

Innovation Methodology - Northern Ireland

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Organisation: Innovation Lab, Department of Finance, Northern Ireland

Country: United Kingdom

Level of government: Regional/State government

Sector: General public services

Type: Communication, Data, Human Resources, Methods, Organisational Design, Partnerships, Public Service

Launched in: 2015

Overall development time: 1 year(s)

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Description

Our innovation is a new innovation methodology. Innovation labs across the world tend to use design methods & design thinking to develop new products & services for tackling public sector problems. We identified that we needed to combine design methodologies with other methodologies which focus on the 'front end' of innovation. That is, before initiating an innovation process we found we needed a process to help policy owners & service providers uncover both where & how to invest in innovative solutions. Our core methodology is built on design principles such as starting with needs, putting users first, developing prototypes, testing iteratively and scaling up solutions which work. We have combined these principles with other methodologies which allow us to translate innovations into organisational change. We've used 3 other methodologies to do this: system dynamics modelling, behavioural science, & open innovation (e.g. co-design adapted to a public sector context).

Generally in the public sector, new innovative tools and new practices tend to be self-contained and siloed. E.g, the UK government's Policy Lab and the Danish MindLab employ human-centred design as a methodology for "connecting new ideas with end users", but most design work seems to be focussed only around digital services. Behavioural science, also new in the public sector, tends to be self-contained, existing as a niche area; e.g., the UK government's Behavioural Insights Team (co-owned by NESTA) draws almost exclusively on behavioural science and related data to generate insights about how to "make public services...easier for citizens to use". Similarly, system dynamics policy labs tend to exclusively utilize methods from system dynamics, e.g. the Social System Design Lab based out of Washington University in St. Louis. By situating system dynamics in an innovation context we accelerate and sustain the promise of innovation offered by behavioural science and human-centred design

Why the innovation was developed

- Our Innovation Lab is a service for the whole of the Northern Ireland public sector. Our purpose is to inspire & enable policy officials, service providers, & stakeholders to develop innovative solutions to wicked, complex or inscrutable problems.
- The creative spark that started our innovation was a 5-day, multi-stakeholder Dementia Lab which covered a massive range of topics. The mental models underlying this lab were based on standard public sector theories of change, e.g. the idea that change must be driven by senior leaders, is designed by brainstorming new ideas, and delivered by building stakeholder collaboration. We considered the event a failure because we were unable to move participants beyond identifying problems.
- Grappling to make sense of the mess, we stumbled on a system dynamics modeler. She helped us embrace failure as a way of learning and showed us methods to navigate through. We've used that approach to unite other methods & develop our unique innovation process.

Objectives

Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve access, Improve effectiveness, Improve efficiency, Improve service quality, Improve user satisfaction, Increase citizen engagement, Other

- Overcome organisational resistance to change and innovation

Main beneficiaries

Civil Society, Elderly people, General population, Government bodies, Government staff

Existing similar practices

n/a

In the private sector, civil society or elsewhere

Boeing, Cola-cola, Kraft foods, etc.

To the best of our knowledge, no public sector organization around the world is using this unique combination of approaches. We suspect that combinations of these methods and tools are being employed in the private sector. E.g., we know that Boeing in Seattle utilizes system dynamics models as well as principles of innovation design. We are aware of a project in which Coca-Cola designed a new product off the back of a system dynamics simulation model of consumer behaviour combined with user insights. We are unaware of any innovation practices in the public sector which explicitly & systematically incorporate principles from complex systems theory into their approach. Likewise, we are unaware of any social policy modelling or systems modelling lab which explicitly includes principles of innovation, human centred design or behavioural science into the approach. There's a vague overlap where social system policy labs and innovation labs both are geared toward organizational learning.

Results

Effectiveness

- The combination of methods has brought some of our stakeholders back from the brink of feeling alienated by a complex system, allowing us to engage their knowledge and expertise and thereby innovate more effectively across the dementia service.

Development

Design

The idea arrived serendipitously via interactions between our team, service providers and users. After the failed Dementia Lab we wrangled for 6 months to extract insights and ideas. We hired a 'health economist' to tackle a discrete cost issue: she unexpectedly turned out to be a system dynamics (SD) modeller. She mapped out the 'system', identifying the key relationships between various care services and users of the service. The SD model served as a unified, dynamic view of a complex area: by aggregating individual understanding of how things work, applying equations and data, and simulating the behaviour-over-time, everyone was able to visualize the system together. The modelling helped us identify leverage points for change, unexpected consequences of well-intended policies, and the structures of underlying policy resistance. In short, it ranked areas for innovating in terms of potential to be effective, meaningful, and relevant to the problems. Design time: 4 month(s)

Testing

- One area that surfaced early out of the method as an area for innovation was the new Dementia Navigators programme. The Dementia Navigators were meant to be the glue that holds together every aspect of a disjointed care system. We offered to help co-design their organization so that they could learn from their professional experiences and leverage this learning by feeding it back into their organization. To do this we are applying behavioural insights to the way the Navigators are required to collect data, e.g.
- (i) designing their reporting systems in visual and organizational ways that are meaningful to the navigators rather than the Excel-based ways prescribed by the program auditors
- (ii) designing opportunity for reflection in their reporting requirements based on behavioural studies which show that meaningful reflection increases both productivity and job satisfaction as well as helps groups function more communicatively and smoothly

Testing time: 1 year(s)

Implementation

Tools used:

- The primary tool used to develop this innovation method was the priceless tool of open-minded curiosity. Our direct management expertly facilitates our extreme freedom to experiment and interact as we choose, with a minimum degree of hierarchy or bureaucratic constraint introduced into our immediate working environment. This has allowed us to invent and find multiple venues for testing the innovation method.

Resources used:

- The innovation method was developed within the existing constraints without any additionally allocated budget. It was enabled by our management's flexibility and open-mindedness to allow us to digress from our original job descriptions.

Implementation time: 1 year(s)

Diffusion

- We currently showcase the method wherever possible and have a high demand for future projects, however, we've not yet had time to properly consider how (or if) this type of model could be systematically employed across public service organizations.
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Challenges and solutions

- The challenges encountered were those typical of big systems with overlapping, disjointed sub-systems, multiple and differing voices of leadership, and wicked problems to tackle. Also, even when the models can identify entry points for innovations or improved efficiency in public services, and behavioural we are finding that organizations are very resistant to change.
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Partnerships

Multiple partners

Academics and Research Bodies, Civil Society, Other Public Sector, Private sector

We partnered with: Department of Health, Department of Finance, Public Health Authority, Health and Social Care Trusts/Regions, people with dementia and their carers, health care professionals (psychologists, occupational therapists, social workers, etc.), staff from several Northern Irish, Irish and Scottish universities, health service designers and system improvement specialists, etc.

It was our relationships with diverse partners that revealed the usefulness of this innovation methodology. Some of the partnerships were based on

previous relationships. Some previous relationships were revived and renewed by the methodology. Some new relationships were established based on the innovativeness of the methodology. So really, the innovation methodology came about directly through relationships with all our partners.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- We learned that focusing on 'big themes' and 'system-wide' solutions doesn't work. It helps to be more specific about problem and to do this a language which can articulate complexity in a simple way is required.
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Conditions for success

- For this to work, you need open learning, open innovation, constant examining of mental models, systems thinking, willingness to believe that ideas can come from anywhere, structures promoting personal mastery on the team, shared vision, team learning, collaboration with the right people, and above all, curiosity.
- As a tool, system dynamics modelling fundamentally opened us to being curious again- curious about the system and the way it works rather than confounded by complexity. Once opened, being genuinely curious about people's lived experience enabled us to discover places for behavioural interventions such as nudges and information feedbacks; being curious about one another's work brought new approaches to human-centred design, e.g. utilizing or collecting different data to determine needs; finally, essentially, the curiosity of our management to see what we would do if permitted to experiment was instrumental to helping us discover how our different skills fit together.

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