



Lab @ OPM Fellowship

The Lab at OPM

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Theodore Roosevelt Building — where the Lab is situated in Washington DC

The Lab @ OPM

The Lab is an innovation center at the Office of Personnel Management, the Federal agency that manages the government's workforce. The Lab was created in 2011 to find ways to increase the amount of creativity and innovation by federal employees to in turn improve the quality of services provided to the United States and its people.

In this mission, the Lab leverages and teaches the Human Centered Design methodology as a way of approaching the complex challenges that exist within government. They aim to do this in a number of ways - through actual project work, coaching teams through their own design process, as well as teaching employees across agencies so that they can apply these methodologies at their own organizations.



Expectations

The application of design methodologies in Federal government is something that had excited me for a long time — all the way from in highschool after coming across a lecture from then Presidential Innovation Fellow Sarah Brooks. The scale of the projects and the potential for meaningful impact is inspiring.

To me, the Lab's structure, in which it collaborated with teams across multiple agencies was an exciting way to get a look into the various challenges that currently exist in the Federal Government as well as the efforts being introduced to solving them. I was also eager to learn from the designers at the Lab - to understand their experiences in designing in public sector.

can be useful. What we do know, from years of experience and many, many design case studies, is that getting to a simple, easy-to-understand, and useful solution to any design problem is the result of many rounds of iteration, problem-solving, and testing. Leadership and clients should not expect a design solution to be completely finished in a month, especially if the team is working on multiple projects either together or apart, but defining the term of the design phase rationally can help the phase move along.

Making Decisions

A successful design phase requires the team to make a lot of decisions. Some of these include: what to design, how to make a model or prototype of it, who to test with, how to test it, how to get on those prototyping calendars, how long to wait before finding other people to test with, how to integrate their feedback, and how to move through iterations on that feedback.

This process can be anxiety-inducing, as it means the design won't meet all the needs of all the participants. This decision-making is, however, necessary. What a design team is trying to do is to make a precisely useful solution for a precise problem, not to make a large, unwieldy solution that tries (and fails) to solve all the problems encountered by the participants.

REFERENCES

Additional Research Methods

Other resources for design principles can be found from the following groups and resources:

- IxDF Methods
- NYC Civic Service Design Group: Tools & Tactics
- UK Design Group Case Studies
- The Book Apart Series, specifically Design for Real Life by Eric Meyer & Sara Wachter-Buntcher



A universal solution in which humans feel or show inclination or impulse for or against someone or something. In Design Thinking, the chances of lateral ideas is accepted, and we connect for these issues to gain awareness and acknowledgment of them.

LEAN (process)

An approach that focuses on people, process and purpose and the alignment between the three.

"No wrong ideas"

In Design Thinking, the principle that, in order to forward innovative thinking, the group or individual performing the thinking session must accept and consider all ideas or possible solutions.

Pain Points

In experience design, pain points are real, perceived problems experienced by customers within a system.

Problem frames

The area of research in regards to a particular problem.

Qualitative research

Properly exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research.

ROI

Acronym for Return on investment.

Root cause

The fundamental reason for the occurrence of a problem.

A representative sample of research. In design-oriented problem-solving, this refers to a collection of photographs, quotations, and synthesized research that is formatted to tell the story of the research endeavor.

Stakeholders

Persons, groups or organizations that have direct or indirect stake in an organization (because it can affect) or be affected by the organization's actions, objectives and policies.

Synathy

The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of through emotional and intellectual understanding of another's experience. Contrasts with empathy in that it does not include a shared experience.

Synthesis/synthesizing

To combine a number of things into a coherent whole. In Design Thinking, this refers to the validation and integration of the substance of the research into a logical and meaningful collection.

Touchnotes

Any point of contact between a customer and a service or service provider. This could be the design of a website, the layout of a meeting room or the usability of a web page.

Yes, And

In Design Thinking, the logical opposition to the statement, "Yes, But..." Used to help up assumptions and integrate the form of reality to statements to allow for expansive conversation instead of a rejection of opinions and options.

REFERENCES

The Lab Education Cores

Visual Experience
Visual Communications
<https://lab.sps.gov/visual-experience-sign-up/>

To read more about the intersection of words and pictures, please see Scott McCloud's excellent graphics work.

Scott McCloud

"Understanding Comics"
<http://scottmcccloud.com/2-print/3/vol/>

IMPORTANT TO NOTE

Understand that different cultures assign different meanings to shapes, colors, gestural forms, and groupings. The same was different parts of the US assign different meanings to words by making a space in a restaurant, in the South, No one will know what you're talking about. For this reason, if the design work is to be shared across languages or cultures, some research is required to ensure that the work retains the intended impact across all audiences.

Building Out Ideas

Using Collections of References for Ideation

As design teams begin to ideate, they start to create collections of references, often called Reference Decks, to help show their ideas. By accompanying these collections of references with words, whether written or verbal, the team can more easily understand what it collectively is thinking or what an individual teammate is thinking, keep a record of that thinking, and edit the idea.

Because design teams evolve or create new product, services, or systems, there's no exact photo or sketch or recording of it that exists. For this reason, it's essential to develop a collection of references that are like the product, service, or system you're envisioning in order to express all your thoughts on how a design might look, feel, and function. The purpose of using references, whether drawn, photographed, recorded, etcetera, is to meet four primary goals:

- To explore nuances in a proposal, system, or idea.
- To understand those nuances.
- To clarify those nuances, especially if they act within a complex system.
- To communicate the steps above to others who may or may not be present in design meetings.

When to Use References

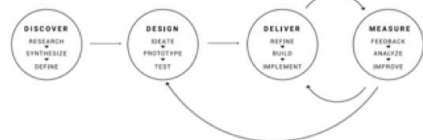
Design team members can use references to aid in communication with their teammates at any point in the design process. However, since references inform the direction of an idea's designed form, and not the details of that form itself, they are most frequently used early in the process of making a prototype design solution. If the team finds itself still leaning on references as they approach a low-fidelity prototype that's testable in the field, that can be a marker of a team that is not coalescing around a design direction, and thusly the team needs to back up and start the design process from the idea again.

Specific practice on the form and cadence of using references will be provided in the upcoming Design Phase Operations Guide.

Design Phase Principles

Design teams frequently create a set of guiding principles for their projects' Design Phases. These principles help teams maintain alignment with the key learnings from the Discovery Phase. Below, find a set of global design principles. These principles, alongside those that you might create for your specific project, will help ensure that the designed product, service, or solution that your team develops embodies the perspectives and needs of your current and potential participants.

1. Getting to Simple is Hard
2. No Solitary Geniuses
3. In Their Shoes
4. Consider Potential Change
5. Value New Participants
6. Plan For Long Term Use
7. Serve Everyone and Define Your Audience
8. Wait for the Right Opportunity
9. Designs Have a Life Cycle



HCD Phases: A Breakdown

Discovery

This Design Guide series began with the Discovery phase. Both Concept (why) and Operations (how) guides are available for this research-focused phase. To review, in the Discovery phase, teams participate in research to gather participants' and stakeholders' perspectives and experiences in that frame, synthesize the results of that gathering, and define possible parameters for the Design phase.

Design

With your insights gathered and opportunities defined, teams enter the Design phase. This phase is characterized by working through design ideas and building models, also called prototypes, of design solutions. Instead of trying to make the first version of a design perfect, the team will practice iteration, testing, and making incremental refinements. Build, test and repeat. As the team

Deliver

After prototyping and testing, public sector design teams typically work with implementation teams and other stakeholders to create a small pilot and test the logistical needs around the launch of the product, system, or service the team has designed. The teams should build into the delivery process mechanisms to gather feedback on the product, service, or system once it has been in the hands of participants for stipulated amounts of time. Creating these mechanisms will feed into the success of the next phase, Measure.

Measure

In the Measure phase, the design team should be part of gathering quantitative and qualitative data to learn if the goals and expectations of your work are being met. When applied, this data will help improve your design.

HCD in Practice

The HCD approach has already created immense value in advancing public sector missions. For example, redesigning USAJOBS, the hub for federal hiring where nearly 1 billion job searches are done annually by over 180 million people, has resulted in a 30% reduction in help desk tickets after the first round of improvements. Not only does this reflect an easier experience for those involved in the hiring process, this change also creates savings in support costs.

HCD and LEAN

HCD and LEAN complement each other. HCD is based heavily on qualitative research, while LEAN is quantitative. LEAN enacts the first two Es of customer experience: Ease and Effectiveness, very well. HCD also enacts Ease and Effectiveness, but adds the third E, Emotion, into the process, through an understanding of human needs, and identification of the desired experience.

The two methods complement each other. HCD helps to define the desired customer experience front-stage, and then LEAN can be used to architect the backstage to deliver on that desired experience.

"What people say, and what people do, and what people say they do are entirely different things."

-Dr. Margaret Mead, Anthropologist

	LEAN	HCD
EASE		
EFFECTIVENESS		
EMOTION		

Human-Centered Design and other qualitative research methodologies investigate and help sort out the root causes of conflicts like the one above by Dr. Margaret Mead.

LEAN and other quantitative methodologies allow for the understanding of current system states and the rational correction of mechanical and nonhuman inefficiencies in

Design Guides

One of the main and longest running projects at the lab is the design guide series. The series consists of two types of books - a concept guide (which teaches the basics of various phases of the design process) and a making guide (which, steps the reader through various design activities). The guide series is a partnership with the Veteran's Experience Office.

One of my roles was the layout of the Design Phase concept guide in indesign - this 80 page book was created by the lab to give background on the what when and why of various design methods to inform the design activities in the making guide.



Design Coaching

My favorite part of the fellowship was observing and helping coach teams from various federal agencies work through their challenges. This gave me a clear view of many problem spaces that currently exist in government as well as the ways in which design could either solve or help to facilitate a solution.

Small Projects

RAIO Interviews

I worked on interviews for evaluation of a program run with the Refugee Asylum and International Operations directive. These interviews helped understand the pain points that employees had in applying the design methods that they had learned to their everyday work.

Business Development

One of the activities at the Lab I enjoyed the most was sitting in on introductory meetings with potential clients of the lab. These were often members of various agencies who were facing a particular challenge where they believed the application of design or teaching design methods to their employees could make a difference. Watching the Lab members structure these conversations and tailor their offerings to each unique client was incredibly informative.

Hiring for Design in Government

While the Lab works with a number of clients, these are normally project based introductions to design. Ultimately, the goal would be to have design integrated within the agencies themselves where they can have a sustained presence. Myself and the other summer fellow assisted with organizing a hiring effort led by the lab - both creating interest among designers to work in government as well as advocating for the creation of design oriented positions in government.

Takeaways

Accessibility

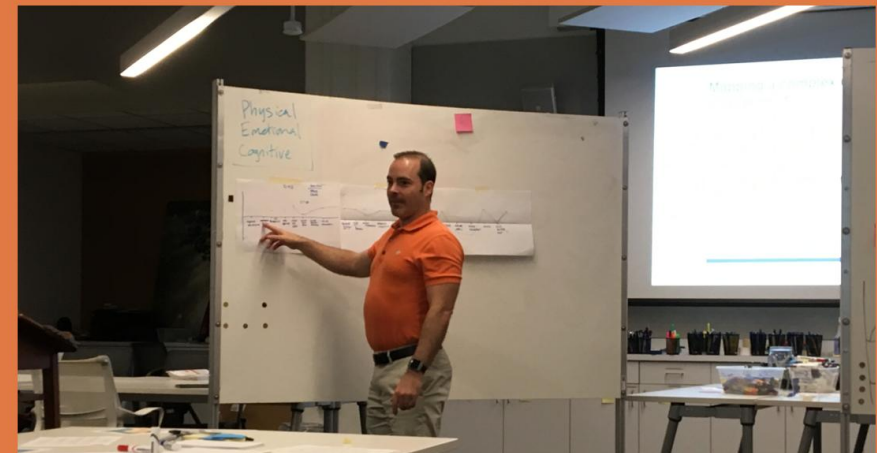
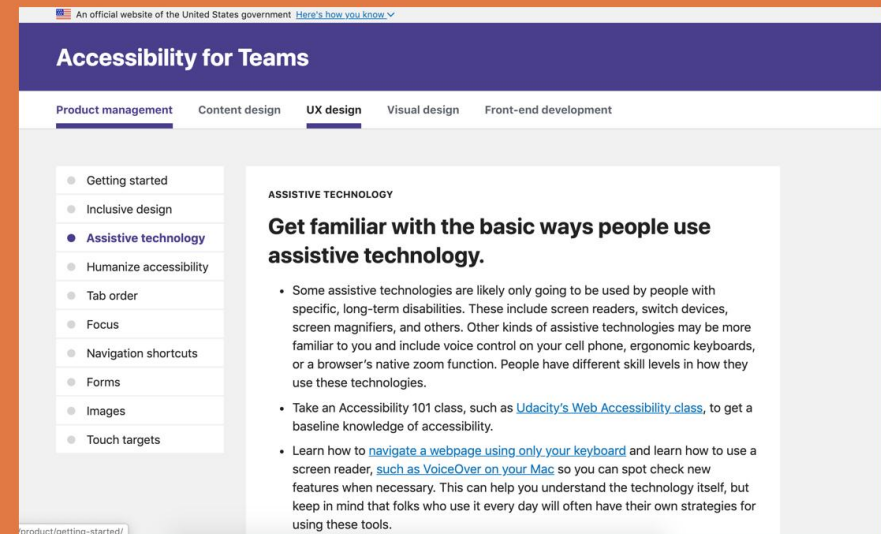
All products released by a government agency must meet accessibility standards — normally made easy by the existence of various templates/guidelines. I took it upon myself to make sure to not only follow these guidelines but also to break down and understand as much as I could about accessibility so that I could apply them to more out-of-the-box projects without set formats.

Introducing Design

Watching the various ways that the lab introduced design concepts and practices to personnel that came into workshops and projects gave me the opportunity to reflect on the ways to present design to partners with minimal prior exposure. Before the design process can begin, it is important to have stakeholder buy in and the fellowship gave me experience in how to translate design impact to those unfamiliar or skeptical about the process.

Problem Spaces

As an interaction designer, most of the challenges that I was interested in at the start were citizen facing products and services. As I became familiar with the challenges articulated by federal employees at workshops and courses held by the lab, I began to see how many opportunities existed in leveraging design techniques as a way of tackling many of the internal issues and broken workflows that exist within organizations as large and complex as the federal government.





Reflection

Being at the lab was an interesting learning experience as it both gave me a look into the complex challenges faced by the various agencies that could definitely be aided by the use of design methodologies but also the number of roadblocks that exist in this effort.

Going in, I was mainly interested in the design of citizen facing services but the more exposure I had to different agencies, I realised that there was a lot to be done on the internal end to streamline the processes and tools used by federal employees that would in turn allow them to better serve their constituents. There is a lot of work to be done and I am optimistic for the greater inclusion of designers and the Human Centered Design Methodology in this effort.

Apart from the lab, the DC environment was inspiring in itself. I had the opportunity to attend many evening events and lectures - both design and non-design related and the amount of conversation regarding the future of government and civic tech has given me a lot to think about as I consider a career in this space.



Thank You!

As always, I am thankful to Designmatters for their continuous support and exposure to meaningful problem spaces that has been consistently inspiring part of my educational career. I am grateful to Susannah, Jennifer, and Garrett for all they have done to support me as well as the rest of ArtCenter in having access to these projects.

Thank you to the members of the Lab for being warm and welcoming through my time in DC and for answering my unending stream of questions as I attempted to get a hang of this space. The goal that each member of the Lab strives towards everyday is deeply inspiring.

Thank you to Maria for being a consistent source of support and cheerleader through the process. She found a way to make everything into something exciting or a learning experience. I was in constant awe of the depth of knowledge and number of examples she had on every topic I brought up. Conversations with her were one of the most valuable parts of the summer.

Thank you to Bob, my co-fellow this summer for solid company and equally solid podcast recommendations.