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The importance of human-centred design – designing services for real people

Our days are filled with people asking us questions and requesting our help. Our service desks are clogged with phone calls and support requests. And a new chat bot is born every day to answer the never-ending slew of questions.

Have you ever stopped to ask why people need so much help to complete everyday tasks? What if, instead of creating yet another chat bot and focussing on the symptom, we actually solved the root problem? What if we designed services and experiences for real people so they could do what they needed without our help?

When you take the time to speak to your service desk team you'll notice they spend 80% of their time answering the same handful of questions. Forget expensive market research or over-priced consulting engagements; spend 30 minutes with your service desk and you will get great insight into what pains your users for free. If you took these handful of pain points and re-designed the process or experience so users could complete these tasks easily then you would save time and money and make everyone very happy. This is the essence of human-centred design.

Human-centred design places people at the centre of the problem. It considers the real person; what they are trying to achieve; and how they prefer to operate. It's about designing services and experience which support users to complete their daily tasks. Effective human-centred design saves time and money; it frees employees from manual repetitive tasks to work on activities that matter. From a citizen perspective, it helps people complete critical tasks without the need to call or walk into a service office.

Tips for implementing effective human-centred design:

1. **Understand your users**

   The key to effective human-centred design is to understand your users – the people you serve. Building personas is an easy and effective way to identify all your different user types. For a government agency, users may include citizens who live locally, inter-state, or internationally. It may include users who are digitally savvy and users who only operate off-line. Recognising each of the different types of users and their different needs helps you to predict and design the different services they may need.

2. **Map user journeys**

   Once you have identified your primary personas it is important to map their various tasks and journeys. User journeys generally include the individual steps within the process, the tools and systems users interact with, the facilitators and approvers involved, and often the pain points and barriers experienced. Visualising an experience can be a powerful tool to illustrate the lived experience from a user's perspective. It can show the complexity, effort, and frustrations experienced by users, and the effort and frustrations of internal employees trying to administer such complex processes. A well-designed journey map can be a light bulb moment for many organisations seeking change.

   And the journey and experience may look and feel vastly different for different user groups. Consider the simple task of registering for a new service. The digitally savvy user may prefer to use your app; the international user may need to use a web-based form; and the offline user may need a hard copy of a form in the mail. Mapping the journey upfront helps you design the right service and experience the first time, as it can cost significantly more to re-develop or correct a journey after it has been implemented.

3. **Prioritise high frequency tasks**

   We are all busy and not all problems may be worth solving. So it is important to prioritise the high frequency or high value journeys first. Streamline the most frequent experiences of your users.

   Talk to your service desk for the most commonly reported pain points. Review your web traffic reports for frequently visited pages and higher than usual page bounce rates. Conduct surveys and discovery sessions to understand the issues for your customers and citizens, but also your employees.

   And remember, experiences rarely happen in isolation; they are a network of touchpoints and interactions. Users looking to complete one task may naturally need to complete a secondary task. For example a newly registered user may need to update their profile and contact details, they may need to add security questions, or link their account with another service. Good journey mapping will flag these dependencies and good human-centred design will treat them as a connected family of streamlined experiences.

4. **Stop thinking about yourself**

   Often, we are so wrapped up in the internal structures and operations of our own organisations that we forget who we are serving. And this carries through into our services. We require our users to understand and work within our organisational structures. We create unnatural hand-off points in a process that are unnecessary, and often disruptive. We hold information in silos and make users repeat steps and provide the same information more than once. A user doesn't care which department owns which part of the process; they just want to get the task done and get back to living their life.

Human-centred design is about putting people at the centre of the problem and the centre of the solution. It's about creating intuitive, seamless experiences that help users complete their tasks quickly and easily. It's about making the lives of our employees easier, removing the obstacles, manual processes, and duplicated effort that stifles their productivity and happiness. Human-centred design is a critical ingredient for effective business improvement and successful transformation.

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