in the design process; 3) embedding service design in the existing organisational culture; 4) assessing the value of design; 5) obstacles for implementing outcomes of service design projects and 6) the identity of service designers. The findings that service design practitioners struggle with include articulating the business value of service design as well as the clashes between a design approach and the existing company culture. These are echoed by Wedin's (2019) study among service design practitioners. Furthermore, some of these challenges that our informants mentioned, such as assessing the value of service design (Foglieni et al., 2018) and embedding service design in (public sector) organisations (e.g. Malmberg, 2017; Kurtmollaiev et al., 2018), are addressed by contemporary service design research. This indicates that there is already some overlap in the challenges that are experienced by practitioners and topics that are considered relevant in academia. However, practitioners also experience other challenges that have not received as much attention in academia yet. These include trouble in communicating and delineating what service design is (not) and what designers can (not) do, and difficulty in involving and engaging people in the service design process. Research efforts that address these additional challenges can support service design practitioners in their work by providing both knowledge and approaches that mitigate the problems. An example of such work is the recent study by Prestes Joly et al., (2018) that aims at supporting dialogue between service designers from different disciplines, by integrating complementary perspectives on service design. Their study addresses the integration from an academic perspective, meaning that a practitioner's point-of-view still needs to be explored in order to "understand how Service Design integrates multidisciplinary contributions in practice" (Prestes Joly et al., 2018, p. 1157). Creating an overview of the plurality in service design perspectives that exist in academia and practice can help explain and understand service design.

As such, the outcomes of the survey serve as a springboard to set up structured research into the challenges that service designers face. Such a study helps develop an agenda of research topics which have relevance for service design practice and academia. Future research that will be part of this agenda will support service designers in their work. Based on the outcomes of the initial survey presented in this paper, we suggest that the structured version of the study should address at least the following topics:

1. Setting a collaborative agenda

2. Occupational mandate

3. Organisational structures for service design

4. Collecting insights from less successful ventures

Setting a collaborative agenda

The challenges that were addressed by the respondents of the survey may be difficult for service designers to tackle alone. It is therefore important to develop a research agenda that highlights topics which practitioners and academia can explore in partnership, where theory addresses the reality of service design practitioners and is made useful to them. Examples include design legacies (Junginger, 2014) to address why efforts to implement design fail, and the use of dynamic capabilities to address how design can be implemented in the public sector (Malmberg, 2017). At the same time, the challenges and reflections from the work of practitioners provides topics that are relevant for researchers, to better understand the direction in which service design practice is heading and what research topics (will) gain relevance.

Occupational mandate

The results from the survey imply that service design practitioners lack an *occupational mandate:* a shared understanding of what service design is and what position it can take (Fayard & Stigliani, 2017). This could be an effect of the plurality in perspectives on service design and its applications. Developing such an occupational mandate helps to give practitioners a "sense of solidarity and identity [which] gives them moral authority to claim that their ways of conduct and thinking related to the work are appropriate and relevant" (ibid., p. 272). By generalising the experiences of different service designers, researchers can help to develop such an occupational mandate for service designers. This is beneficial for both service designers as well as those who work with them. It helps to clarify what role is fitting for service designers, which in turn helps to make the contribution of service design(ers) clear.

Organisational structures

In order to resolve the challenges related to the position of design in the organisation, more knowledge is needed regarding the structures that are

necessary to integrate design work in the (other) organisational processes. This includes helping managers understand what they can expect from design work as well as how it can be part of development processes in the organisation (Holmlid & Malmberg, 2018). Another aspect involves determining how to best implement a service design approach in the organisation to facilitate successful service transformation. Understanding where service design capabilities need to be developed in the organisation is an important aspect of realising service transformation, but this topic is still under-researched.

Collecting insights from less successful ventures

While learning from successful service design examples is extremely valuable, much can often be learnt from failures as well. Such studies that include both the good and the bad are not new to service design research and were, in fact, among the first works in this research field (Akama, 2009). Over the years, more examples of similar studies have appeared. For instance, Holmlid and Malmberg (2018) used two theories on learning to address why certain initiatives aimed at embedding a service design approach in (public sector) organisations did not produce the intended results. With regard to implementation of outcomes of service design projects, Raun (2017) analysed which approaches adopted by service designers facilitated successful uptake of the outcomes. Future research on the challenges that service designers face should include success stories as well as failures, to provide insights into how practitioner challenges can be addressed. Such a plurality of case examples helps to aggregate insights and lessons learnt.

Conclusion

Various academic fields have taken an interest in service design, bringing a plurality of perspectives and corresponding research on the topic (see Prestes Joly et al., 2018). Practitioners often do not have the possibility of maintaining an overview over these developments, nor do they have time or access to a variety of cases and approaches which allow them to aggregate lessons learnt. Academia finds itself in a favourable position to study such issues given its dedication to research. We believe studies like these are important and point to areas where more research is needed. Research addresses the challenges

practitioners face, supports dialogue between academia and practice, and helps avoid conflicts between what practitioners and researchers consider important for the development of the field. In this paper, we have presented the outcomes of a pilot study on challenges that service design practitioners face and have made suggestions for future research into these challenges.

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