



## **Human Centred Service Design in the context of sport participation**

Iva Halacheva  
ivahalacheva@gmail.com  
Melbourne, Australia

### **Abstract**

The positive impact of sport participation is well researched and documented worldwide and the results are nothing short of amazing. Some of the major social challenges in contemporary societies have been successfully tackled through sport: mental and physical health, job creation, poverty alleviation, community development and crime prevention to name a few. Yet, the communities most impacted by the above-mentioned challenges have been historically the hardest to recruit and retain by sport clubs and organisations.

This paper examines the application of Human Centred (HCD) and Service Design to both address the challenges of recruitment and retention of vulnerable and marginalised communities and to drive systemic and positive social change.

**Keywords:** systemic social change; service design in sport participation

## The positive impact of sport participation is yet to be utilised by service designers

Style Sport England (2013) offers an overview of the overwhelmingly positive impact of sport participation (the act of purposeful engagement in physical sport activities). Give yourself a moment to review Sport's Impact (Chart 1, page 2). You might be reading this and you might be wondering: is sport the solution to some of humanity's most pressing problems? Well, it turns out it can be.

Some of the social benefits of doing sport are hot items on the agenda of many governments, NFP and social enterprises around the world. And this is an area increasingly familiar to designers (see Chart 1 below). What if sport could be used as a tool to address issues such as mental health, job creation and crime prevention, and some of the allocated spend for these issues diverted accordingly?



Figure 1. Sport's impact. Source: Economic value of sport in England, 2013

The economic cost of mental health in Australia exceeds \$180 bn per year (Lunn, 2019). Mental health affects 16% of the population (Lunn, 2019) and is closely linked to job stability, physical activity and social interaction.

Iva Halacheva

Human Centred Service Design in the context of sport participation

Linköping University Electronic Press

All of these are problems worthy of designers' attention and sport can be part of the solution. Sport impact on an individual and community level, combined with the fact that sport is essentially a service industry, made me wonder what designers around the world do to get more people to participate in sport more often. There is very little in the way of white papers, case studies or online discussions on service design in sport. This is peculiar because the estimated value of sport in Australia exceeded \$39 bn in 2018 (Parsons, 2018).

I turned to design practitioners and members of the sport community in an attempt to close this gap. I conducted seven half hour unstructured interviews over the phone and face to face. They were exploratory in nature and the questions varied based on the participant. My primary objective was to understand the relevance and maturity of Human Centred and Service Design for sport organisations in the context of sport participation. I spoke with people who have designed for some of the top sport bodies in Australia: Tennis Australia, the National Football League, Cycling Victoria, the International Cricket Council, Sport Victoria. I discussed the nature of the projects they engaged with, the underlying reason for the project, their processes, solutions and results. I also sought their opinion on the overall relevance of HCD in sport, both in terms of participation and fan experience. An interview with management at Cycling Victoria provided insight into the challenges they face with community engagement, programme implementation, recruitment, retention as well as the sort of help they need in order to achieve their objectives. The common theme across all interviews was that understanding what people want, and designing experiences in sport which respond to this, is not only on the agenda but is also becoming a matter of survival for sport organisations. Sport, put simply, is late to the party and is now playing catch up. It is competing against a myriad of other industries hungry for people's time, attention and money.

## **The common challenges for sport participation**

All sport disciplines I discussed with practitioners seemed to share common challenges: access to marginalised groups of society, recruitment and retention, centralisation of and therefore competition for resources, access to qual data and the "why" which drives stakeholder behaviours and motivations. Sport England (2013) features similar findings (see Chart 2 below). A growing number of large sports organisations, government

and social enterprises, however, are starting to adopt HCD to address these challenges. Please see case studies below.



Figure 2. Sport's challenges. Source: Interviews with designers and members of sport organisations in Australia

## Case studies of the application of design to improve recruitment and retention

Auskick, the kids programme of the Australian Football League, is a great example of the effective use of design in sport.

**Problem:** Recruitment and retention rates of young players were plummeting. Kids and parents found the drills boring and the events run by volunteers uninteresting. Children's attention spans have changed over time; kids are less patient, easily bored and don't like queueing. AFL recognised the need to re-imagine the Auskick experience.

**Design approach:** Understanding how parent, child and volunteer needs and expectations have evolved over the last few decades was key to designing a programme which reinvigorates the sport. Leveraging external

expertise, AFL went through a number of community design sprints, co-creation, prototyping and testing sessions.

**Results:** The new curriculum was launched in the 2019 season. It promises better experiences and opportunities for young people to join the sport (AFL, 2019). Early signs of improvement in recruitment have been very promising.

Auskick's success inspired NRL, which has since re-designed their own juniors' programme and drew almost 4,500 new kids to rugby league for the first time (Phillips, 2019).

## **Case study of the application of design to drive big and meaningful social change**

The effective use of sport to improve community safety by a local government in the UK demonstrates this is both possible and effective.

**Problem:** Rising numbers of anti-social behaviour incidents, polarisations of young and older residents and youth crime.

**Design approach:** The Council set up a gym in the park and later a dojo in disused pavilion buildings. Activities and programmes were co-created with and delivered by the community.

The dojo teaches martial arts and a sense of self-respect and respect for others. Every week tuition is given to 12 young people at risk of being drawn into anti-social behaviour. Martial arts present an ideal gateway for young people who might not be inclined to join any other form of organised sport group by providing easy access and a low start-up cost, irrespective of age, gender, social class or ethnicity.

**Results:** These developments reduced reported incidences of anti-social behaviour (e.g. graffiti and vandalism) and improved the perception of safety among older users of the park. The park also attracted more younger and older residents who were previously marginalised.

The martial arts programme brought individual benefits to young people taking part in it and improved police time efficiency.

The UK is among the few countries where sport's economic value (in relation to the real-world economy) and impact (in terms of welfare and utility) are recognised. The above example is one of many, taken from

Sport England's publication Economic value of sport in England from 2013.

## Conclusion

While the maturity of Human Centred and Service Design in sport participation is low, these disciplines hold huge potential to tackle the challenges faced by many sport organisations.

The successful application of design can lead to engaging more people around the world to do more sport more often, including hard to reach marginalised and vulnerable members of society. Furthermore, it is possible for designers to employ sport participation as a tool to address some of the major social challenges in contemporary societies such as mental and physical health, crime prevention and job creation. By addressing these challenges designers and sport organisations can improve social mobility and in turn strengthen both recruitment and retention in sport participation over the long term. Put simply, the application of Human Centred Service Design in the context of sport participation holds the potential for a systemic and positive social change.

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