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Design for Services

Emerging practices in Ireland

For many people, services are difficult to define. We use them everyday but never own them. Our experience of services is often defined by many tangible and intangible elements, interactions and touchpoints. Our experiences of a service can unfold over long periods of time or can be short lived. How and why services work usually only becomes apparent when something goes wrong.

The services we use every day have often emerged from the fragmented and ad-hoc implementation of decisions made by different levels of an organisation. This can lead to frustrating experiences that impact on the relationships between businesses and customers or between public sector organisations and citizens.

Service design is about designing services from the perspective of the people that use them. An objective is to design out frustrations and frictions from the experience of using a service and make a service desired and responsive to their needs and motivations. Service design is often co-creative and therefore, a deeply collaborative process involving people across and outside organisations.

Service design practice has drawn on insights from designing for user experiences learned through decades of product and industrial design, interaction design and business strategy. In order to understand actual rather than assumed behaviour, desires and motivations service design is also informed by sociology and anthropological practices.

The design of services is not new and designers and design researchers have been discussing it for at least three decades. It now has matured as a key approach to the transformation of business and public sector services.

In this article we interview three Irish designers working on the design of services. They have shared insights into their design practices as well as their thoughts on the future of the discipline in Irish design, business, public sector and education.

This interview was conducted on behalf of the Iterations editorial board by Dr. Simon O’Rafferty. Simon is a Design Researcher with the Design Factors research group at the University of Limerick - <http://designfactors.ie/users/simon>, twitter: @simonorafferty

Please note, this interview was conducted online, the comments are made in a personal capacity by the interviewees and the responses are presented without edit.

Q. Service design often combines elements of different design practices e.g. UX, interaction design, graphics and communication design, design strategy and other user/human-centred approaches. How do you describe your design practice to non-designer colleagues, clients, family or friends?

Linn - I often say “I make things easier to use.” This could be on screens or it could be a service.

Lynsey - I’m a service designer within a digital team, so what I normally say is that I design the overall experience ensuring consistency and alignment, for both digital and non-digital touchpoints.

Ré - I no longer say explicitly I’m a service designer, but say I’m a designer as part of a multi-disciplinary team looking at developing new services or improving existing ones. Like with Lynsey this is almost always within a digital context.

Q. Service design is a relatively new design discipline but has become more prominent over the last decade. What attracted you to working on the design of services and were there any particular experiences or realisations that took you in this direction?

Linn - For me it was a natural evolution of

design work - everything you design happens in a context. Often poor UX of a digital product is symptomatic of organisational issues - and designing 'omni-channel' experiences requires service design approaches and tools to understand how everything hangs together.

Lynsey - As a service user it's common to see the internal structure of the organisation. What attracted me to service design was to break down these internal silos to give our users a seamless experience.

Ré - For me, it was a natural progression also thinking about the wider context of a user's interaction. Over time, I've seen that the bit that a customer / user touches is really a manifestation of an organisation's structure, politics and culture. With this in mind, creating touchpoints becomes less important than the conditions that allow you to create services. Over time I've seen service design less as a discipline and more of a sensibility, less end-to-end control / God's eye view and more an active participant in shaping change. This means a humbler approach with less emphasis on design and much more emphasis on service (both in terms of the output but also as a way of operating within multi-disciplinary teams).

Q. Can you talk a bit about your different experiences of working on service in-house and as a consultant - how does it affect your approach to projects?

Lynsey - I jumped between in-house and consultancy in my career, both have their pros and cons, but I feel being in-house has more of an advantage for service design practice. The reason being, a service is a user's experience of a brand, so touches almost every department in an organisation. Being an in-house service designer gives you much more leverage to make changes happen right across the organisation.

Ré - Agree completely. Focus less on the service touchpoint / user experience and more on the organisation's ability to deliver services.

Q. Are there particular design research methods that you (or your project teams) are drawn to? Are there approaches or methods you would like to be applying but don't?

Linn - Design research is awesome! Most

important of all for me is trying to understand people and their needs and behaviours in context. For this, contextual inquiry, design ethnography and interviewing are the optimal approaches. Unfortunately, the amount of generative research on projects tends to be limited - oftentimes we are doing evaluative research like usability testing, which misses the opportunity for user voices to frame the questions, scope and solutions.

Lynsey - We are always digging into why people do what they do, so qualitative research techniques are best. We use contextual interviews to try and understand user goals, needs and emotions. We've found diary studies useful when we need to understand how users engage with a brand over time, for example their bank. Using qualitative research techniques will produce insights to inspire ideas. However, this is not to disregard quantitative techniques, we also use these in our work for validation.

Ré - Designing enterprise services in heavily regulated financial services environment means there are strict controls on access to quantitative data. Talking to users is vital but data as a material for design shouldn't be overlooked and definitely something I'm keen to do much more of.

Q. What inspires you most about your work?

Linn - What inspires me most is people. It is a privilege to get to engage with people through design research on a variety of topics. You get to share in people's stories and hear some pretty personal things. It's an honour. And a skill to learn how to do that with respect [sic].

I'm also inspired by the variety of project types and industries I get to explore - as a designer you get these deep glimpses into a whole range of worlds - I've worked on libraries, insurance, airline loyalty, retail, not for profits... Getting to peek into the skeletons and frames that make all these things happen is so cool.

Lynsey - I love the problem solving aspect to my work. Finding out what really frustrates users and then designing a solution that solves that problem is very rewarding.

Ré - Hard questions. Again working within a heavily regulated industry, across



Above: Linn Vizard, UX and Service Designer at Usability Matters; Lynsey Duncan, Service Designer at Ryanair; Ré Dubhthaigh, Innovation Manager at Citi

100+ countries, with an existing complex infrastructure and ecosystem means you can not shy away from hard questions like data protection, privacy, security, different levels of access to technology, non-western cultural norms, commerciality. Deciding the trade offs between reducing friction and reducing agency are very real and can't be wished away.

Q. Where and how do you seek out inspiration for your design projects?

Ré - Externally - online. I try and follow a diverse bunch of people on social media and try and read a wide variety of topics, well beyond design. I don't get to read as much as I'd like any more and the book pile is growing. Similarly conferences. Internally talking to colleagues is important to share knowledge, especially if it is domain specific.

Q. What value do you think design brings to the development of services, either in the private or public sector?

Linn - I think design brings the value of a human centred approach. Starting with people and their needs is incredibly powerful and unfortunately not that common.

I also think design brings the value of understanding that there are things that bring value that cannot be measured. It is an antidote to the business fixation on profit as a metric.

Lynsey - Design brings the user lens to the development of services. But truly great design also balances that with the needs of the organisation/service provider.

Ré - Services are at heart intangible and design is a mechanism to materialise them.

Q. Have you experienced any barriers or resistance to your design practice within the companies or organisations you are working for? e.g. understanding value, resourcing, bringing in a right time etc.

Linn - All the time. There is a disconnect between what design practitioners see as the potential of design and how clients see it. Designers want a seat at the decision making table, and there is often a frustration at being brought in at a tactical level rather than a strategic level.

Lynsey - As designers we want to be sure we are designing the right thing before we start designing the details. This can be difficult, as 'ideas' are often born out of keeping up with

competitors or an attempt to drive profits, but without a real understanding of the human problem we are solving.

Ré - Yes. (re)designing services is inherently about change and that always has some element of risk. As an approach and methodology it can be perceived as more risky than traditional management approaches. Articulating the value of an iterative, user focused way of working is key to make service design stick. Also not calling it service design. And showing numbers.

Q. Service Design is not part of any full design education programme in Ireland. What design skills and attitudes do you think future graduates and design schools need to develop if they want to move into service design?

Linn - The ability to deal with and visualise complexity. Systems thinking. Organisational change/change management skills. Communication skills. A business understanding is important, as service design depends on working with many departments across an organisation.

Lynsey - Service design is mostly about soft skills, empathy, communication, management, problem solving, etc.

Ré - Agree with all of the above. I think future graduates need to cultivate a capability to think both in systems and in the details, an appreciation for other disciplines and a wide set of interests beyond design. Above all though, we need to expand the range of opportunities that we are encouraging future design graduates to go after.

Q. Service Design stands out as one of the design disciplines that bridges the public and private sectors. Based on your own experience as a design practitioner, how do you think we can better integrate design in the Irish public sector?

Linn - I think we need some small, quick wins that demonstrate the value of design approaches. Also the sort of trojan horse idea - perhaps we do not need to explicitly talk about design, but rather focus on the outcomes that design could enable. When you pique people's interest you then hope that they start to ask 'how?'

Ré - The most likely answer here is service design / design as strategic resource will be

integrated into the Irish public sector via the big 4 [Accountancy firms] and not by either social designers or traditional design or branding agencies (less risk). And the people doing it will not likely have a background in 'art-school' / studio design tradition. That's not necessarily a problem but something for people who self-identify as designers to consider. That said, the shift in public sentiment towards improved services in the recent election, reduced budgets plus the demographic shift in the civil service means service delivery will also need to change. This may mean a reskilling of the public sector or wholesale outsourcing of public services - both routes for design.

Q. Have you set out a formal service design process (e.g. Double Diamond) that you apply in every project or are you more responsive to context and specific project requirements?

Linn - Much more responsive to context and specific project requirements. Ré once said to me that the dream of the end to end service design project doesn't exist, and that really struck a chord. You are coming in at a certain spot, using the methods that seem most appropriate, and doing the best you can within the parameters of the project. It's very pick and mix.

Lynsey - I agree with Linn in that it's all about following a good process. I also think that the term 'service design' can alienate certain people. Sometimes it's just best to follow your process and prove the benefits without putting too much of a label on it.

Ré - Did too much of this and now gone the other way. In my view articulating intent over and over again is more important than a formal process, especially in multi-disciplinary teams or projects with lots of stakeholders with different priorities. An anchor for conversation rather than a timeline to follow.

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