

Overcoming the ‘Not Invented Here’ barrier in public service organisations

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How can service designers overcome the resistance to solutions that are “not invented here”?

A significant barrier currently facing service design consultants working with the public sector is the “Not Invented Here (NIH) syndrome”. It is a term used to describe an unwillingness to adopt an idea because it originates from another culture (1). The NIH syndrome challenges an organisation’s innovation processes because it prevents co-operation with external consultancies and implementation of new solutions.

As Harvard Business School professor Henry Chesbrough states in his book, “Open Innovation”; “Innovation today must be managed as an open system, with a far greater external focus”.

There can be several reasons that the NIH syndrome exists in organisations. Some are lack of employee involvement in important processes, experiences with several similar and failed processes and apprehensiveness to change and new routines.

One can claim that the NIH syndrome is more prominent in the public sector than in the private sector for three simple reasons. Firstly, public institutions typically have a lack of experience in innovation – especially with design. Secondly, they typically have great professional pride. And thirdly, they are hierarchical organisations bound by a rigid set of long-standing norms. When service designers challenge existing procedures and organisational structures, their user-driven “bottom-up” approach can meet resistance in “top-down” managed public organisations.

So how can service designers work with management and employees to avoid NIH scepticism and activate the immense innovation potential that lies in these public organisations and their employees? How can service designers inspire and motivate management and employees so that they welcome proposed solutions as an opportunity to meet user needs and create higher satisfaction amongst customers and employees? And how can service designers secure commitment and action from all layers of the organisation, so that the solution is firmly anchored in top management and consistently delivered by employees?

Involvement, and ownership are crucial for successful implementations of new solutions. A big challenge to achieve this can be insufficient communication to employees about the project from management level. For example:

- **at a national mail service company, an automatic service was difficult to implement because employees were not involved in the process or informed about its aim. Instead of seeing it as help, they considered it a threat towards their employment.**
- **at a large hospital, a range of users were involved during the development of a new service concept. The design team experienced resistance from some employees, which was caused by a lack of information from the management. Who owned this project and how did it concern the employees? The involvement of employees was important to gain valuable user insight and create ownership amongst employees. The aim was for employees to feel like their needs were being met and that new solutions were relevant to them.**

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Not_Invented_Here

What can we learn from this? That a successful implementation of new service solutions demands that employees are not only involved in, but also informed about the project, its purpose and potential consequences. Designers have important competences in involving actors and users in the process. They are also skilled in communicating through visualisations and scenarios – creating tangible solutions as a base for discussions and decision-making. This is where design truly has an impact as a tool in solving process problems.

Another lesson is that management must communicate with employees so that the service designers are accepted and gain access to required user insight. The insight lays basis for the service solution. If this fact is well communicated to management and employees, they will see that the proposed solution in fact is “invented here” and creates value for everyone involved – staff, users and the organisation as a whole.

So the next question must be: if the key factors for successful service design projects are top management commitment and employee involvement, how can service designers work from both ends - top and bottom? How can they facilitate a dialogue and good flow of information about insights and challenges throughout the process?

During the workshop, the two case study projects (postal – and hospital service) with challenges caused by NIH mentality will be presented. I will also suggest aspects of design that can help meet these challenges and reduce internal problems with change processes.