

In-House Service Design Roles – A First Look

Johan Blomkvist, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden, johan.blomkvist@liu.se

Abstract

A sign that the field of service design is maturing is the increase in service design education programs around the world. With this increase in number of students reaching the professional arena, it is important to consider the options for future employment. Service design is currently discussed as an activity by design consultancies. This paper will look at service designers working within organizations and companies. More specifically we want to gain knowledge on the roles service designers have within organizations, what they do, when they are involved in projects, and how they fit with the overall structure of organizations. The research is based on interviews with 9 service designer in 6 different countries. We find that very few seem to have a dedicated service design function within their companies, that they work within a span between design and strategy in many different constellations and that they share the function as interpreters or advocates for customers. Designers working on a strategic level can influence what the organization designs, while roles on the operative design level work with how to deliver service concepts that have already been decided.

in-house design; service design; case study; interviews

In 2010 Blomkvist, Segelström & Holmlid (2010) wrote that soon we can study service designers who actually have an educational background within the field. This time has now come and a lot of research has been devoted to study what service designers do once they reach the field. However, a closer look at this research reveals that most studies so far have focused on service design performed by consultancies. So, despite there has been a lot of research about service design practice, little to no research has been conducted about service design conducted by designers within organizations, so called in-house service designers. Some of the studies about service design practice have looked at consultancies and design agencies. Another approach has been to embed researchers with design capacity in organizations (e.g. Han, 2009; Singleton, 2009). However, we believe that there is a significant difference between being embedded as a designer in an organization participating in a research project and being part of an organization for a long time. As a researcher you are partly outside of the organization with specific circumstances influencing your perspective and your work.

One reason we have not seen much research about in-house service design is that there has been very few opportunities to study this role. However, at this point it is possible to find at least a handful of service designers working in non-academic contexts within various organizations. As an in-house designer you are part of an organization, making you part of an internal culture and politics, as well as a resource of the organization. A closer look at in-house service design allows us to open up another discussion about the potential role of service design in organizations. This discussion has implications for both education of service designers and how organizations are structured for innovation and development of services.

Hence, this paper contributes some initial knowledge about what service designers do within organizations by focusing on the areas of:

1. Roles – what are the roles of service designers within organizations? At what level are they working within their organizations? In what constellations do they participate? How do they contribute to service development?
2. Customers – Who are the customers and what is the relationship between in-house service designers and their customers?
3. Work – what do they work with? This question relates to what they design within the organizations, e.g. IT, products, services etcetera.

In-house service design presumably has a lot in common with related design fields such as interaction design and user experience design (UX). In a survey of 963 user experience professionals, authors found an “immense diversity of answers” (Farrell & Nielsen, 2013, p. 6) in terms of education, background, roles and work. We expect that similar diversity exists for (in-house) service design. The study by Farrell & Nielsen (2013) also showed that UX could be seen as a translation layer between different groups within organizations. One of the roles UX fulfils is thus to communicate information and facilitate group decision making. This requires “people skills” and advocating for users (Farrell & Nielsen, 2013). Similar results have been found when studying service design consultants who have the role of interpreters (Wetter-Edman, 2014), communicators with stakeholders (Segelström, 2013), and communicators of users/customers (Blomkvist & Holmlid, 2011).

Service Design has also been described as a potential way into the boardroom (Patrício & Fisk, 2012) where designers can influence the directions and motivations of companies in a way that other types of design cannot necessarily do. It is interesting to consider whether the roles of in-house service designers allow them to do this, or if they are more concerned with how to implement ideas and concepts from other parts of the organization. In Holmlid’s (2009; 2008) studies of design and management, design seem to either be part of understanding and developing the core business values, or as a supporting function. Similarly, the overall role of service designers for service development is interesting, since service design consultants seem focused on designing service concepts (Goldstein, Johnston, Duffy, & Rao, 2002) to a larger extent, than they are involved in actually implementing

services. Researchers also contribute to a focus on the “fuzzy front end” of innovation (see e.g. Clatworthy (2013)) and research about design consultants have shown that service design often do not lead to prototyping and implementing services (Blomkvist, 2011). Many organizations are “silently” designing their services today (Gorb & Dumas, 1987) so understanding how people with design backgrounds can contribute is an important area to study. For instance, when Ponsignon, Smart, & Maull (2011) studied service design in organizations, the informants were “sales managers, sales assistants, marketing managers, service quality managers, credit control managers, customer service advisors (CSAs), billing managers (BMs), service managers, operations managers, IT specialists, and process management experts.” (Ponsignon, Smart, & Maull, 2011, p. 330).

Due to the large influence on service design from interaction design (Sangiorgi, 2009; Segelström, 2013) it is reasonable to assume that much service design is still focused on the digital channels. Interaction design is after all mostly concerned with digital interaction, despite including both human-machine and human-human interaction (Buchanan, 2001). However, the use of IT is not only the use of artefacts and software programs or applications, it is also the use of associated services (Taylor & Todd, 1995) in many cases. Managing IT is a powerful way of managing an organizations’ interactions with its customers (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003); (DeLone & McLean, 2003); (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989). For instance, IT is a central concern when managing customer experience in the hospitality domain (Huh, Kim, & Law, 2009).

Zomerdijk & Voss 2010 – have looked at service design within the “experience-centric” domain. Among the 17 studied organizations, 8 were experience-centric service providers, while the others were consultancies and design firms. For both categories, design in the experience-centric domain meant treating services as series of events and cues to be designed. About half of the organizations designed for multiple senses and for a dramatic structure of events. Zomerdijk & Voss 2010 found less evidence for organizations that tried to manage customers’ impact on other customers’ experiences in services, and for a coupling between front-stage experiences with the backstage employees. It is difficult to say what the contribution from design exactly is from the studies in these organizations. Much of current service development and design is carried out by non-designers in organizations (Tether, 2008). This makes the question of what designers do more specifically interesting, and what and how a potential formalized work processes look like. This can inform us about how design fits within a larger organizational context.

A final area of interest is the extent to which the designers direct their work towards end customers or users, and how much they design their own organization. Service design has been described as design of people (Penin & Tonkinwise, 2009) and service design influences not only the customers but also the service provider (Stuart, 1998). This leads to interesting areas for research related to the relation between in-house service designers and who their customers are (perceived to be) and towards what they direct their design efforts.

Method

The interview study was conducted during the course of August – September of 2013. 9 participants located in 6 different countries from organizations with sizes from 10-300 000 employees (3 governmental and 6 private sector) were interviewed, see Table 1. The sample was chosen to cover as many cases of in-house service design as possible, with different sizes and types of organizations, as well as different roles of the designers within their organizations. This provides a rich initial picture of the variety of in-house service design. The interviews were transcribed into a verbatim transcript. Meaning units were then identified for all themes of the interviews. Emerging patterns were identified and made into categories in which the different meaning units were then placed. The approach was based on Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) Qualitative Content Analysis. A version of the paper was later sent to all participating in-house service designers for member checking (Creswell, 2006). The feedback we received was positive but one participant made minor changes. The changed paragraphs have been marked in the text. Some answers have been translated from Swedish to English in the text.

Table 1: Information about the informants

Name	Country	Sector	Number of employees	Title	Focus
P1	Sweden	Public (business driven)	~2 000-3 000	Service designer	Design
P2	Sweden	Public (business driven)	2 500	Research director	Strategy
P3	Indonesia	Private	4 400	Service experience designer	Design
P4	Global	Private	300 000	Design researcher & service designer	Design
P5	Sweden	Private	100	Interactive art director	Strategy
P6	Denmark/Germany	Private	13 000	Business development manager	Design
P7	The UK	Government	4 000	Service designer	Design
P8	Sweden	Private	10 000	Global service solutions director	Strategy
P9	Italy	Private	10	Design strategist	Design

Results

Here we discuss the roles that service designers inhabit in their respective organizations, both their titles and their actual positions and duties within the organizations. We also report on their roles in innovation and when they contribute to the process of service development. Some additional areas are touched upon, where our data is less convincing and prompting further research.

Roles

Only three of the nine informants were actually hired as service designers, though most of them considered their work to be service design, or at least conducted from a service design perspective. Obviously, service designers are occupying positions within companies that are not explicitly tailored for service designers. P8 suggested that one reason there are few service design positions is because service design is relevant for everything. “Because you could say in a way that function needs to be everywhere and you can’t really have someone that is in charge of everything because that’s kind of the CEO ./ so there is a lot of potential for service design but it’s not easy to find the right place where it should sit” (P8). We discuss the different roles here in reference to four categories: the in-house consultant, the design strategist, the business-to-customer, and the business-to-business designers.

The in-house consultant

P4’s role as a design researcher and service designer within the UX department was similar to that of a consultant, but working within the organization to help different groups and departments with their innovation and design processes. P4 described two general types of projects, one where they assist with designing a new service for the customers of the company, and one where they teach service design thinking to some department in the company. Assisting in the design of services for P4, meant taking part in projects in other departments. For instance, they might need help with facilitating collaborative innovation processes and conducting workshops. Usually the UX team would pitch ideas to departments, but at the time of the interviews, the UX team already had enough work and did not have to actively work on pitching and selling their services. P4 and the UX team also worked with the departments to increase their awareness of service design thinking and educating them. To add complexity to this picture, P4 said that one additional goal was to increase the awareness about service design thinking within the UX team where P4 was working. This included emphasizing that service is not only tied to digital solutions, but also physical and human-to-human interactions:

“I think what’s important here is to just to think about the both the digital side and the physical side and that’s something that I in my role keep in mind and keep everyone else thinking about because there is a tendency in the software centered of mainly focus on software and I think it’s important also here in California there is a lot of focus on digital and I it’s been my role in all the places I’ve been and the places I’ve talked to to sort of keep in mind that we also need to talk about physical touchpoints so ahm when I say that it’s even going to people to people interactions like how do we talk to other people as with this project I was telling you about how do we ahm let the employees be better informed by the HR for example the people in HR like how can their role be strengthened within this system and how can the digital touchpoints actually support what the people are saying”.

The (design) strategist

P4 was the only participant who had an in-house consultant role. While P4 worked mostly with designing services (besides teaching), others worked with developing strategies. Strategies can be for instance guidelines for design, customer research and analysis to find segments or personas, or finding opportunities for new services. P2 explained his role like this: “you could say that I am the ‘voice of the customer’ eh on one hand I am responsible for all research, meaning that anything customer generated eh customer generated insights comes through or from me, kind of eh uhm in practice this means that I run the work more than participate actively, I make sure the quality is good enough and eh make sure we have the right researcher in the right place and that the insights are reformulated so that either the design team understands them or ./ the project team or ./ the board or the company leaders”. P2 was trying to understand customers and translate that understanding into actionable insights for the organization. P5 had a similar role to that of P2. P5 was focused on understanding the customer needs and mapping them and making personas. Much like P2, P5 tries to find the root of the relationship between customers and the organizations’ main propositions. This means that when a customer interacts with the organization and its’ resources, P2 and P5 are trying to figure out the underlying drivers for that behavior.

Another participant working on strategies for an organization was P8. P8 did not take part in the actual service development either, the last project P8 worked on was two years ago at the time of the interview. What is interesting is that P8 was developing a way for the organization to deliver consistent and high quality service across departments and countries. P8 was placed in charge of streamlining the work processes across the regional offices. To do so, P8 interacted directly with the regions and reported to the board. This way P8 could say “you know what, in France it’s a bloody disaster they haven’t even called me”, but also it was “a lot more fun to celebrate the people who have tried something where it is working and we can learn from each other” (P8). Working with the organization internally, either by coming up with customer profiles and guidelines, or by improving work processes is considered strategic work, but there is no distinct line between strategic and design work. Also the participants working with more design-oriented tasks can be described as having quite strategic roles within their organizations. One example is P4, who was trying to change and educate the company to become more service design mature.

The business-to-consumer (b2c) designer

One example of work with b2c was given by P3, who “basically create a principal or guidance to guide the product or business owner so when they create or have an idea about a product they already thinking about the costumer side how the costumer will get the best experience”. P3’s work was described very similarly to P9’s, as a layer above the product development describing the target experience based on a design research phase. P3 and P9 both generated requirements for development, but also took part in ideation and experience evaluations, also post-launch evaluations in the case of P3. P3 worked in a large

organization, while P9 worked in a start-up with only ten members and as the only designer. “I need to work with the other competences eh so that requires some times, I give my feedback and they implement with my feedback” (P9). P7 worked in a team of designers within the public sector, referring to themselves as a service design team. P7 described the overall work process like this:

“we start with project scoping and form a challenge before moving onto research. We aim to take an ethnographic approach, although sometimes it ends up being more of an ethnographic-light approach along the lines of contextual interviews and long interviews with people in their own homes. Following the research we turn our insights into themes and go into a period of ideation where we come up with possible solutions. We put people at the centre of what we do so that we can co-create solutions with them. Once we have something to work with we move into prototyping” (P7) [This paragraph revised by member checking.]

The business-to-business (b2b) designer

P1 worked with the development of services (and products), mostly for other organizations. We call this a b2b designer role. P1 described work as focused on finding common denominators between different businesses, and then trying to design from that. The role of P1 was described as less about designing good experiences, and more about doing what the businesses wanted and making sure that things worked. This meant that work became focused on long-term relations with the businesses, not only designing something but also supporting and following up on how the design was received. The biggest difference between designing for customers and for businesses, according to P1, was that when you are working with businesses you do anything they ask. B2b also made it more difficult to find people to test designs, because it is not always clear who the recipient(s) are within the client organization or the business.

P6 was worked as a business development manager, and was hired because “they wanted someone who could work with innovation within the service part of the business”. P6 worked together with the sales department and tried to carve out a role and space for service design. This meant working with “a lot of different assignments but primarily I work as either project manager or process facilitator for different projects” P6. P6 was also the only one with a design perspective within the department: “I am the only one with the design thinking or design related background ehm which mean that when I do projects I do the traditional process of service design but we don’t have a fixed eh for our organization for how to deal with it” and “in our organization we don’t have other designers, any product designers any interaction designers”. As a result, P6 was working with the sales department, trying to figure out what role service design could have in the organization. For P6 this meant working with both strategy and marketing, in addition to introducing service design approaches to the innovation. Many times, projects were not considered service development projects by the organization but P6 still saw them as such.

Customers

With these different roles within the organizations, what the informants consider their clients or customers also vary. P1 sometimes did not even know exactly who the presumptive end-user within the client organization would be. This of course makes it difficult for P1 to conduct user studies. P1 also says that experience is less important than making things work. The problems are often quite well known, mainly by the sales people, and that makes it easier to identify what needs to be changed. P4's situation is unlike that of P1. P4 directs work inwards, focusing on the organization itself and educating and helping the organization much in the way a design consultancy could also do. For P4 it can be argued that departments in the organization, end-customers of those departments and colleagues in the UX department are all customers in different ways. The departments in the organization are much like when other companies hire consultants to do a job that sometimes involves the customers of that department. P8 described this situation like this: "you have two different service designs one is the relationship with the client and one is the- us helping them have better relationship with their clients". P4 also mentions teaching others within the UX department about service design. This is a strategic long-term goal to make the efforts of the organization more service oriented.

P6 also often work with companies rather than customers in the end-user sense. This situation influences one of the main aspects of service design – inclusion: "the financial project we have a customer that has agreed to be a partner in the development project eh so because we need someone to go through the existing process and then see both the experience but also because it's we're a big company and our customer are also big company whit many departments so it means we don't have a person as a customer we have a company" (P6). If there is no identifiable customer it is also difficult to find opportunities for involvement in the design process.

Work

Another aspect that is interesting to consider is the role of service designers in relation to projects (service development) in organizations. While the process of starting a new project is quite straightforward for consultancies, the process can look very differently in in-house contexts. As mentioned above, for the b2b designer (P1), projects were often motivated by information from sales people. This information sometimes reached a critical mass and the organization had to find a solution.

For the in-house service designers working on a strategic level it was possible to identify opportunities and projects that would benefit the organizations on a strategic level, or reach a specific target group. However, most of the informants could not make decisions about whether or not to start a project or implement a service.

When projects were underway, the informants also had different strategies and mandate to influence the processes. P8 for instance, secretly introduced service design in the

organization: “the strategy process that we rolled out and that we licensed to a lot global brands is basically build on the service design process I just didn’t call it that so in a way when you sort of look back to my ambition to creating that kind of offering I made a lot of secret progress with that” (P8).

For P7 government funding was part of the equation, limiting the amount of influence P7 had on projects.

“I think ideally we would want to be able to spot areas of interest and chose our challenges, perhaps influencing the organization a little bit more. In reality the situation is that the organization tends to drive what we work on because funding from government has been drastically cut meaning that they are under pressure to make large scale organizational changes quickly.” (P7). [This paragraph revised by member checking.]

Maturity of organizations

We have mentioned how P4 was trying to influence the organization to become more service oriented. In the case of P6, the company was also quite goods-dominant in their thinking so there was no dedicated service development process “we haven’t agreed on yet what we mean when we say service development”. They were also reactive rather than proactive, thinking that service was a way to respond to complaints rather than something to be designed for customers: “so they don’t think don’t think of it as a way of developing our business they just think of it as something that they do just because it’s a complaint from the customers or they fix it” P6. Apart from missing a service mind-set, a larger design context was also missing for P6, as previously discussed. “[W]e are missing at the moment and then we are missing prototyping and stuff like that we-we they go on from directly from idea to implementation the research is missing a lot of the time and the part of prototype to actually find out if the solution is the best is also missing” (P6).

Many informants had similar situations where they were trying to influence the organization to either become more service oriented or to include more design approaches in their projects. A common function seemed to be as an interpreter and a spokesperson for the customer/user. However, being an in-house designer allows for more influence on the organization as well. Unlike design consultancies, the role of in-house designers “enable long-term change” within organizations, as P4 put it. A common sentiment among the participants was that consultants are important because they bring new perspectives and an outside view of the organization. But when they leave they have no possibility to influence what happens to their designs. As in-house service designer, each project becomes an opportunity to change the organization and to influence how they think and work. P8 talked about the importance of being there “you kind of need to live in the organization to understand the way they talk the way they think what are the hot buttons that drive things forward and the you can kind of see how you can add value and then eeh to drive things forward”. P1 expressed similar views, and one benefit of being part of an organization for a

long time was that P1 could make some smaller decisions without talking to other people in the organization.

Concluding discussion

This first look at in-house service design indicates that there is not a specific role in organizations for service design. Some of the informants were hired as service designers but still seemed to dedicate effort to explaining and influencing the role they played in their organizations. The roles found in this study were: in-house consultant, design strategy, b2b and b2c designer. The designers generally had quite high-level positions, ranging from strategists to hands-on designers. In general, strategy work was directed inwards, design work outwards. Strategy aimed at identifying experience goals or guidelines for their organizations, so quite high level functions in organizations (Patrício & Fisk, 2012). P2 and P5 for instance, were trying to understand universal drivers or motivators within their respective domain, while P1 was focused on addressing actual (and known) needs. P1 also deemphasized experience as an important part of work while P2, P4, and P5 consider experience design as an important part of their work. In-house service designer at the strategic level of organizations were thus able to influence what organization do for their customers, not only how they do it.

Many of the findings in this study are reflected in the survey report by Farrell & Nielsen (2013): the diversity of roles in organizations, the variety of types of work conducted and the role as advocates for users. Regardless of whether the in-house designers worked on a strategic or design level in the organization, they were all in some way interpreting users/customers, just like in service design by consultants (Wetter-Edman, 2014; Segelström, 2013). However, identifying who the customer is was also described as difficult for some informants. Customers included: departments, organizations (both external and internal), and end-customers. All of these groups (and sub-groups) need to be approached in different ways.

This research represents an important contribution to our understanding of in-house service design, as practiced by designers (Tether, 2008) as opposed to other roles within organizations (as in Ponsignon, Smart, & Maull (2011)). The informants did not only work in the fuzzy front-end of innovation but also in later stages. However, as the work process was described by most, the later stages seemed to include more traditional (interaction or industrial) design, with emphasis on the digital arena as could be expected from other research (Segelström, 2013; Sangiorgi, 2009; Taylor & Todd, 1995). Making design contributions to projects was not always easy, and some informants found themselves trying to adjust to the internal process of organizations rather than influencing the work process in a more design-oriented direction.

Further research

Future research should look at the progression of the field and what formal and informal roles service designers occupy within organizations and how that evolves. Observational studies can also complement this research with more contextual and situated data. Furthermore, examples showing how service concepts are tested and implemented, both by service design consultants and in-house designers, are still largely missing.

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Author Biographies

Johan Blomkvist

Johan Blomkvist is a service design researcher at Oslo School of Architecture and Design and at Linköping University. His research focuses on service prototyping and understanding the relationship between people and physical manifestations of service. This relationship was explored in his thesis *Representing Future Situations of Service*, defended May 2014.