Towards sustainable impact after University-Government design projects - Case of worker services in Singapore

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Abstract

Recently, there have been a number of design collaboration projects between government agencies and external design experts in many parts of the world. The Singapore government is known for its effectiveness and efficiency. Design collaboration projects are mainly initiated by top management in the government. In its early stage of adopting design, it is ever now important for the Singapore government to diagnose its current state of understanding of the true roles of design, conditions needed for nurturing design capabilities and set future directions they need to head towards. With this aim, this paper looks into recent design collaboration projects between a Ministry and a University in Singapore, to investigate challenges and opportunities in creating sustainable impact after the collaboration. By doing so, we believe that the government can truly benefit from the adoption of design for citizen-centred transformation.

KEYWORDS: Government, Public Service, Singapore, Design Capabilities

Introduction

Service design has been recognized in the public sector as a promising approach to deal with complex societal problems and for its ability to create public services and policies in a more citizen-centric way. We have recently seen a number of projects where government agencies collaborate with design schools. These movements have been initiated and predominantly observed in Europe (Design Council, 2013), and we do see more and more cases in other parts of the world, including North America, Australia and New Zealand, Latin America and Asia (Bason, 2014).

Singapore is one of the leading Asian countries in this aspect. Throughout the nation's developmental history, Singapore government has always been open to innovations and adopts good practices and models from abroad (Tan, 2013). Singapore's national legacies and its size are also known for providing platforms for experimenting changes. Several

government agencies, including various Ministries, Civil Service College and Prime Minister's Office, have piloted design projects and participated in design education programs (Ng, 2014). The impetus for these visible initiatives advocating benefits from design approaches came from top management within the government.

In its toddling stage of adopting design, it is now ever important for the Singapore government to reflect on what their earlier attempts have achieved thus far, what the actual impact was, and whether there are sound conditions in place for sustainability beyond projects. Driven by these aims, this paper looks into recent service design projects that one Ministry in Singapore had initiated, and thereafter engaged a local design school to design government services for the workers.

We conducted three sessions of in-depth interviews with the Ministry officers and design students who participated in these projects. The focus was on investigating what happened after the design projects, in order to identify challenges and opportunities in creating sustainable impact. By doing so, the Ministry can truly benefit from design collaborations and develop design capabilities, rather than considering these projects as 'one-off events'.

Challenges in Adopting Design in the Public Sector

Despite the presence of successful case stories and design potentials, challenges in adopting design in the public sector are still being reported. Challenges include unfamiliarity and cultural gaps between government and design practices (e.g. Vaajakallio et al., 2013), silo government structures that hinder from having a shared goal or holistic view (Bason, 2010), and lack of resources and commitments (Hyvärinen et al., 2015).

The service design community has been exploring various directions to embed design in the public sector. One solution is to drive continuous design projects to function as pilot and experimentation for government agencies to realize their 'design readiness' (Bailey, 2012) and to gain relevant understanding of design (Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2011). Incubating an 'organizational design champion' has also been highlighted as a way to overcome the problem of insufficient resources and as a way to nurture organizations' design capabilities (Cooper et al., 2011). The role of conversational design pieces is also emphasized to help organizations realize their current state and envision future directions (Junginger, 2015).

Junginger (2015) recently suggested paying more attention to organizational design legacies of the public sector, instead of confronting them with design. Most organizations already have design legacies in place, though many are probably flawed and poorly suited. The designers' role would then be to initiate design conversations and help organizations to articulate, visualize and engage such design legacies (Junginger, 2015).

Case: University-Ministry Collaborative Projects in Singapore

In 2014 and 2015, two rounds of service design projects were conducted in collaboration between a University and a government Ministry in Singapore. Over the past five years, this Ministry attempted to reshape its relationships with citizens. It recognized the ever-evolving needs of citizens, their expectations of services provided and how technology has advanced citizens' means of communication and information sharing. To drive this change, an

international design agency was engaged to rethink service spaces at its premises and its mid-management employees were sent to design education programs. An internal unit was also set up, to understand citizens' behavior and motivations and ultimately improve their experiences with the Ministry's programs and services. This internal unit had initiated both rounds of the collaborative projects with the university.

The overall aim of the projects was to improve the Ministry's interactions with the workers in Singapore. Objectives were to empower workers with knowledge of their rights and employment rules, and to drive take-up of self-help services when dealing with the Ministry. These workers face difficulties in understanding the abundant regulations and processes of the Ministry due to language barriers, cultural differences (for migrant workers), third-party intervened communication and so on.

The design projects produced various solutions, including the enhancement of service journeys in the Service Centre and alternative ways to communicate and reach out to the various migrant worker communities. The projects concluded with presentations to the Ministry's middle and top managements, and an exhibition at the Ministry's headquarters to showcase the role of design. The solutions were demonstrated through service prototypes and video narrations. These projects were so well received by the Ministry that six design students were invited to a 2-months long internship program, to further develop and deploy some of their design solutions.

Interviews on the Projects' Afterlife

We conducted follow-up interviews with two Ministry officers who had participated in the design projects. To juxtapose findings from the Ministry, we also interviewed the six design students who participated in both the design projects and internship program. Overall, three interviews were conducted and each lasted between 60 – 90 minutes. It was a semi-structured interview, focusing on the key themes presented in Table 1. All interviews were recorded and verbatim transcribed.

To the Ministry officers	To the design students
- Their experiences in participating in the design projects - Their perception on benefits and limitations of the projects - What happened after the projects, especially on implementation of the design propositions - Challenges and organizational barriers when embedding the results of the projects - Future opportunities and ideas for overcoming the barriers	- Their experiences and challenges in participating in the design projects - Their job responsibilities and roles in the Ministry during the internship - Opportunities and challenges in working as a designer in the public sector

Table 1 Key themes of the follow-up interviews

Organization in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities

From the follow-up interviews, we identified challenges and opportunities in creating sustainable impact after the collaborative design projects. We present our findings below.

Needs for a Common Understanding of 'Design Thinking'

Visible initiatives for benefitting from design were encouraged by top management in the Ministry as an organizational strategy, for example, many mid-management officers attended short-term programs like 'design thinking workshops.' Those who were exposed to such programs use the terminology 'design thinking' as a representative term that refers to methods and skill-sets of designing.

They do perceive that the strength of design is to involve citizens' needs and experiences into their service developments. But their perception on what role a designer can play in the Ministry seems yet to be established. Although the design adoption is encouraged by the management, the vision needs to be shared with frontline staff who actually participate in the projects for the change. Some frontline staff' perception on the role of designer may not go beyond those who make incremental changes to service touch-points.

> *"Design is definitely very important, because a simple little information, that we sent to customers may trigger a larger response from customers if a design of a letter is not done properly, or the content and the way you write is not done properly and make it simpler and easier for the customers... How we package information, the nuancing, the words we use, all these definitely play a part, and shaping and reacting the customer behavior as well."* (Frontline staff in the service centre)

Dilemma Experienced by Frontline Staffs

Frontline employees' participation in the projects was very crucial as they hold both the customer knowledge, including customer contacts for user research as well as domain knowledge such as government regulations. These frontline employees recognize the need for change and improvement to the Ministry's services; unfortunately they face the constraints of limited resources (i.e. manpower and time) to participate in projects and work on design implementations. Their hectic work demands made it even harder for frontline employees to spare time for developmental projects with high commitments.

> *"When we try to focus on doing the project we tend to get occupied when suddenly there is a case that is escalated or a case we need to attend to, we cannot be totally 100% involved in the project, to think to sit down to really do it, so that is one of the challenges that we have...if high management can give us the assurance, actually it's ok maybe three days we will be focusing on core jobs but two days will be solely (dedicated to) whatever we need to do with design thinking, like attend workshop, eLearning whatever sort of thing rather than double hats at the same time during the week."* (Frontline staff in the service centre)

> *"The challenge is how can I get my officers out from the ops and equip them with the kind of knowledge to do it."* (Middle management staff from the frontline service operations department)

The frontline employees encountered difficulties in thinking in new ways during design projects participations, which in turn, caused them emotional anxiety.

> *"We are too involved in our operations, very hard for us to think outside of the box to do these projects. When we do these projects we may be sticking to our usual thinking…so that is one of the challenges."* (Frontline staff in the service centre)

Frontline employees are constantly tasked to adapt their work styles and relearn new skills due to continuous changes in the Ministry. The abovementioned challenges made it difficult for frontline staff to actively participate in design projects.

Project Ownership

There had been several related actions after conclusion of the design projects, for example, embedding new interface elements into the existing e-kiosks in the service centre. The Ministry officers expressed their concerns over the implementation process, which was slow because the people involved in the design project might not be the ones who would be involved in implementation. There is a need to ensure that the background and impetus of the project was communicated to those who would be implementing the solutions to ensure buy-in and follow-through.

> *"The implementation and solution may be taken care by different teams, depending on the staff movement, depending on the area of work they are making changes to, so there might be some gap, because the people who are involved in the implementation may not really understand the background and why these changes are needed."* (Middle management staff from the frontline service operations department)

> *"The developer who was asked to do the kiosk, we wanted him to use our kiosk design to test if our interface works but he wasn't able to achieve that so that in a way also slowed down the whole process of our kiosk prototyping."* (Design student intern).

Identifying Internal Design Ambassadors

From the interviews, we identified a middle management employee who has good understanding of design and in fact took up the role of educating other employees on design thinking and practice. As the Senior Assistant Director of a division, he often iterates his wishes for project participants to continue to use design thinking in their daily work.

Similarly, there are other individuals who have relevant knowledge and skills, as well as personal interest to promote design within the Ministry. Different from 'organizational design champion' (Cooper et al., 2011), these internal design ambassadors are employees within the Ministry who have better insights on how design skills and mindsets can be relevantly embedded in their daily work, and act as potential 'silent designers' (Gorb & Dumans, 1987). The senior management could strategically involve this group of internal design ambassadors in design projects to support participants from frontline and to facilitate the afterlife of projects, including knowledge transfer and implementation of projects' outcomes.

Strategy for Long-term Impact beyond Quick Results

The Ministry currently made a long-term contract with the university to use design in various design challenges from the level of frontline service to policy-making where various departments are involved. In this long-term collaboration, the Ministry strategizes to make changes in the organization by spreading the process and the impact of service design projects across different departments and also having reflective activities after the project, for example, workshops or follow-up interviews. By doing so, the Ministry aims to have a mutual understanding of challenges for developing design capabilities and set the goals and

action strategies together. This kind of long-term visioning and strategy making will allow the government to see the outputs of each design project in a long-term view, as mid-way outcomes for long-term transformation beyond quick results. This way, the government can have a mindset conducive to see real impacts of the university-collaboration projects and the role of design in strategizing transformation.

Discussion and further work

From the interviews, we have learned that the current state of the Ministry in adopting design is located between 'design for discrete problems' and 'design as capabilities' in terms of the Public Design Ladder model (Design Council, 2013). Whereas adopting design comes from senior management, some communication gaps currently exist in the Ministry across different departments and different levels. During the interviews, the Ministry officers realized that they have different understanding on the role of design and had experienced different types of challenges. At the same time, we have also identified the opportunities for the Ministry to strategically embed design capabilities in their everyday work and enable long-term impact, such as supporting internal design ambassadors and developing a long-term relationship with external design experts.

The Ministry is currently in transition. Our position in this paper resonates with Junginger's claim (2015) to understand design legacies of the organization, to take the design collaborative projects and the follow-up interviews as steps for both parties to map the current state and co-develop future strategies. This Ministry has great interest to embed design for citizen-centred services and policies. We plan to co-investigate opportunities and challenges by working with more Ministry officers from different levels.

Acknowledgement

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