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## Service design and human resource consulting: An integrated vision

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### Abstract

When talking about service design people still tend to perceive it as something new, although the international debate in research and education fields is far beyond maturity. In fact, in the professional world and in education, we are witnessing three important pushes: service design tools are becoming valuable also for other professions; designers are searching for other skills in order to face the complexity of contexts; user experience approaches are becoming fundamental for organizational transformation. In particular, this paper addresses these three issues by analysing the intersection between service design and HR consulting. Both professions are involved in strategic projects that support businesses facing change: from the design point of view through developing new services and from the HR consulting point of view through enabling people to engage in change. The paper describes how these two professions meet and how this encounter can facilitate business transformation processes through collaboration experiences.

**KEYWORDS:** HR consulting, service design, business and cultural transformation processes.

### Introduction

This paper is the result of a combined effort of a group of designers, design researchers and HR consultants who have been working together to understand how these two professions can learn from each other and grow together. The work is mainly based on on-field experience with companies, where the two professions have collaborated in transformation processes, while theoretical research has to helped us to reflect on the empirical results

achieved in the past years and position them within the international academic debate.

## Business and cultural transformation processes

The world is made of continuous transformations, if there were no transformation there would be no evolution. Similarly, also the business world is constantly changing for the most diverse reasons. Today the changes cover many aspects of business and they are occurring fast: the evolution of the needs of customers (both internal and external, BtoB and BtoC); the evolution of new technologies offering more and more advanced solutions; the change in work dynamics demanding for larger flexibility, agility and speed; the change in organization structures and their boundaries and the new challenges that concern big data, business intelligence and analytics (Petersen, 2016); the increasing need of performance improvement and innovation for any enterprise to stay competitive (Gino and Staat, 2015); the global challenge to attract and retain the most talented people, always more important particularly in highly complex occupations (Keller and Meaney, 2017)

All these needs and transformations require a shift in management paradigms (Mootee, 2013) and of the role of the manager and the skills needed for leading groups: the new skills being visioning, casting, learning and investing versus previous skills being working by targets, functions, education and delegation (Staes, 2009). Especially within innovation processes people need to feel and be engaged in higher visions from the start instead of only executing visions created by others. “Innovation usually emerges when diverse people collaborate to generate a wide-ranging portfolio of ideas, which then refine and even evolve into new ideas through give-and-take and often-heated debates” (Hill and al. 2014). So managers need to develop a new kind of leadership based on co-designing; they should structure organizations in order to allow each individual to contribute unleashing their innovation potential.

Moreover there is a radical change regarding the emerging need to involve customers within business processes, both for internal decision making and the development of solutions. Within this last issue co-design methods are seen as the best way to approach the problem by using customer journey maps as prototyping tools throughout the process. This is happening when defining new products/services and involving users in formulating better customer experiences, but it is also implied when talking about internal organization transformations where we tend to talk about employee journey maps (or employee life cycles). In business transformation processes this change in mindset brings people at the center of the design of new organizational services and the new emerging goal of HR Departments is designing a productive and meaningful employee experience through solutions that are compelling, enjoyable, and simple (Deloitte, 2016)

Successful companies are constantly wondering how to offer products and services that satisfy the customer/employee, how to improve their services with respect to other competitors, making sure that internal processes are effective through gradual investments. Furthermore successful companies are able to capture all the benefits that new social and digital technologies offer both in relationship with customers, and in bettering internal collaboration and management of knowledge. In doing so, they continually redefine and plan their transformation: they identify and pursue improvement goals and all this is achieved with people and thanks to people.

If in the past transformation happened through a top-down process, therefore top managers decided what needed to be done and the rest of the pyramid executed according to specific functions and delegations, today transformation processes involve everybody at every level, allowing people to grow through the transformation and participate actively throughout the process. In this scenario, change can be sustainable when people are called ‘on board’ and become themselves, with their creativity and experience, the designers of change. Today people are at the heart of transformation processes and this is why there is an increasing need for professions able to guide this evolution through new modalities that are capable to:

- understand the specific corporate culture, because there are no pre-packaged solutions that are good for everyone;
- give voice to the various stakeholders involved, in order to have an enlarged vision;

- be human-centered, to encourage motivation and engagement;
- encourage the creative process, to go deep, envision and build possible futures;
- support people to exploit all the different emotions associated with change, from the negative ones, like fear, anger and sadness to the positive ones, like joy, happiness, curiosity, etc. (Fredrickson, 2001, 2004);
- encourage people to adopt new behaviors by approaches based on “changing mindset” (Dweck, 2006, 2012) and “changing context” - the environment within which we make decisions and respond to cues (Dolan et al., 2010).

Knowing how to guide transformation processes also entails to be able to:

- use ethnographic analysis tools;
- be empathic with various stakeholders;
- guide and follow work groups;
- have a visionary approach;
- use methods that favour the elaboration of creative thinking.

### The role of service design within business and cultural transformation

In the professional world what is happening is that designers are called to co-design in different modalities within transformation processes and within this process they are often called by managers to help employees reflect on specific problems and find new solutions together. Problems can go from defining a better customer engagement service to defining new ways to work within the business or building a vision for the future development of the business itself.

The role of the designer in transformation processes has been described as a facilitator or mediator of multidisciplinary groups to reach different goals (for a deeper reading see Yee et al., 2017).

The profile of the service designer in particular is the most suitable to achieve such abstract outcomes varying from organizational structures, operation processes or service experiences (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2011).

Since design thinking is also becoming the next management ‘wonder bug’, a tool for changing management paradigms (Moootee, 2013) and the design attitude (as defined by Michlewski, 2015) is considered to be precious in facing today’s challenges, designers are often called to support human resource consultants in changing work environments and integrating them with design thinking tools and methodologies. In more advanced contexts designers are also asked to guide advisory boards in order to help businesses involve external experts in defining solutions together.

In general, however, in practice designers are not involved from the start of the transformation process, but rather are invited to perform in a specific moment within the process. Design is more often seen as a team building accelerator, while in reality the main goal of the profession has always been to co-design, to involve different stakeholders in the process for developing new ideas.

Therefore, due to this misunderstanding, in all the aforementioned situations, and beyond, there is a need to reflect on different aspects of the profession, including both limits and strengths, and how designers could integrate with other professions in order to better respond to the impelling business demands while keeping focused on the profession’s main goal.

Analysing previous experiences we have identified a few areas in which the design profession lacks in reflection in understanding:

- the opportunities and risks of facilitation (Meroni et al., 2018);
- the limitations in transferring design capabilities, from tools to a broader mindset (Sanders and Stappers, 2013); and of instilling a design culture which goes beyond the application of a process (Michlewski, 2015)
- the effectiveness of co-design in terms of final product/service delivery with respect to traditional design processes (Pirinen, 2016);

- the overproduction of ideas with respect to real downstream implementation (Verganti, 2017).

Within this reflection, starting from professional experience and also from confrontation with students, we realized that the design world is increasingly interlinking with the world of HR consultants. In particular we have noticed how service design and HR consulting have similar core competences, such as for example empathy and “perspective transformation” (the capability to facilitate individuals to change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds) (Merizow, 1978, 2000)

But the way the two professions use this competence and the reasons why can be very different, although both are essential for business and cultural transformation processes. Many practitioners in the consulting environment are exploring this interconnection. An example is the report published by Deloitte, where HR experts identified specific consulting areas that can benefit from design, including organisational design, engagement, learning and more (Deloitte, 2016). Building on this knowledge and starting from our intuition, in the following paragraphs we will describe our point of view and the proposal of an integrated vision.

## Limits and opportunities of service design within business transformation

### Beyond the role of the design as a facilitator

The way design is practiced and adopted both by businesses and the civil society today is much more collaborative than it traditionally was. Co-design has passed from being an emerging practice to being usual and often seen as the only way to do innovation.

Within this context, businesses look at design as a tool to involve employees in decision-making by analysing the status quo and imagining future possibilities. This process usually takes the shape of a workshop gathering staff from different business units and sharing a business challenge to be tackled together.

It is in a context like this that a new role of the designer is defined: the designer is no longer merely seen as the expert that comes out with the brilliant solution and delivers it to the client, but as a facilitator able to interact with very different stakeholders and guide them to find solutions together (Muratovski, 2015).

This represents a big shift in the traditional service design activity. It is no longer a matter of merely interviewing final users and key stakeholders to collect the evidences that are necessary to design the new product/service (Segelström, 2013). It indeed implies to facilitate non-designers with very different backgrounds and characteristics to collaborate with each other and co-design solutions.

The service designer is in a sense familiar with such approaches because interacting with people is fundamental within the profession, but this doesn't necessarily imply the capability to lead a co-design session. Facilitation is a professional skill and there are experts who are specifically trained to coach. Historically, designers are simply not, or rather facilitation is not a skill that is officially foreseen in the curriculum of design education.

Service designers are trained to work in groups and sometimes the groups can be even highly heterogeneous, within some universities there are support programs for team building in order to allow students to learn basic techniques, but still this doesn't mean that designers know how to manage groups in a professional manner. For this reason, the designer's role is often confused by people coming from other professions. In this regards, the experiment made by Han (2009), illustrates the very different perceptions that the designer can evoke in stakeholders regarding the role the profession must have during the various stages of a project.

Indeed, there are some service designers who can be personally inclined to lead groups therefore performing better in those conditions, but there is the possibility that they don't act in the most proper manner and hence this leads to having to deal with critical situations. During a workshop there are many dynamics that can be difficult to manage for a designer: throughout the process, a conflict can arise because of different opinions of the participants; there can be some people that are not so confident in expressing their opinion and have difficulties in engaging with others; there are groups where all members want to contribute with long talks and time is limited; there are people that feel uncomfortable in playing, letting go and creative thinking tools and techniques. These are just a few examples of situations where the service designer faces group dynamics which can be critical and can be solved only thanks to personal intuition, instinct and wisdom.

What is felt by many service designers is the lack of awareness and skills within facilitation methods, that can probably be found in a group dynamics specialist or a professional in the field of coaching.

Being aware of how group dynamics work and how they develop could be a great value for the designer, necessary to understand what is going on when working within groups, but on the other hand it could be still not sufficient to know how to deal with them.

Facilitation today, besides being improvised and not grounded for most service designers, could also be considered as distracting for the design activity itself.

Indeed, the activity of facilitating as it has been defined by the community of psychological scientists (De Sario, 2017) is an activity that should be done with an 'outsider' tone, without adding content or opinions to the table. Based on personal experience in education and in the professional field, we think that in these contexts designers should stay focused on playing the role of the visionary and hence propose content and lead the group toward the project goal, being this the core skill of the profession, leaving facilitation to an expert in the field.

With regards to this, many authors have been studying the ever changing role of the service designer and how to conciliate the twofold activity of facilitating and proposing contents (Meroni and Sangiorgi, 2011; Tan, 2012; Yee, 2017). Selloni (2017) with her experimentation of co-design with citizens offers an extensive material for discussion, highlighting the crucial power of the designer in 'proposing contents', that goes far beyond facilitating the expressions of others and puts the designer in a leading position. From our perspective, the role of the designer should not be limited to summarizing a group discussion on post-its (Manzini, 2016) and probably should not be focused on managing the group, subtracting energy to the creative act. Rather, designers should stay focused on the design activity in order to develop intuitions, crazy thinking and breakthrough ideas. Facilitating is indeed a stressful and demanding activity, which could threaten the quality of the result of the co-design itself. Hence, we believe that the lack of a specific competence in facilitation is concerning for the service designers for two main reasons: the first one is related to the quality of the consultation, which can be compromised by the unawareness of the designer toward group dynamics techniques; the second refers to the effort in facilitating which affects the concentration of the designer in the creative act.

## Service design and HR consulting: integration of tools and methods

Based on the reflections described above, at the beginning of October 2017 we decided to have a live confrontation to understand how service design and HR consulting could merge together. The confrontation was organised as an event, where the authors of this paper represented expert practitioners in the two fields. They reported situations, in their experience, where they felt the need of the support of the other profession and they opened the discussion to the audience. The audience was composed of professionals of the two fields mixed with a generalist public.

The aim of the confrontation was to collect different perspectives on the possible integration of methods, tools, competences and activities of the two disciplines and to frame a proposal for a 'manifesto' in this field. What was interesting is that both professions found that the combination of the skills was empowering and has to start from the beginning of the transformation process. Below is the result of this confrontation (see also Figure 1 and 2).

**An open dialogue between professions: how does design see HR consulting and how HR consulting sees design? Which tools can be shared?**

### **The Designer's point of view**

The following points underline different areas in which design tends to fail its task when called to perform within a context of change and hence the areas in which it would be useful to search for allies in the field of Human Resource consulting.

**1. For greater effectiveness in stakeholder engagement.** Upstream, the ability to involve CEOs and top management, at the beginning of the process, in understanding the importance of the project to ensure continuity over time and avoid the usual workshop and hackathon tendency to end with many ideas but without any concrete outcomes. Designers are often called upon to intervene in short activities within a process of change but often innovative ideas that emerge in the design activity do not find fertile ground after. In the long run, this can be negative because it creates expectations in the group and confusion in understanding the real aim of the design profession confusing it with a teambuilding activity. HR consulting has developed methods to build trust upstream and also define transformation goals with stakeholders from the very start of the project.

This is the step of the diagnosis, when the goal is to have a deep understanding of the needs, the context, and to build a strong alliance with the customer. With a process consulting approach, HR consultants interview the stakeholders in order to gather information, understand the context by a systemic point of view, and tighten a relationship where the stakeholders are in some way the 'content experts', because they are the ones who know what they need, while HR consultants are the process experts, because they know how to guide the project. The final goal of the project is the result of a co-design process for diagnosis. In this manner, stakeholders feel engaged in the process and are willing to risk and take the process forward.

**2. For group management.** In the planning phase of the design process, it would be helpful to have an ally able to understand group dynamics in order to achieve better results in each phase. Groups are living systems and go through recognizable stages as they change from being a simple collection of individuals to a real group (Tuckman, 1965). When you understand it and know how to manage the subsequent dynamics, you can help working teams become effective and productive. This collaboration can determine what tools to use and how, with what aim, and also who to involve in the process and how to form groups. It is also useful to allow designers to better focus on reaching design goals without being absorbed by having also to deal with group dynamics during the design activity, leaving this task to professionals that are more skilled and expert in this field.

**3. For conflict management.** While working with HR consultants we have learnt that as designers we tend to see conflict as a negative factor, something that needs to be quickly solved, while it can also be seen as a positive moment, a crucial turning point in group dynamics which, if managed well, can bring to breakthrough insights. This change in mindset must not be underestimated because it can also lead to defining new pathways in managing design processes. However, it is important to recognize the typology of conflict and lead it in the right direction.

**4. For the acceleration of integration.** We have come to the conclusion that the two professions have common abilities and that we deal with the same themes from different

angles. In particular, as said in the above paragraph, in order to be successful both designers and HR consultants need to have an empathetic approach, and need to lead people to work together with such an approach, however, the tools used are very different, but, when combined, they accelerate integration between the people involved in the process. Designers talk about empathy when analysing people before designing, while coaches focus on empathy within the working group while designing.

### **The Human Resource Consultant's point of view**

The following points underline different areas in which design offers methods and tools that can support Human Resource consultants in better performing within a context of change and hence the areas in which it would be useful to integrate.

**1. For building a place of trust and empathy.** If we want to focus on our customers'/employees' needs and be effective, we have to work with our clients in a personal way, emphasizing authentic openness, curiosity, and humility. As consultants we need to create an atmosphere of genuine trust and caring so that clients can share what's really on their minds (Schein, 2016). Consultants and clients can then jointly discover what needs to be done. The co-design approach, methodologies and tools, facilitate the creation of a participative atmosphere where everybody plays the same game and at the same level. In particular, role playing methods allow people to live the experience in a playful matter, but it is a serious play, like playing card games, Monopoly or Risk, people are serious about it and tend to care for achieving the goal more than in other occasions of adult discussions like traditional meetings. So co-design, reducing interpersonal barriers and accelerating a deeper sharing of different points of view, can be a fruitful approach to empower people, energize teams, overwhelm prejudices and reduce cognitive bias (Liedtka, 2015).

**2. For visualization.** In many projects design enters thanks to graphic skills. The capability to transform a conversation into a visual representation allows participants to elicit their mental models, build a common knowledge around a topic and stimulates the debate underlining gaps and areas of opportunity. The use of maps, capable to transform a complex system of actors and the interactions between different parties involved in a process, facilitates confrontation. The visualization of needs, desires, expectations, fears, etc. facilitates the creation of a common ground of understanding of a topic and supports decision making processes.

**3. For structuring the project process.** The design process is perceived as an 'ordered' set of tools that give form to a methodology. When involved in a complex co-design project it is important to keep track of the results emerged in every step and to learn from them to go forward. The iterative method adopted by the design profession allows the team to build on each step of the process keeping in mind the final goal and preserving an overall vision of the whole process. The design process allows HR consultants to understand in which stage of the process they are, keeping track of outputs and intuitions and generating comparable outputs, both within the same project and among different projects.

**4. For empathic integration both at a cognitive and emotional level.** Co-design activities involve people while designing. This means that people are involved in the development of new ideas in an active/participative manner rather than only answering questionnaires and interviews. As human beings they are living an experience and are totally involved in it, mentally and emotionally, and this increases and develops awareness and empathy in the group and towards other stakeholders and therefore customers. Service design methodologies are based on practical tools that combine the two levels of engagement and this allows people to deeply understand what they have to change or improve, to define new solutions.

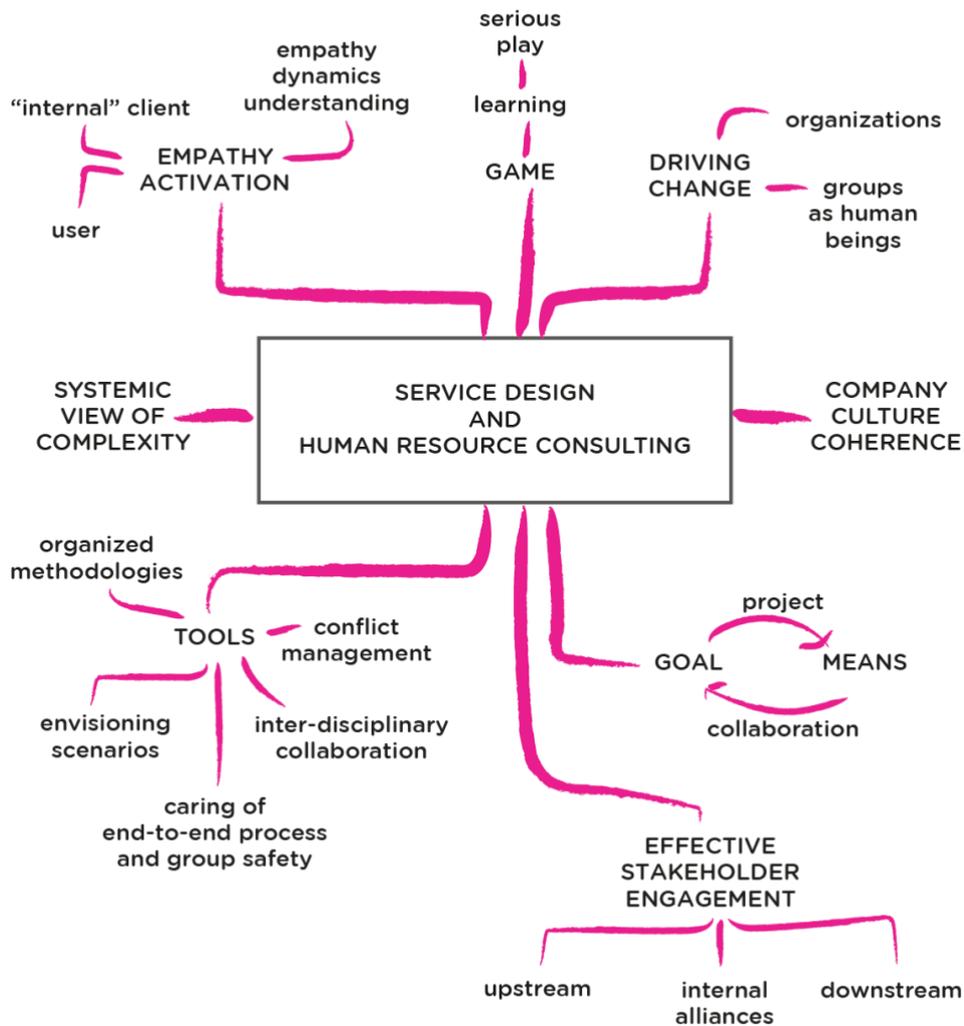


Figure 1 – Mind map that emerged from the confrontation between the professionals representing the two disciplines during the event held in October 2017.

As previously mentioned, the confrontation involved also the audience that attended the event. Therefore, after the panel discussion between the experts, the audience was invited to contribute to the debate, during an interactive session. All contributions were mapped on a board and they are reproduced by Figure 2.

The participants were asked to brainstorm on the connection and integration of the two disciplines: service design and human resource consulting. Five areas of possible synergies emerged:

- empowering collaboration: service design tools are seen as means to support people to work together and accelerate collaborative activities. They offer visual guidance to organise ideas and thoughts of diverse people;
- applying design methods to diverse fields: design methods and tools are seen as flexible and they are currently being applied in diverse fields, especially in management.
- shifting from individuals to groups: in a context where the design activity is becoming increasingly collaborative, the specific competences of the HR consultants represent a significant value for managing groups dynamics and creating communities of intents and practice.
- managing diversity: similarly to the previous point, the alliance of service designers with group dynamics specialists can be beneficial to value diversities that are naturally found within groups, in order for them to be empowered instead of flattened.
- fostering emotional pushes: during a collaborative activity, it is important to emotionally engage people who participate to it. Even if an important principle of service design deals with building empathy, designers can surely benefit from the knowledge of behavioural experts to increase motivation to participate.

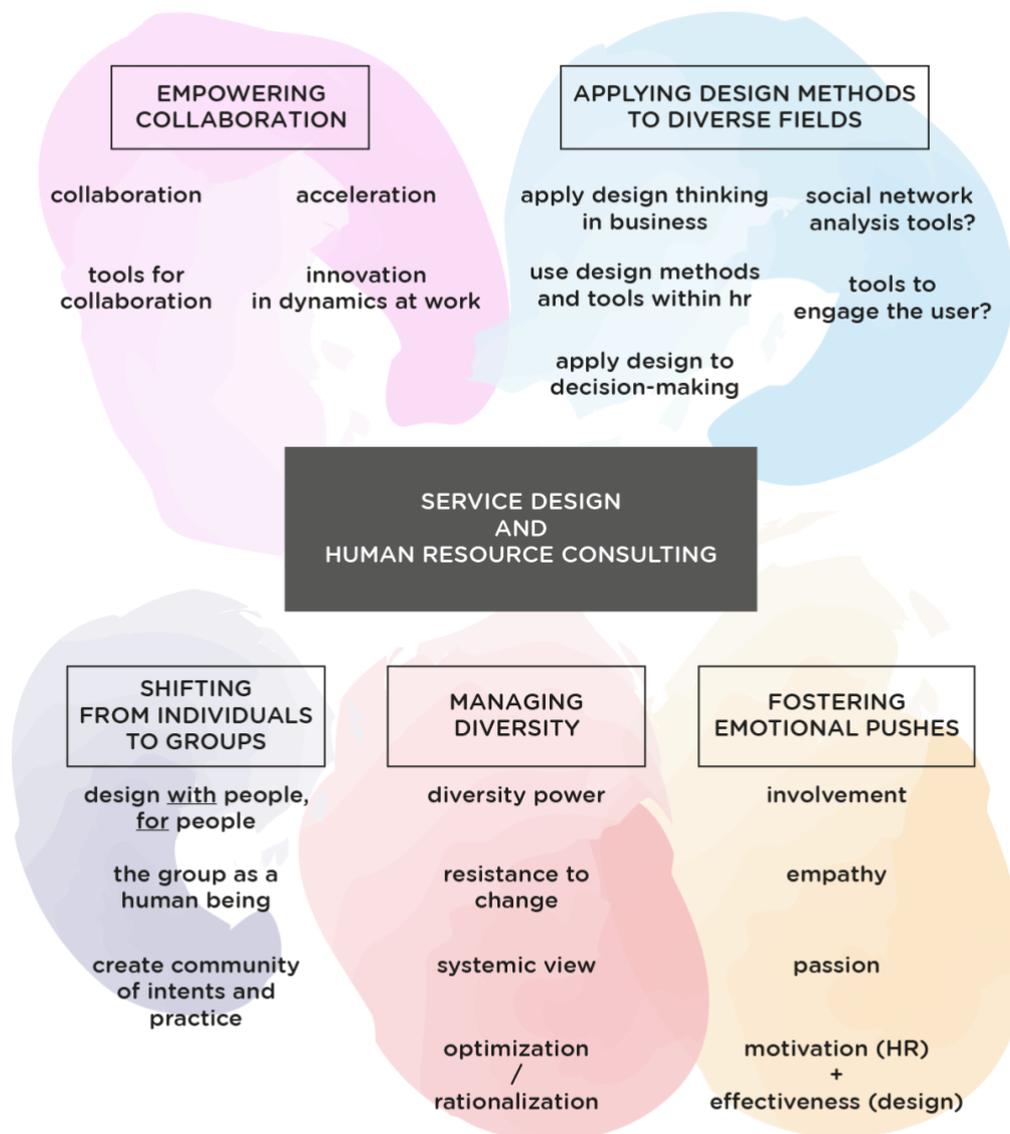


Figure 2 – Representation of the brainstorming co-designed with the audience of the event held in October 2017.

# Proposing an integrated vision for the future

## Implications in the professional world

In conclusion, what we are trying to build is a set of tools and methodologies that see a total integration of the two professions. Our intuition leads us to believe that if the two professions collaborate in defining a transformation strategy together from the start instead of working in parallel, this could give businesses a stronger acceleration in change dynamics, reducing costs and being more effective throughout the whole process. This is a first reflection on what is happening and further on-field testing needs to be done in order to define a possible integration model. The case studies on which this paper is based still see a separation between the professions but they have allowed us to start reflecting on our differences and the power of mutual collaboration. The next steps will be to approach new projects together, understanding the implication of a more profound integration and defining a model for ongoing collaboration.

## Implications in education

In the field of education the implication of such reflections is still not clear: on one side there is a desire to bring HR consulting tools within service design schools (and vice versa), in order to allow both parties to be aware of each other and of the opportunities in working together; on the other the possibility to define a new specialization that can allow these two professions to come together and form an expert in business transformation processes. The doubts of both have been described in the previous paragraphs and maybe the best solution would be to create opportunities to form teams in which the two professions can meet and learn how to collaborate.

We are not proposing to teach each other specialized skills with the risk to form hybrid professionals (nor designer, nor HR consultant), but education opportunities to learn how the two professions can integrate in the future. The vertical expertise should stay the same, but both should gain basic knowledge about the other's profession in order to build a bridge in which the two professionals can work effectively together, speaking the same language. A first practical step in education toward this solution could be to insert a specific module within both educational paths about the other's discipline in order to get that basic knowledge that we mentioned above.

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*CoDESIGN. Creatività in rete. Building a Design Orienting Scenario with respect to groups psychology to foster dialogue, engagement and effective collaboration* by Marta Violetta

*Service design inside human resources. Multiflows active environment* by Matteo Mariani

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