



The designer

"You can analyse the past, but you have to design for the future"

New goals for the organisation require new ways of thinking. Having an outsider, fresh perspective helps me generate out-of-the box solutions. When I don't know the world of the users I try to gain insights by any means necessary; interviews, observations, questionnaires. I like to do role playing and write out scenarios early in the project to understand the users and their needs. I try not to overanalyze the situation. You could end up talking a long time getting nowhere. Storyboards, concept maps and prototypes are interesting tools for me. I like to make many different design options. The solution with a strong conceptual model or metaphor, implemented with rigour and style will work best for both users and the organisation.

Characteristics: Spontaneous, Keep it simple. Instinct & empathy are important, Ethnography.

School of thought: Subjectivist but with order. Organisations are a team, there is a shared culture, norms and values.

Tips

- Watch out for destructive creation: Especially for redesign projects you risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Maybe you need evolution, not revolution. What are the real problems with the existing situation/product?
- Design isn't necessarily directed towards human beings. Did you or your team fall in love with a concept or metaphor that just doesn't work for users? Did users help you decide between design alternatives?
- Is your solution really future-proof? Is the organisation ready to support the user experience you envisioned? Watch out for creating high expectations, be realistic (expectation failure)
- As an outsider you might not have a full understanding of the nuances of the organisation and its customers. Do not assume you understand their world but work closely with people that have a deep knowledge of the situation.
- Document your design decisions in an information architecture styleguide. When you are gone the design will have to stand it's ground

The expert

"Analyse the situation and come up with an efficient solution that supports the goals of the organisation and the users"

Management is in charge and part of my job is coming up with the architecture for the solution that supports their goals. I really enjoy learning about the domain, first by reading through existing documentation, doing a content inventory and modeling the structure and processes of the organization. I interview users or other domain experts. Sometimes I let them do a card-sort. The time spent with domain experts and users helps to fill my knowledge gaps. In later stages, access to real users can be important for testing design choices and of course for ensuring the usability of the end product. I usually start design by creating high level concept maps or site maps. Documentation is an important part of any project and one of the ways in which information architecture is communicated.

Characteristics: Methodical, structured techniques, Situations can be objectified, reduce complexity by breaking down the problem into smaller parts.

School of thought: Objectivism, functionalism, order. Organisations are set up so people can achieve a defined goal or purpose.

Tips

- The map is not the territory; your models are abstractions that leave out information that does not fit with the intended use. Beware of your bias.
- Do not only model the system but try to incorporate the environment. Make sure you do not only think in models that map existing structures. Some provocation might lift the thinking within the project team out of its normal grooves.
- Focusing on means, rather than discussing ends will make life easier for you but when the ends are in fact debated, the 'solution' you provide might be inappropriate for the situation: 'correspondence failure', the system does not correspond to what was actually required
- There is not one optimal solution. Coming up with a good design is coming up with many designs
- Not all people necessarily support the way in which end goals are determined. They will resist change even when they are closely involved in the development of the intended system.



The facilitator



"Create a shared understanding of the problem at hand, and work towards a solution from there"

The felt need for change is the primary driver in a project. I am there to help uncover the problem and facilitate in finding a solution. Strategy and goals often emerge in the process and help to discuss directions but not many stakeholders are not nearly as interested in them as you would expect. Models are a way of getting people to talk about their reality. Insight in the world of the business and the users arrives from discussing the personal goals and activities of the different stakeholders. In these meetings real understanding takes place and commitment is generated. Documentation I send out is mainly used to involve management and control the project, but usually has very little impact on the work process or the end result. It is important I am present and meet with stakeholders regularly.

Characteristics: Social, Holistic, interpretive, Methodology can be structured but reality is subjective, socially constructed.

School of thought: Interpretive, social relativism, humanism. Organisations can be organic or political, with different views and conflicting interests.

Tips

- By putting people first you try to create consensus and understanding. But be aware of common obstacles in human communication:
 - Some stakeholders distort or withhold information in the face of authority
 - Watch out for 'group think'; tunnel vision for the sake of loyalty. To avoid this you should not make the number of people in a meeting more than five or six
 - Time, space and resource limitations can prevent important stakeholders from joining, or from being motivated to contribute
 - Differences in education, personal values and beliefs increase the risk of misunderstanding
- Don't confuse what the project team wants with what users want. If some users or stakeholders are not represented, turn to the role of advocate to express their interests.
- When goals for the project remain unclear, control en evaluation is increasingly difficult: 'Process failure' is a neglect of time and resource constraints. Being open to different views and facilitating the group process doesn't mean there is no clear methodology for the project.
- Development of a solution as facilitator is usually evolutionary, and based on studying the present situation and intended use. Maybe the situation is better served by a more radical approach and focus on the future (see the design role).

The advocate



"You should intentionally design relevant and fair systems"

Design choices can be a political act. When users (or other people influenced by the system) are not benefitting I challenge the strategy. Organisations are political, conflicts of interest abound. Some managers for example are solely focused on short-term targets. They forget the needs of real users and the impact the system will have on the people within the organisation or on the brand image. At the end of the day I want to help people, and raise awareness of the user experience. I need to be headstrong and cunning, know when to be patient and when to intervene. Creating personas based on user research can be a helpful tool to raise awareness of the needs of real users and keep the project team focused.

Characteristics: Principles, evaluate often, competitive, user research

School of thought: Radical structuralism; objectivism with a need to surpass existing social and organisational arrangements. Organisations are political, with coalitions forming and opposing interests.

Tips

- If you want to change a large organisation, start small. Evolve the product step by step
- Watch out for oversimplification. Is your research solid? Did you really understand the users and their needs? If user research is turned into a political tool nuances are lost
- Try to support your claims with hard data on increased sales, efficiency or product loyalty. Case studies of similar products can also be helpful. User-centeredness doesn't mean the system should not satisfy the needs of the business
- When it is not possible to change the product or strategy, define goals for webmetrics and user testing to find out if your predictions play out. Do a before-benchmark if possible.
- Activism, where radical change is more important than understanding, can stand in the way of cooperation and building consensus (see the role of facilitator)

