

Design Capabilities

IN PUBLIC GOVERNANCE INNOVATION

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In October of 2013, Chris Wormald, head of policy in The UK government and permanent secretary at the Department for Education, published a 12-point plan for better policymaking. The plan proclaimed “if there’s one set of skills departments lack it’s not policymaking, it’s designing.”¹ During the same month, the Public Policy Lab and the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects jointly initiated a the event *Policy, Meet Design* for ten designers and ten policy-makers to begin conversation and facilitate mutual understanding for both groups of expertise.² Government agencies from Singapore, Denmark, Australia and the European Union are all stepping into the conversation of how to best recognize design as a strategic tool to drive necessary change within government with the goal of engaging citizens towards more human-centered innovations thereby improving the quality of life.

In its essence, public administration deals with complex social problems that are

inherently wicked because we have a hard time reaching consensus in a pluralistic society.³ The external environment is changing at such an unprecedented speed that the original organizational structure cannot keep up, causing a vicious cycle of inefficiency. It takes time for all kinds of demands and opinions to be discussed while input into political system often requires years of negotiation.⁴ Moreover, internal organizational frameworks such as structure, process and personnel strategies do not necessarily provide motivation for employees to be innovative in their everyday work. Many scholars have studied how to motivate government employees through performance review questionnaires, peer evaluations, rewards and so on, but the core issue actually lies in the awareness of team spirit and cross-departmental collaboration. In addition, traditional leadership and the top-down decision-making process often blocks innovation. The natural tendency is to observe and adjust behavior according to power. As a result, most employees in

public organizations play safe strategies instead of being creative. All mentioned above have been hurdles for public sectors' transformation. So, where is the opportunity for design to help drive the necessary transformations within public governance?

At first glance, one may say that the opportunity lies in inviting external partners like designers and design consultants to work with policy makers. However, in order to sustain the impact of design, the capabilities and values must be embedded within the individuals, the working process and the organizational structures. In a successful case of Australian Taxation Office (ATO)⁵, John Body implemented design methods and articulated how to embed design within organizational change containing seven top-line principles and commitments, fifteen tools and techniques and three comprehensive design conferences to communicate how design can drive change in detail. The topics ranged from ways to work with complexity to changing the way the ATO thinks about design and to building up design capabilities, as well as the values of prototyping and the importance of user research. There are two moments within the challenges of interest to me. The first is the process of negotiating and balancing the general vision of design for the whole tax system and the second is

being specific within the everyday working process. Towards the end of this three-year implementation, it was concluded that the implementation of the design process needs to rely more heavily on their own staff rather than on external consultants.

So what is design? Among a wide range of elaborations, one has captured that the essence is to view design as a continuous process of negotiating the trade-offs between different goals.⁶ In Philip Sargent's paper, "Design Science or Non-science? A Non-Scientific Theory of Design," he indicates that the process of design is meaningful and useful only in certain contexts. Nigel Cross identified "Design with a capital D" as "the collected as the collected experience of the material culture, and the collected body of experience, skill and understanding embodied in the arts of planning, inventing, making and doing."⁷ Design capabilities deal with the organization and planning of programming and scenarios those to do with mediating and attuning relations like negotiation and resonance and those to do with moving from existing to preferred situations such as translation and reconfiguration as well as those involving the bringing of something new into the world such as propositions and discovery.⁹

Because we, as human beings, are living in

a dynamic environment in which the scale of change is so enormous and interconnected, only government has the impact to drive towards a more positive direction collectively. In the public sector, design capabilities exist on different levels in order to drive organizational change. These capabilities should be paired with leadership to build upon values, purpose and regulations in order to function coherently in a political system.

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