
Service design and experience design: what unites us is greater than what divides us

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Abstract

This position paper draws on experiences of working within service design and experience design in the UK in order to reflect on the key differences and growing similarities between these two practices. The challenges faced by design agencies are described and in particular those arising from the closer alignment of design and business. This alignment is leading to a need for design teams to deliver process as well as digital products as project outcomes, requiring understanding of how to facilitate lasting transformation within organizations as well as how to design compelling user experiences. A skillset built upon three pillars: working with business, with people and with ideas is proposed to support further convergence of these two disciplines.

Author Keywords

Experience Design, Service Design, Design practice

Introduction

Both service design and experience design are widely acknowledged to overlap in scope and share much in common in terms of theoretical roots, design approach and tools and methods. The uncertainty surrounding their boundaries is magnified by the multiple academic disciplines that underpin and shape how each is taught

and researched [1,2]. This position paper reflects from a UK industry perspective upon the differences and similarities between the two; the challenges that today's design practitioners face and the skillsets needed to prepare for the future.

Similarities and differences

Similar outcome, different transformational scope

Despite the evident similarities in tools, methods and design outcomes there are still significant differences in scope between service design and experience design projects. Whilst in experience focused projects the focus is very much on designing amazing user-centric digital experiences (within current constraints or starting afresh) within service design projects the business itself is very much part of the transformation scope: business processes are questioned, and multiple optimization solutions explored which ultimately impact upon customer journeys and the design of end user touchpoints. As an architectural transformation, a service design project, therefore affects all of the system. Whereas, for example, an experience design agency might be tasked with designing a customer portal for a water provider delivering end user interfaces that enable the customer to log in, pay bills, check water usage etc., a service design project might present the same design tasks to a design agency but with the additional strategic goal of looking to optimize the business processes within the system *first*. *Only after* these systemic decisions have been made will the end user interfaces be designed. In other words, business is often the object of design within a service design project, rather than purely the context for design, thus offering higher scope for transformation.

Similar channels, different levels of complexity

The 'field of play' for service design is also broader than that for experience design but the assumption that the focus of the experience designer is upon design of a single touchpoint and for service designer multiple touchpoints no longer holds true. Today's experience designer is often tasked with designing across a range of digital touchpoints as increasingly customer relationships with brands and organizations are shaped by interactions in the digital and physical world. Ogilvy One's work with IKEA for example defined both in-store and online experiences for the brand's stores worldwide [3]. However, the scope of design materials utilised by the two disciplines remains different. Whereas, the focus of experience design primarily remains upon making tools for people to use, service design often goes beyond this to design new jobs, roles and responsibilities for the users of these tools.

The differentiation in scope between the disciplines in the design agency setting relates often to how deeply the backstage limitations of existing ICT systems are explicitly considered within a project. For service design this will routinely include consideration of how complex new systems talk to legacy systems and how this ultimately constrains or opens up the end user or customer experience. The acquisition of service design agencies by large IT consultancies (Ernst and Young's purchase of the UK design agency Seren to name one of many [4]) acknowledges growing recognition that successful design of end user experiences (business to business or business to customer) and business transformation are now tightly intertwined.

Similar methods, different degrees of precision

The methods used by service designers and experience designers are in today's design agencies very similar with common use of discovery workshops, stakeholder and user interviews, with the goal of achieving a good mix of upfront qualitative and quantitative data to scope projects and inform decision making. Again, the notable difference is the level of complexity to be considered. Service design requires precision from day one, whilst traditional 'build projects' may require less with more opportunity to underpin design decisions with assumptions regarding the user journey. For example, you can make a hypothesis around how a user interacts with a careers website; it's much harder (or almost impossible) to make a hypothesis around what kind of information technology (IT) systems underpin provision of meaningful data for users within an airport. Consequently, the involvement of exactly the right people in discovery workshops becomes paramount. Does service design in comparison to experience design therefore demand more in terms of quality from those responsible for front end research and is this greater need for precision understood by clients and agencies new to the service design space?

Summary

In conclusion, when working in today's design industry, drawing a hard line between these two design practices does not make a lot of sense. Ultimately and most fundamentally, both have user centeredness at the core. The methods used, and eventually, the output created is very similar and both require granularity and system thinking. Experience designers are increasingly adopting service design tools to address design of multi-channel and omni-channel experiences and service designers the tools of experience design as the

digital fabric of services, traditionally delivered face to face, becomes richer and often the key differentiator between competitive product offerings.

However, the level of complexity of service design projects is never to be underestimated. To use a gaming analogy: service design can be compared to a massive multiplayer online role-playing game where every character affects the actions and reality of others and experience design to the end-to-end journey experience that early platform games provided. Both can be classed as gaming experiences but the complexity of the former demands so much more from both players and designers.

Process pain points

Drawing business and design closer

Service design is sometimes criticized for focusing on mapping of experiences and processes but not necessarily delivering value in terms of outcomes [5]. The initial 'service consultancy' agencies often did not have the right skill set to deliver the actual change (at an end user interface level) that needed to be delivered as a result of transforming the service / strategy. This led to strategic partnerships between service design and experience design agencies (sometimes resulting in confusion about where the responsibilities of each lay). However, increasingly mergers and acquisitions are leading to the evolution of large business transforming agencies with an experience/service design arm encompassing the traditional remits of both. Whether design becomes isolated or fully integrated into the structure and ethos of such agencies depends on the extent to which those at the very top truly believe in its value. How much design teams have to adapt their studio culture, workflow and client relationships to

successfully co-exist with more traditional business divisions is as yet not fully determined.

Making promises a reality

Such mergers of business and design under one roof do not guarantee that the promised transformations come to pass. Research suggests that service design projects fail when agency designers are 'parachuted' in to run workshops, create experience maps, stakeholder maps, brainstorm solutions etc. but how to implement and drive change going forward is left in the hands of the client organization who (particularly in the public services or community context) may not be equipped to deliver it [6].

Top level buy-in or drive (supported by constant extensive research) is therefore essential to the success of most transformational projects. The focus of the client can sometimes be too focused on the first delivery or launching of a product (or a service) rather than investing in on-going maintenance, training staff, etc. Successful projects therefore require that attention is paid to process design (as well as the outcome design) and strong leaders are required to champion this. Tools and methods that help the designer facilitate change, such as stakeholder and experience maps, and support co-design with people tend to facilitate successful and lasting outcomes. Outside of the large business consultancies, design agencies established in the service design space are starting to develop specific expertise to support long term transformation [7]. However, experience design agencies seeking to broaden their consultancy portfolio beyond digital product design to include service design and evolution of business strategy must not underestimate the effort

and buy in required to successfully deliver process as well as digital outcomes.

The future of this union

So, as blurring of the boundaries between experience design and service design continues what skills will be needed by the user-centered designer of the future (whatever they may be called)? A well-rounded experience professional has to work with the business (understand business language, strategy, how it translates to experience design strategy etc.) and understand what needs drive client decisions (beyond the needs of the end user). They need to be able to work with a multitude of stakeholders including end users but increasingly senior managers to be able to extract information and choose the right research methods for each context and also be creative inventors that can work systemically with ideas and clearly communicate, often visually and through the use of prototypes and stories, these ideas to others. If these three pillars are covered by the skill set of the future designer - working with business, with people and with ideas they can be equipped to function in the increasingly complex world within which design teams (in-house and agency) reside.

Design faces many new challenges from the rapid evolution of technology including learning to design with big data [8] and with artificial intelligence (AI) to name but two. Whereas, experience design to date often embraces new technologies to challenge understanding of what could be, service design in comparison can appear timid and less willing to push boundaries and speculate about the future. It is possible therefore that over time service design agencies will gravitate towards design of public services

and industries where risk is not usually welcomed and experience design agencies towards digital innovation for brands able to invest heavily in inventing new ways to engage consumers (as evidenced, for example, by the growing use of augmented technology within retail marketing [9]).

However, as business and design draw closer, such divergence is less preferable than a future where further convergence of these disciplines allows their strengths to be combined. Service design, with its

emphasis on process and transformation, *together* with experience design, with its emphasis on designing compelling user centered experiences can potentially provide the tools, methods and knowledge needed to successfully innovate with emerging new materials and also support long lasting transformational change. The future will be better served therefore by opening up the disciplines to share each other's skills and knowledge rather than by narrowing down roles to create an artificial divide.

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