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Designers as change agents

DESIGN+

Organizational renewal and innovation
through design

The products, services, technologies, ecosystems, and networks of today are much more interconnected and complicated than ever before. As a result, private and public organizations alike are turning to design to find new ways to create value, manage uncertainty and innovate in a sustainable manner. Design can play a variety of roles on different levels in organizations, with different effects. The Design+ book offers an overview on how design and design thinking can change our organizations, drawing from academic research and company experiences in different industries. We showcase different perspectives and approaches, and hope to inspire you to explore the opportunities through which design can help to renew your own ways of working.

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Designers as change agents

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In engineering-driven organizations, designers often find themselves increasing design awareness amongst developers, selling the relevance of user research to management, or facilitating design workshops for product managers. Designers go beyond doing design work, and act as change agents creating more design-friendly working environments. Sharing showcases and offering opportunities for first-hand experience help to get the message across.

Design is increasingly recognized as a competitive advantage for companies[1,2] as well as a contributor to societal benefit[3]. However, while a wide variety of organizations are becoming more interested in what designers can bring to the table, they often lack sufficient understanding of the capabilities possessed by designers, in what roles they can flourish and what kind of support they need. To enhance their own design capability at work, designers often need to dedicate time and effort to creating and clarifying their position in the organisation.

Legitimizing and stabilizing the role of design on a strategic level can be particularly challenging in large organizations[4]. In particular, organizations with cultures generally characterized as traditional, engineering-driven or technical, may struggle with the incorporation and advancement of design due to established regulations, processes and norms privileging engineering ways of working, that are not always in line with expectations or needs of design work. Designers thus often end up acting as change agents, engaging with a large variety of stakeholders to bring design to more strategic levels in their organization.

As change agents, designers attempt to influence their environment by using issue selling tactics, which are ways to get people on board with their ideas, changing both people's mindsets and the organization at large[5]. There is an abundance of possible variations in these issue selling attempts, including types of issues sold, reasons for pushing these, ways of framing, choice of medium, and different approaches in terms of whom to involve and who to target, all influencing the success or failure of an issue selling attempt.

Which combinations make an attempt successful is contextual, of course, yet highly dependent on tactics employed by the designer and enablers put in place by the managers. Looking at change efforts at

ABB (a pioneering technology leader working with utilities, industry, transportation and infrastructure customers), we've found three common combinations of issues, tactic and enablers. We share the stories of Anna, Pawel and Sarah* to show how common challenges can be tackled in practice and what managers can do to facilitate and support designers in their change agent initiatives.

ANNA'S CHALLENGE: BEING ISOLATED

A newly hired designer, Anna, struggled with not knowing what happened with her designs after handing them over to a development team. Sometimes a developer would come back if they had a challenge and needed a different element designed, but more often she was left in the dark concerning decisions being made. In dealing with this issue, Anna participated in several on-line meetings with ABB designers and design leads across geographies to exchange experiences. Equipped with success stories elsewhere in the organization, she decided to clarify her design capabilities and responsibilities to her team, both product owners and developers. In particular, she made the case for designing new elements that require new coding by showcasing examples of the ultimate benefits for the user experience, even though it initially seems inefficient and more costly than plug and play. She now enjoys interacting more with the developer teams and is even being recommended by them to other project teams.

ISSUE: Designers being understood and valued

Like everybody, designers want to be listened to and respected for what they can contribute. This is not just to enhance their work enjoyment, but it also very much influences their ability to do their work properly, as their roles and responsibilities are often deeply tied to the work of developers. With project leaders in tech-heavy organizations being

*names have been changed

more familiar with engineering ways of working, they are sometimes hesitant to allocate enough resources to do design work. To increase prioritisation of design work, it is often up to the designers themselves to enhance their superiors' understanding and enthusiasm, which is challenging considering managers' busy schedules.

TACTIC: Showcasing outcomes and ways of working

Through the stories we gathered, it appears showcasing existing projects in presentations with engaging visualisation to superiors most often is successful, as was also the case for Anna. Through this tactic designers show middle managers who else in the organization has adopted design approaches, how it went and what the impact has been. By aligning user benefits with the larger goals of the organization, designers' peers and superiors are equipped with the right information to sell the issue further up in case they have to. Additionally, being very clear on the details of the execution – for example, with guidelines, process visualisations, project walkthroughs or clear milestones – contributes to making managers feel more secure, especially when they are developed collaboratively.

ENABLER: Channels for dialogue

Enabling designers to apply this tactic was achieved at ABB by allocating resources for on-line discussions and face-to-face meetings for the internal design community to listen and learn from each other and benefit from each other's creativity. Exchanging experiences with peers lessens feelings of isolation, while shared best practices can be used as examples to show managers across the organization what the potential value of allocating time and money for design practice is.

Additionally, the participation of a wider audience across the organization in these communities supports designers in identifying allies. These non-designers (e.g. analysts, coaches, scrum masters,
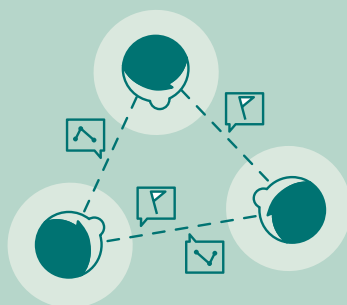
Anna's challenge: Being isolated

designer   non-designer

ISSUE
Being misunderstood

TACTIC
*Showcasing outcomes &
ways of working*

ENABLER
Channels for dialogue

sales teams) can become issue selling champions who further the visibility and value of design and creating a valuable supportive community.

PAWEL'S CHALLENGE: DOING USER RESEARCH EARLY

A senior UX designer, Pawel, experienced that despite receiving support from higher management and design being a buzzword throughout the organization, several colleagues would still not involve designers from the start of a project and talk to users. With his colleagues, Pawel decided to involve some project owners in guerrilla user testing, quick usability research with just five users. This immediately gave them valuable insights, and opened their eyes to how easy, fast and inexpensive user reach can be. After this, middle managers such as project owners understood the importance of incorporating design work in the development process, and decided to allocate time and money for designers to do user research.

ISSUE: Designers getting involved too late

One of the most often experienced issues for designers in engineering-driven organizations is getting involved too late in the development process. Even if developers are aware that designers can do more than make user interfaces look beautiful, doing user testing on almost finished projects is hardly ever beneficial, as making significant changes at that stage would be very costly. Getting involved early enables designers to gather user needs before the development starts, and work together with product owners and project managers to define the scope and goals. Moreover, they can touch base with users during the development to verify, adapt and develop together. From a process perspective, if designers are included early, they can suggest other design tools, as well, such as service blueprints and user journey mapping together with wireframing, visualizing and prototyping; and thus enhance the development process with their expertise.

TACTIC: Gathering external supports

Pawel is not alone in realizing that middle management needs to be on board if designers wish to be involved from the start. In attempting to achieve this, designers experienced it to be most effective when they share feedback provided by users in the form of quotes or videoclips, or even, like in the presented case, taking middle managers and developers on a safari to do some quick user testing themselves. People were often amazed by the major insights and implications that come from quick user studies.

Alternatively, we found that middle managers' competitive spirit is quickly fuelled by making comparisons with products from competitors, or by showing design methodologies from other major players such as IBM or Google. In either case, clarifying the relation between the user feedback or design methodologies and the business targets pays off in getting middle management on board.

ENABLER: Freedom to explore

Change agents at ABB who had been granted freedom in terms of time and money to conduct quick user studies, as well as having access to users to gather feedback, had a high chance of succeeding, since user feedback is a powerful selling component. They were supported by managers higher up to experiment, without having to request resources or defend the value of their plans prior to executing them.

Additionally, some managers went the additional mile and promoted design work, increasing its visibility throughout the organization. When designers were given flexibility to explore where they would be most useful in the organization, they were able to choose projects or development teams where they were not required to compromise on the design process, generating the best work they could do.
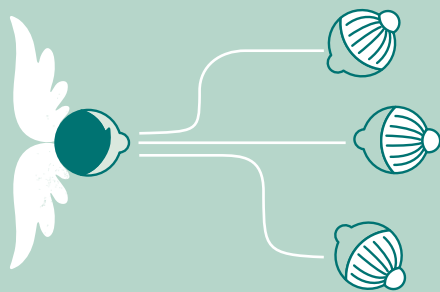
Pawel's challenge:
Doing user reseach early

designer

non-designers

ISSUE
Getting involved too late

TACTIC
Gathering external support

ENABLER
Freedom to explore

SARAH'S CHALLENGE: SPREADING DESIGN SKILLS

When Sarah joined ABB, she quickly realized that even though many had heard of design thinking, the execution was often messy, because some people thought design thinking was just conducting workshops with lots of post-its at the beginning of a project. She decided to do an in-depth presentation of design thinking for project managers, because, "sometimes business, especially people on the high level, they don't know what design thinking is, so you should introduce this idea and of course introduce also the benefits of this approach, so how we can achieve our target". In particular, she stresses the importance of making the presentation easy to understand, aesthetically pleasing, and clearly illustrating financial benefits and other alignment to the organization's goals. Her dual role as a designer and a business analyst support her tremendously in being able to sell the need for more design to both developers and people on the business side. Her presentations are very well received, enabling her to make design thinking tools and processes a more integrated part of the existing development process and execute it together with the developers.

ISSUE: Design being misunderstood

Considering that design is relatively new as a separate discipline, it is no surprise that people with limited exposure to design are not always fully aware of professional design capabilities and thus of the roles and responsibilities designers can carry. Consequently, designers need to spend time explaining how they can bring in the user perspective with user research, a user-centered design process and various design tools. Many designers wish to empower their peers, such as developers, to do user research themselves, know the basics of the process and can utilize some of the tools, so that these developers understand, use and value design and designers more. By sharing the basics, professionally trained designers can focus on the more challenging design tasks.
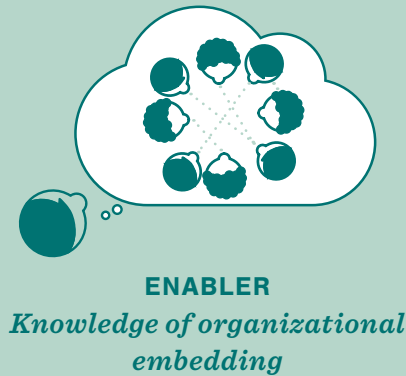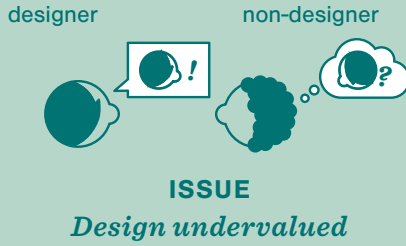
TACTIC: Tailoring presentations to audience

Like Sarah, many designers experience that an effective presentation for developers needs to cover all the basics and use business or technical vocabulary. To be successful, designers need to acknowledge that people's understanding of design thinking varies, thus no assumptions should be made about what people might already know about what design thinking is. Additionally, emphasising hard numbers is more effective, targeting predictions in terms of required time and estimated return on investment. This equips the recipients of the presentation with the materials to convince leads or managers.

In case of a more skeptical or resistant audience, one effective approach is to start small and expand from there. For example, a quick brainstorm or mockup session on an existing project can be done with a team of managers and developers so they can begin to see the potential value. Doing user research with the team is often most powerful, as they experience how easy it is to get valuable insights with just a few short interviews. Subsequently, once initial buy-in has been achieved, people's mindset can be changed over time by engaging in several design sprints.

ENABLER: Providing adequate understanding of the context of design in the organization

Sarah attributed her dual role as a designer and a sbusiness analyst at ABB to her successful design thinking selling attempts. Other designers confirm the importance of multiple perspectives by stating that a good understanding of the goals and values of the organization supports being an effective change agent, as it makes it easier to describe the link between design and other departments in the organization. Additionally, when designers are made aware of the 'languages' used in the organization, they are better able to tailor their pitch and translate design jargon into understandable formats.

Sarah's challenge:
Spreading design skills

designer   non-designer

ISSUE
Design undervalued

TACTIC
Tailoring presentations

ENABLER
Knowledge of organizational embedding

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