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Contexts of briefing for service design procurements in the Finnish public sector



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Public-sector organisations around the world are increasingly harnessing service design expertise in order to renew public services and organisations. However, little research attention has been paid to how service design is procured in the public sector and its implications for the work of service design consultants. This study recognises public procurement as a briefing process and elucidates the complexities involved. Through an inductive thematic analysis of interviews, ethnographic observations and documents, the study maps out key phases of briefing in service design procurement in the Finnish public sector. In doing so, the study unveils how the professional contexts of public servants and service designers impact briefing and explores the challenges and practical responses of practitioners in such engagements.

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Keywords: design practice, public procurement, briefing, service design, silent design

Design is increasingly pursued as a means of renewing public services and organisations. Innovation teams have been set up in Europe with design as one of their key capabilities, such as MindLab in Denmark (2002–2018), Strategic Design Unit at the Finnish Innovation Fund (2009–2013),¹ and Policy Lab (2014) under the U.K. Cabinet Office (Kimbell, 2015, p. 3). Recently, new teams with similar agendas have emerged in the Americas, including Laboratorio de Gobierno in Chile (2014)² and The Lab in the U.S. federal government (2014).³ The trend is spreading to Asia with South Korean and Japanese governments formalising the use of service design through a presidential order (2017)⁴ and an official guideline (Sabisu Dezain Jissen Gaidorain, 2018), respectively.

During the past decade in Europe, service design consultancies focusing on public-sector projects have flourished, while more established consultancies have added ‘public sector’ to their range of expertise (Deserti & Rizzo, 2014, p. 88; Sangiorgi, 2015). In Finland, public organisations have been procuring service design work since the early 2010s, and the number of such assignments is expected to grow in the coming years (e.g., Boman-Björkell, Korva, & Nieminen, 2016, p. 6). However, scant research attention has been paid to

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understanding how public organisations procure service design and how they and design consultancies negotiate the scope and contents of such engagements.

This study recognises the public procurement of service design as a briefing process in its own right and sets out to untangle the complexities involved. A number of practical guidelines have been available for effective briefing in various fields of design, including architecture (e.g., [Blyth & Worthington, 2001](#); [Lupton, 2000](#); [O'Reilly, 1987](#)), visual design and advertising (e.g., [Morrison, Knox, Ellis, Pringle, & IPA, 2011](#)), and design management (e.g., [Petersen & Phillips, 2011](#); [Phillips, 2004](#)). A close examination of such guidelines reveals that recommendations vary in different design fields. For example, architects are advised to utilise a variety of briefs as projects progress, such as urban, strategic, project, and fit-out briefs, while also involving a wide variety of stakeholders at different phases ([Blyth & Worthington, 2001](#); [Ryd & Fristedt, 2007](#)). In contrast, design managers who oversee visual communication, packaging and advertisements are recommended to use a single brief while conducting extensive reviews of current portfolios, competitors' offerings, and retail environments ([Morrison et al., 2011](#); [Phillips, 2004](#)). Consequently, the extant literature provides few guidelines on briefing for practitioners that operate in the young and emerging field of design.

Focused research studies have explored various aspects of briefing practices in more regulated fields of design, such as architecture and civil engineering (e.g., [Bendixen & Koch, 2007](#); [Jensen, 2011](#); [Luck, Haenlein, & Bright, 2001](#); [McDonnell & Lloyd, 2014](#); [Ryd, 2004](#); [Ryd & Fristedt, 2007](#)). Briefing practices in other design fields have received sporadic research attention through studies on shared framing by industrial design students ([Hey, Joyce, & Beckman, 2007](#)), (re)framing strategies of visual communications designers ([Paton & Dorst, 2011](#)), patterns of requirement elicitation in product design consulting ([Haug, 2015](#)) and adapted briefing practices in industrial design consulting ([Park-Lee & Person, 2018a](#)). Literature on the client–designer relationship has indirectly discussed the issues around briefing when client companies engage with design consultants ([Bruce & Docherty, 1993](#); [Bruce & Morris, 1994](#); [Hakatie & Rynänen, 2007](#); [Jevnaker & Bruce, 1998](#); [von Stamm, 1998](#)). Still, how briefing unfolds in the context of public procurement for service design has yet to be explored in research.

Through a thematic analysis ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)) of interviews, ethnographic observations, and documents, this study identifies the key steps of briefing in public procurement of service design and unveils the professional contexts of the professionals involved. The findings of the present study show that such briefing processes can be characterised as unfolding in phases that are structured by legal requirements with varying details tailored by public servants. Impartiality and accountability are identified as factors that

influence public servants to be cautious in preparing and managing procurement processes. Due to the inflexible scope of public procurements, service design consultants often attempt to manage unexpected changes in projects by replacing or reducing some tasks, which is not always possible due to the peculiarities of working with public-sector clients.

The present study adds to the extant literature in design by providing empirical grounds for briefing in public procurements in terms of (1) its legal and organisational requirements, (2) professional contexts of public servants and service design consultants, and (3) the challenges they face during the process. In doing so, it contrasts the lessons from the past literature on briefing in design – which are often grounded in designing for commercial success – with new insights and the peculiarities involved in designing for the public sector (Hyvärinen, Lee, & Mattelmäki, 2015; van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2016, pp. 2149–2164). Further, the findings this paper extends into a broader academic community in public procurement and knowledge intensive business services by surfacing commonalities across and discerning peculiarities in public procurement of service design projects.

1 Briefing in public procurement of service design

“Briefing is design, and design relies on briefing” (Blyth & Worthington, 2001, p. xi). As problem and solution co-evolve in design processes (Dorst & Cross, 2001; Maher & Poon, 1996), reframing is often considered as an essential skill of experienced designers (Cross, 2004; Lawson & Dorst, 2009; Paton & Dorst, 2011; Schön, 1995). In resolving “ill-defined problems” (Cross, 2007, p. 12), skilled designers reconstruct the initial brief throughout a project as “the problem develops and definition of the solution proceeds” (Cross, 2007, p. 100). Congruently, studies show that revision and iteration are a significant part of design work (Berends, Reymen, Stultiëns, & Peutz, 2011; Jin & Chusilp, 2006; Smith & Tjandra, 1998).

However, the milieu of design consulting does not readily cater for such iterative design/briefing practices (Park-Lee and Person, 2018a). Design consultants are often hard-pressed to propose the full scope of a project before securing a commission, while holding only partial insight into the project context and the client’s organisation (e.g., Hakatie & Ryyänänen, 2007, pp. 42–44, Park-Lee and Person, 2018a). Further, the proficiency of client organisations in using design could influence how they engage with design consultants and what they pursue in such engagements (Micheli, 2014; Ramlau & Melander, 2004; von Stamm, 1998). As design consultants often deliver their work through projects with inflexible scope and agreements, the initial brief proposed to secure a commission could become a “nailed down” document (Bruce & Morris, 1994), instead of serving as a basis for continuous iteration.

These challenges could be especially acute for service design consultants. The importance of involving and/or co-creating with various stakeholders and users early on in the process has been emphasised across the board in service design literature for exploring possible project directions (e.g., [Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011](#); [Penin, 2018](#); [Polaine, Løvlie, & Reason, 2013](#); [Sangiorgi & Prendiville, 2017](#); [Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010](#)). Therefore, the processes of service design project are sometimes seen as evolutionary by design ([Sangiorgi, D., Prendiville, A., & Jung, 2017](#)) and their impacts as transformative for the client organisation ([Burns, Cottam, Vanstone, & Winhall, 2006](#); [Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009](#); [Sangiorgi, 2015](#); [Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018](#)). This co-creative, exploratory and transformative nature of service design suggests that it is rarely possible for service designers to comprehend all aspects of a problem and predict the design process when creating a project proposal before securing a commission. Further, as a young and evolving field, service design is perceived in different ways depending on the tradition and practice one adheres to (e.g., [Kimbell, 2011](#), pp. 44–45). This multifaceted character of service design could present challenges to novice clients in recognising the benefit of engaging with service designers and when setting the scope of such engagements.

Studies on knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS) have explored various aspects in procuring professional business services from clients' perspectives (e.g., [Lindberg & Nordin, 2008](#); [Smeltzer & Ogden, 2002](#); [van der Valk & Rozemeijer, 2009](#)), as well as from providers' perspectives (e.g., [Andreini, Salo, Wendelin, Pezzotta, & Gaiardelli, 2015](#); [de Brentani, 1991](#); [Järvi, 2016](#)). However, these studies typically approach a broad range of expertise in KIBS as a singular category, including accounting, advertising, architecture, business consulting, engineering, IT consulting, legal services, market research, et cetera. This study adds to this literature by delving into the distinctive characteristics of briefing within public procurement of service design as one of emergent phenomenon in KIBS.

In the field of economics, there has long been various attempts to develop mathematical models that describe and predict behaviours of buyers and providers in procurements (e.g., [Decarolis, 2018](#); [Herweg & Schwarz, 2018](#); [Jeitschko & Wolfstetter, 2000](#); [Koh, 2017](#); [Laffont & Tirole, 1987](#); [Lülfesmann, 2002](#); [Piccione & Tan, 1996](#)). In recent decades, empirical studies in public procurement explored diverse themes within more specific geographical contexts through analyses of large sets of naturally occurring data. These themes include, though not limited to, cartel and bid-rigging (e.g., [Bergman, Lundberg, Lundberg, & Stake, 2019](#); [Lee & Hahn, 2002](#)), effects of certain bidding strategies (e.g., [Iimi, 2013](#)), and association between the number of bidders and the procurement price (e.g., [Onur, Özcan, & Taş, 2012](#)). However, with the exception of [Warland and Mayer \(2017\)](#) who explored peculiarities in public procurements of IT services in Switzerland through interviews, in-

depth qualitative inquiries that surfaced the process and challenges during public procurement of consulting services have been scarce.

Similarly to Park-Lee and Person that explored the context of briefing in industrial design consulting (2018a), this study sets out to understand the briefing process in public procurement of service design through an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of interviews, ethnographic observations and documents. Specifically, it aims to uncover why and how public organisations in Finland utilise service design expertise, how they prepare and manage procurements of service design, and how service design consultancies tender for such procurements. In order to do that, it maps out the steps through which public servants and design consultants interact to settle the scope and content of projects, and uncovers the professional contexts involved in the process. Further, it explores the challenges public servants and service designers face in the process and contrasts their similarities and differences with the commercial sector and KIBS literature.

2 Method

In navigating the complexities involved in briefing in public procurements of service design, this study approaches the process in its social context (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). In the public sector, responsibilities are dispersed in organisational silos (e.g., McNabola et al., 2013, p. 6) and thus it could take a long time for coordination and negotiation between these silos to result in enacting a procurement. Therefore, it would be challenging to determine the exact time, place, and people one should observe to understand how briefing unfolds in service design procurements *in situ*. Further, procurement is a sensitive process for public organisations, as discussions with any external party could lead to a disclosure of critical information to the advantage of a few contenders undermining impartiality during the process. Also, communications between clients and consultancies involve exchanges of trade secrets and thus observing these discussions as a third-party observer may not always be feasible. To this end, the present study utilises interviews with public servants and service designers recently involved in the process and triangulate the findings with naturally occurring data (e.g., Thurmond, 2001), such as legal documents, invitations-to-tender documents and decision documents (see Table 2 for the full list). In doing so, it provides a “detailed and nuanced account” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 83–84) on the professional contexts of briefing in public procurement of service design.

To delineate the scope of inquiry, this study identified procurement cases and interviewees through a single service design consultancy with a significant track record in working with the Finnish public sector. Service design is a rapidly evolving field (e.g., Penin, 2018, p. 12), making it challenging to select relevant cases across numerous design procurements in the Finnish public sector. For instance, IT procurements could include an element of service

Table 1 Generated data

<i>Items</i>	<i>Content</i>
Interviews, (26 in total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 13 interviews with 12 Consultancy employees (incl. design directors, service design leads, senior service designers, junior service designer, and management) – 12 interviews with 14 public servants (incl. those in educational institutions, public companies, municipalities, and design pilot programmes) – One interview with a lawyer in a private law firm that specialises in public procurements – One interview with an executive at a professional organisation
Email communications for fact-checking (five in total*)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – With two lawyers in public-sector organisations that specialise in public procurement – With two public servants that were involved in service design procurements
Field notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 44 pages of text (12 pt, spacing 1.5) – Nine sketches and 15 photographs depicting the field situations

*Emails for fact-checking and follow-up questions after the interviews. The number excludes the emails used to approach interviewees and for agreeing upon the time and place for the actual interviews.

Table 2 Naturally occurring data

<i>Items</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Legal documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Act on Public Procurement and Concession Contracts (160 pages), English version by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment – General Terms of Public Procurement in Service Contracts (26 pages), English version by the Ministry of Finance. 	– None (used English versions)
Procurement-related documents (11 procurement cases in total)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Six public procurement notification-related documents incl. a large number of annexes, four decision documents and one question-and-answer document (332 pages in total) – Three invitation-to-tender documents (57 pages in total) 	– Key documents were identified and translated (168 pages translated in total)
White papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Finland of Solutions – mid-term review: Government Action Plan for 2017–2019⁵ by the Prime Minister's Office (72 pages) – Impact Procurement⁶ by the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra (22 pages) – Effective Dialogue!: Guide to Successful Design Procurement⁷ by Ornamo, a professional organisation for designers (78 pages) 	– Key sections were identified and translated (resulting in 18 pages in total)

design although the work of designers in such projects could be centred around digital user interfaces. Further, not all procurements are available for public view, as the law allows public entities in Finland to carry out procurements without publicly inviting tenderers when a procurement is below a certain monetary value or when it is under a framework agreements for the sake of efficiency (Section 3.1 discusses this in detail). By identifying procurements through a single consultancy, the author gained access to those cases not available for public view, which also served as stimuli for a lively discussion with

interviewees about the context in which these procurements were initiated and managed. Further, the author conducted unstructured observation (Mulhall, 2003) in one of the offices of the consultancy, which helped understand the real-life contexts of service design consultants in working with public organisations.

2.1 *The service design consultancy*

Serving as a lens for selective sampling (Coyne, 1997), the service design consultancy – referred to as *the Consultancy* hereinafter – represents an archetype of emerging service design practices. Initially established as a spatial design firm in the early 2000s, the Consultancy shifted its competency and offerings towards service design in the early 2010s. The shift coincided with the World Design Capital Helsinki 2012 and its broader impact on the growth of the service design field in Finland. Since then, the Consultancy has carried out a large number of projects for both the public and private sectors.

With a commitment to “creating unique and successful customer experiences”, the Consultancy positions itself as a firm that specialises in identifying opportunities and strategies from user insight for its clients rather than focusing on the implementation of technological solutions. At the time of this study, the types of engagements with the public sector in the Consultancy ranged from designing service interfaces to designing for strategies and organisational transformations (e.g., Mager & Alonso, 2017, p. 6; Penin, 2018, pp. 191–193; Sangiorgi, 2015). The real-life examples that came to light during the interviews and observations include: intensive observations to produce user insights; experience and strategic goals; service models to reduce redundancy and enhance quality in services; methods to involve citizens in city planning; and training for organisational transformation.

Having received several national and international awards, the Consultancy currently employs a multinational staff of fewer than 100 employees in a few European cities. At a certain point during the study, one of the offices of the Consultancy had more than 15 ongoing projects, with project fees ranging from ten thousand to over a hundred thousand euros-equivalent.

2.2 *Data collection*

The author conducted interviews between April and December 2017. The interviewed public servants include managers and lawyers at publicly-owned companies, educational institutions, municipalities, government agencies, and ministries (Table 1). The topic guides were tailored for each procurement case based on the documents acquired prior to the interviews. As each procurement was unique in its purpose and scope, the discussions revolved around specific details in the procurements and their backgrounds and intentions. This approach made it possible to uncover how public organisations handle

different considerations when preparing service design procurements. For further interviews, the study followed “snowball sampling” (e.g., [Faugier & Sargeant, 1997](#)) to identify those public servants and experts frequently involved in service design procurements and/or projects. The author engaged with a few more public servants, an executive of a professional organisation, and a few lawyers specialising in public procurement through face-to-face interviews, phone calls, video conferences and email communications. These discussions provided a rich description of the legal and organisational contexts of public procurement, as well as how service design is currently perceived in the Finnish public sector.

The Consultancy employees interviewed for this study include service designers with varying degrees of experience and responsibilities, sales staff and management. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using topic guides to structure the inquiry, while keeping the conversations open-ended and paying close attention to emergent topics. The topic guide included questions about differences between commercial versus public-sector projects, the involvement of interviewees in offering and briefing, and the transition from selling a project to carrying out the project ([Appendix 1](#)).

All interviews were conducted in English at the workplaces of the interviewees, except four that took place at cafés, on the phone, or through video conference tools for the convenience of the interviewees’ daily schedules. The interviewees were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Most interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. One interview could not be recorded due to the noisy environment and it was thus documented in the form of field notes and digitised within a day. The length of recorded interviews ranged from 27 to 99 min with a mean of 50 min, totalling 22 h of interview material.

The author sat in one of the offices of the Consultancy for one to three days a week from April to December in 2017 (53 days in total), having informal discussions, participating in weekly meetings and internal seminars, and observing daily work in the Consultancy. The observations were documented in the form of ethnographic field notes and photographs that were digitised at the end of each day ([Appendix 2](#)). Past projects identified during this period served as vivid examples for discussions with the employees about the context and impact of briefing and procurement processes in their work. Further, informal discussions with the employees helped provide nuanced understandings about how they perceive briefing in public procurements.

Naturally occurring data collected for this study include publicly available documents from various websites and archives maintained by the Finnish government, such as regulation texts, public tender notifications, question-and-answer documents, decision documents, and the tender proposals from the

Consultancy. These documents served as the material for focused interviews and data triangulation (e.g., [Thurmond, 2001](#)). The majority of these documents was in Finnish, and key documents and sections were translated into English by a single research assistant for consistency ([Table 2](#)). English versions of legal documents were used following the advice of a legal expert interviewed for this study.

2.3 Analysis

The author performed all the interviews and ethnographic observations. All interviews were transcribed by a professional firm. “Initial Coding” ([Saldaña, 2013](#), pp. 100–105) was conducted by listening to all the recordings anew, reading the ethnographic notes, and writing down in-vivo codes and summaries of segments on sticky notes with the source information (e.g., the initials of an interviewee, or a shortened name of legal documents). The coding was conducted in three key rounds for focused analyses: first for the interviews with public servants, second for the interviews with the Consultancy employees, and third for the field notes. Each round was followed by regrouping the notes in iteration using coding software, and broader patterns emerged through “Second Cycle coding” ([Saldaña, 2013](#), pp. 207–212).

After the initial analysis, discussion sessions were organised with the interviewees for “co-constituted” and “mediated” accounts on the findings (e.g., [Finlay, 2002](#); [Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014](#), pp. 6–8). Similarly to [Person, Snelders, and Schoormans \(2016\)](#) and [Park-Lee & Person \(2018a,b\)](#), the aim was to validate the initial findings by inviting the practitioners comment on and modify the “work-in-progress” visual representations ([Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006](#), p. 21). For the Consultancy employees, two sessions were organised in May and June 2018. Over 10 employees participated, including those interviewed for this study, as well as others interested in the topic. The themes were presented through a set of diagrams with exemplary quotes ([Appendix 3](#)). For public servants, individual discussions were arranged since strict anonymity has been central to having frank discussions during the interviews. A summary of findings and exemplary quotes were electronically sent to five of them in February 2019 following maximum variation sampling ([Marshall, 1996](#)): in two municipalities; a government agency; a publicly-owned company; and a ministry. The discussions took place over phone calls and video conferences after a few days and were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The discussion sessions corroborated the findings, while also providing additional information and examples that added depth to the analysis.

3 Characteristics of briefing in public procurement of service design

To unpack the complexities involved in briefing in public procurement of service design, this section first presents the legal and organisational requirements

in the process. It then reviews various forms and details in service design procurements and identifies key steps through which public-sector clients and service design consultants engage in communication with each other.

3.1 Legal requirements for public procurements of service design

The analysis reveals that service design procurements in the Finnish public sector can take various forms. For example, under certain conditions a public organisation can directly purchase a project without comparing multiple proposals, while under other conditions a procurement can take the form of a competitive tender involving a large number of public organisations and dozens of suppliers.

In Finland, public procurement of service design is very much governed by the [Act on Public Procurement and Concession Contracts, 2016](#), referred to as “the Act” hereafter.⁸ The Act enables tailoring each procurement for specific needs, provided that the public organisations “act transparently” and treat all actors involved “in an equitable and non-discriminatory manner” (Part I, Chapter 1, Section 3). The Act details various procedures for tailoring procurements, including open procedure, restricted procedure, and negotiated procedure (Part II, Chapter 5, Section 33–40). The contracting entity can carry out “market consultation”⁹ that enables communications with, and learning from, suppliers, independent specialists, and/or other public authorities prior to enacting a procurement (Part II, Chapter 9, Section 65). For example, they can engage with service design researchers in universities or designers in government innovation units.

When a procurement value falls below the national threshold of sixty thousand euros¹⁰, the Act allows public organisations to pursue “direct procurement” (Part II, Chapter 5, Section 40). In such cases, a public organisation can directly approach several service design consultancies and select one to work with. When the value exceeds the national threshold, the Act requires opening a public tender competition through the national procurement notification webpage¹¹ (Part II, Chapter 7, Section 60). When the value exceeds the EU threshold of 209 thousand euros, the contracting entity is required to comply with additional rules, such as opening up the competition to contenders from all EU member states and accepting supporting documents issued in countries other than Finland (see [Fig. 1](#)).

In addition, a public organisation in Finland can set its own ‘purchase guide’ requiring its employees to follow additional rules even when procurement values fall below the national threshold. These guides could impose lower threshold values for direct procurements than the national one, e.g., 20 thousand euros. If the procurement value exceeds the internal threshold, the

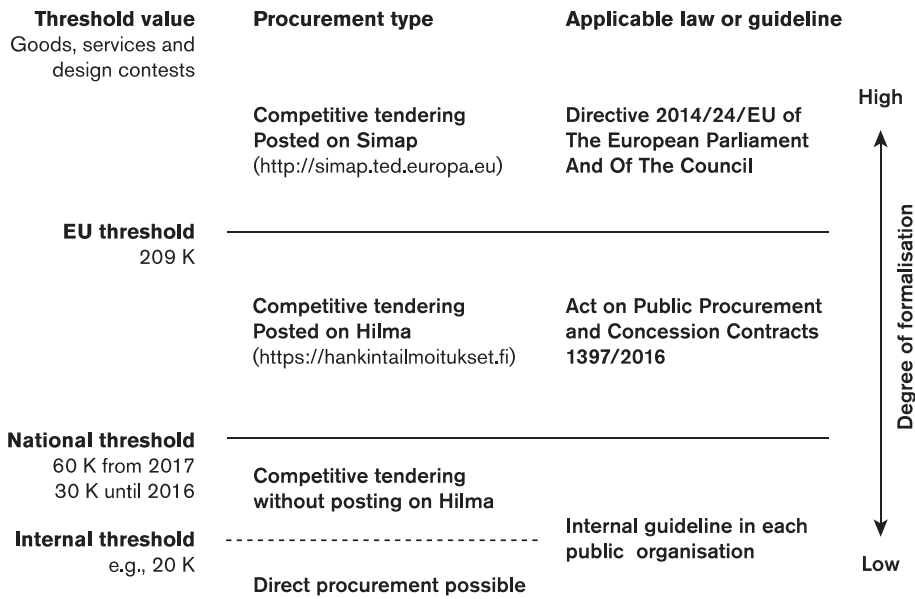


Figure 1 Threshold value and applicable law

organisation is required to open a public tender competition, for example through its own website. When procurement values fall below the internal threshold, public servants in charge may still be required to justify a direct procurement.

To help reduce the involvement of administrative functions (Part I, Chapter 1, Section 2), the Act also provides guidelines for forming a framework agreement.¹² One or more public bodies can jointly establish such agreements with selected service design consultancies for up to four years (Part II, Chapter 5, Section 42), allowing swift procurements under a set value without having to engage in a public tender competition. The contracting entity can also pursue a so-called ‘mini-tender’,¹³ a competitive tendering between the suppliers selected for the framework agreement using the criteria predetermined in the call (Part II, Chapter 5, Section 43).

3.2 Various forms of service design procurements

On the whole, the Act provides an amount of freedom to tailor each procurement to ensure the process is “open, equal, fair and reasonable” (Lawyer_A). As a result, the service design procurements examined for this study varied widely in the ways they were tailored. Table 3 exemplifies these variants and their details among those revealed during the interviews.

Pursued independently without using a framework agreement, the values of *Individual Project Procurements* often fell below the national threshold (e.g.,

Contexts of briefing for service design procurements

Table 3 Examples of various forms of service design procurements observed during the study

<i>Procurement type</i>	<i>Identifier</i>	<i>Type of the contracting party</i>	<i>Procurement value (€)</i>	<i>Framework agreement condition</i>	<i>Selection criteria</i>	<i>No. of contenders</i>	<i>No. of selected consultancies</i>
<i>Individual Project Procurements</i>	i	Publicly-owned company	Above 10 K Below 30 K	N/A	Quality 50% (CV, reference, proposal) + Price 50%	3	1
	ii	Public-sector association	Above 10 K Below 30 K	N/A	—	1	1
<i>Framework Agreements</i>	iii	Central government	Above million	4 years	Quality 30% (CV, customer satisfaction survey) + price 70%	40-50 for 2 categories*	20-30 for 2 categories*
	iv	Municipality	Above 60 K Below 209 K	Direct purchase possible under 5 K; 1 + 1 year	Quality 60% (CV, reference, proposal for a fictitious project case) + Price 40%	Over 20	1–5
<i>Project Procurements Using Framework Agreements</i>	v	Ministry	Below 10 K	Direct purchase possible under 5 K	Fit and availability among three suppliers listed	3	1
	vi	Publicly-owned company	Above 129 K	Two-year partnership with a single consultancy	—	1	1

* There were more than two categories in this procurement case, of which two were relevant for service design consulting.

i & ii in Table 3). Despite being similar in monetary value, these procurements could differ significantly in terms of how communications took place at pre-project stage and how procurement decisions were made. For instance, a publicly-owned company carried out an iterative market consultation prior to inviting three suppliers to tender (see i), while a public-sector association pursued a direct procurement without comparing any proposals, as the choice could be justified based on the unique advantages gained when hiring a specific consultancy (see ii).

Representing greater procurement values than the national threshold, procurements of *Framework Agreements* have often been announced through the national procurement webpage, attracting dozens of contenders (e.g., iii & iv). Critical details of these procurements varied, including the selection criteria and the length of agreements. A procurement by the central government placed comparatively small importance on quality points in the selection criteria (30%), which combined the CVs of consultants with a customer satisfaction survey (see iii). Meanwhile, a municipality procured a framework agreement placing significantly more weight on quality in the criteria (60%) and utilising a fictitious project case to evaluate the competencies of contenders (see iv). The duration of the former framework agreement was four years, while the latter was set to be only one year with the possibility of a one-year extension.

The procurement values and the relationships a public client organisation and a service design consultancy can establish varied widely among *Project Procurements Using Framework Agreements* (e.g., v & vi). A municipality directly procured a project worth five thousand euros from a suitable consultancy to plan a participatory event for citizens by using a framework agreement and funding prepared by a ministry (see v). Having formed a partnership with a single consultancy through a framework agreement, a publicly-owned company directly procured a large user study project exceeding the EU threshold of 209 thousand euros without a public tender competition (see vi).

3.3 Key steps of briefing in public procurements of service design

The variants and their details presented above show how mouldable a public procurement of service design can be in Finland. Therefore, briefing in public procurement can be continuous and iterative if the details are tailored to enable this. That said, these details are set by public servants prior to enacting a public procurement and are mostly inflexible once a procurement is announced. Consequently, service design consultants can only respond through these predetermined steps without being able to proactively communicate and negotiate with public organisations. Figure 2 articulates these steps through which briefing took place as observed in this study.

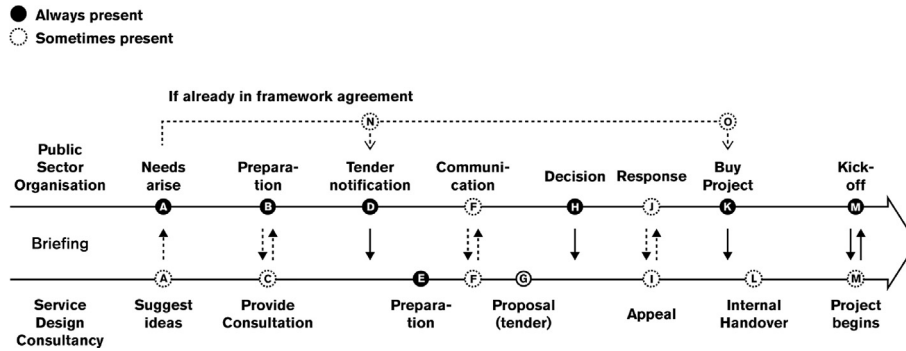


Figure 2 Briefing in public procurements of service design

After identifying needs internally and while preparing procurements (A–B), a public organisation may engage in “market consultation” in order to explore different possibilities (C). The organisation can either invite a few suppliers to tender or open a public tender competition through the national procurement notification website, depending on the expected procurement values (D). Service design consultancies gain a basic understanding of the background and aim of the procurement mostly through the tender invitation, its annexes, and question-and-answer documents, and those willing tender for the call (E–G). Once a procurement decision is made, the contracting entity publishes the results (H), upon which the participating consultancies can appeal to the market court if they deem the process unfair (I–J). The public organisation may formalise the purchase once everything is sorted out (K). Meanwhile, the selected consultancy may internally hand over the project from the consultant who prepared the tender to the one that will carry out the project (L). If and when a public organisation uses a framework agreement, the process can be simplified to a direct procurement (O) or a “mini-tender” with a small number of providers under the agreement (N).

4 Professional contexts for briefing in public procurement of service design

As examined thus far, briefing in public procurements of service design projects and expertise can be characterised as being: principally structured by the Act’s requirement for fair treatment of all tenderers; unfolding in phases that are predetermined by public organisations; and often lacking early and sufficient dialogue between the client organisation and consultancies. As these phases and the presence of dialogues in them are tailored by public organisations prior to enacting a procurement, it is essential to understand the professional contexts of those public servants involved in the process. Also, it is equally important to uncover the professional contexts of service design consultants and their abilities in responding to invitations-to-tender and in adapting to the project situations when working with public-sector clients. This

section describes these contexts and how they may present challenges for briefing as discussed during the interviews.

4.1 Varying degrees of proficiency in different public organisations for using service design

Service design capability has yet to be formalised in the Finnish public sector, and public organisations in Finland hold varying degrees of proficiency in using service design. This variation in proficiency was identified as presenting challenges to public servants in (1) tailoring the details involved in procuring service design expertise and (2) estimating an appropriate scope (budget) in preparing procurements for service design.

Despite being a forerunner in utilising design for renewing public services and organisations, the Finnish public sector is yet to integrate (service) design expertise into its formal capability. Several pilot programmes for integrating design expertise into public organisations were set up in the early 2010s. These include the Design Exchange Programme initiated by the Finnish Innovation Fund (2012–2013),¹⁴ the Design Driven City as a legacy of the World Design Capital (2013–2015),¹⁵ and the Chief Design Officer at the City of Helsinki (2016–2018).¹⁶ While encouraging, these programmes had brief tenures and most of the ongoing programmes are set to be terminated, including the Inland Design team at the Finnish Immigration Service (end of 2019)¹⁷ and the service design team at the Social Insurance Institution (2020).¹⁸ Although a few service designers were also present in municipalities at the time of writing, they were all working with fixed-term contracts. For this reason, many of the interviewees deemed that the current service design capacity in the public sector is inadequate to meet the growing demand and to make an impact with a long-term vision.

Consequently, some of the public servants interviewed for this study discussed their difficulties when preparing procurements:

I felt really lonely. Not with the procurement part, but from the content part. I didn't have anyone to benchmark in the public-sector. I tried to look for it [but did not find anything useful]. Luckily, I had one person here who was working [in one of the aforementioned programmes] [he/she] was more like psychological support. (Public_servant_K, brackets added by the author)

In addition to the lack of available precedents and support, the interviewees discussed how few public organisations employ (service) designers. Of the 11 procurements examined for this study, only one case included a service designer with a temporary contract in the procurement team; this person later left the organisation for a service designer position at a consultancy.

Termed sometimes as the “maturity” of client organisations (Consultancy_employee_F), public servants with varying degrees of proficiency in using service design seem to have different perceptions about an appropriate project scope. In creating a framework agreement for a municipality, a public servant considered a project scope of a few thousand euros for direct procurement as “reasonable” (Public_servant_D). Another public servant regarded a past project with a budget of 20 thousand euros as “really expensive” (Public_servant_M). Contrastingly, a public servant with a career record as a service design consultant deemed an internal threshold of 20 thousand euros for direct procurement insufficient to produce any significant outcome (Public_servant_C).

The Consultancy employees discussed how they were often pressured to compress their work into a limited scope due to this chasm in perceptions. Invitations-to-tender with predetermined tasks and set values were seen as particularly problematic, as such tenders were neither “co-created” nor realistic:

I think the problem is that [...] many times we get this [invitation-to-tender] where the process is already laid down. We just got a procurement request [...] to create vision and structure and service models and blueprints [...] It had, I counted, six different phases [...] and it was 20 thousand [euros in total]. So, what can you do with that? (Consultancy_employee_G, brackets added by the author)

Given that the going price of a service design consultant is about a thousand euros per day,¹⁹ the request for a proposal in the quote above would allow about three days for each predetermined phase, which the Consultancy employees deemed insufficient. Observation at the Consultancy showed that this phenomenon sometimes leads to the rejection of incoming invitations-to-tender because the tendering process itself would already consume much of the profit before the commission is even secured.

4.2 Service design efforts bundled in broader agendas in the Finnish public sector

The resources allocated for hiring external service design expertise, or for furthering public services more broadly, were identified as irregular and unpredictable. The interviewees described that the approach taken to procuring service design is tied up with broader agendas in the public sector. To this end, the ways in which these procurements were tailored may not have always been ideal for procuring service design expertise.

It was my supervisor [...] she’s the head of our unit [...] it was, my boss [who] has the right to make these purchases, [he/she] made the [decision]

that we buy this service. And we did it together with the [another unit in the organisation]. Our unit paid one part and they paid another. [...] They had also some money left for this kind of activities, and so we could have it together. It benefits the whole [organisation], of course, but we bought it together. (Public_servant_I, brackets added by the author)

As evident from the quote above, public-sector organisations often combined different sources of funds to finance a service design procurement. This tendency also holds true for framework agreements, as one of the agreements identified for this study required the contracting entity to combine its own budget with funding from the European Union, while another one fully subsidised the fees, albeit only up to a certain amount. Initiating relevant projects and securing the necessary budget were not always as straightforward as the public servants would have hoped – one of the interviewees stated that this process felt “random” (Public_servant_M).

A top-down managerial practice was frequently mentioned during the interviews as a way to create the required budget and organise procurements. Those public servants directly involved in public procurements stated that they held little control over establishing a development project and securing funding. In the discussions, the interviewees acknowledged that elected officials and top public servants, such as a minister, a mayor, and head of a department, were the sole initiators of a series of initiatives (Consultancy_employee_G, Public_servant_B, D & I). The interviewees mentioned that higher-ranking public servants – referred to as the “chief” (Public_servant_M) or “boss” (Public_servant_I) – have progressively greater decision-making privileges to “create” (Public_servant_M) and/or approve a project budget.

Congruently, broader changes in the sector emerged as an important driver for hiring service design expertise during the interviews, such as political climate, election cycles, and the resulting changes in the government leadership. For example, the Health and Social Care reform²⁰ was pinpointed as the driver that initiated different service design procurements (Public_servant_A, consultancy_employee_F); others mentioned different mandates for enhancing citizen participation (Public_servant_D, I, & M) and consequent organisational reform as the reasons they procured service design work (Public_servant_H & M). Congruently, varied themes with broad interests came to light as the motivations for hiring service design consultancies, including achieving human-centric digitalisation (Public_servant_B & J); obtaining cost-savings by identifying citizens’ needs and reorganising services around them (Public_servant_B); furthering economic development and helping understand complex networks through visualisation (Public_servant_D); and pursuing sustainable urban development with European Union funding (Public_servant_B, D & J).²¹

This phenomenon may not always present an ideal setting for engaging with service design expertise. For instance, a framework agreement prepared by a ministry sought to provide municipalities with the resources to hire consultancies for a defined list of goals, including “digitalisation and experimental culture”²² (procurement case iii in [Table 3](#) under Section 3.2). The procurement was carried out under few parallel categories seeking to introduce various capabilities to the public sector, of which service design was one. In the framework agreement, the threshold value for a direct procurement was set to the maximum of five thousand euros. As exemplified earlier, this was hardly the only framework agreement with such a limited scope.

The Consultancy employees expressed concerns about such engagements, as they could lead to superficial exposure to service design and induce public-sector clients to have unrealistic expectations. Further, this may limit the opportunities for service design consultants to involve users in the design process, which is often recognised in practical guidelines as one of the primary benefits of engaging with service design expertise (e.g., [Polaine et al., 2013](#); [Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010](#)).

4.3 Minimised communication with tenderers for impartiality

Having to communicate with a large number of (potential) tenderers prior to and during the public procurements, public servants tended to minimise the amount of communication for the sake of impartiality and practicality. This might sometimes lead to a situation where service design consultants have only limited understanding about the goal and scope of procurements.

The pursuit of impartiality has been highlighted as a major principle for public servants in communicating with the tenderers during the interviews. As discussed earlier (Section 3.1), when the value of a procurement rises above the organisational or national threshold, a public organisation is required to publish a call for tender, attracting a large number of contenders from all over Finland. This poses a dilemma for public servants in procuring service design expertise. On the one hand, having direct conversations with all potential tenderers would be impractical, while on the other hand having individual discussions with only a few of them would disadvantage the rest. The contenders can appeal procurement decisions if unsatisfied, or even bring the case to the market court if they feel that the process was carried out unfairly. To this end, some of the public servants interviewed stated that the effort and degree of caution required for communicating with contenders is strenuous:

It’s [a] very expensive [process for the organisation]. I did nothing else but this. And the lawyers did as well. And then, there was one or two complaints about the whole project, so it also took some time to [...] discuss with the lawyers what to do and how to react and what everything means,

because it was a new situation for me, too. (Public_servant_J, bracket added by the author)

As a result, it was rare for public organisations and service design consultancies to engage in continuous discussions throughout procurement processes. Indeed, iterative market consultation was observed in only one of the 11 procurement cases examined for this study. The communication between contracting entities and tenderers has mostly been limited to a few documents, such as invitation-to-tender announcements, proposals and/or offers, question-and-answer documents and decision documents.

This minimised communication, in tandem with the limited proficiency of public organisations in using service design, could sometimes leave bidding consultancies ill-prepared for creating adequate proposals. In an invitation-to-tender for a framework agreement, participating consultancies were required to submit a plan for a hypothetical event for involving employees and citizens in a city (procurement case iv in [Table 3](#) under Section 3.2). The interviews with the public servants involved in preparing this procurement revealed that this assignment was not to seek an actual answer to a specific problem, but to evaluate the competence, and more importantly, creativity and willingness of bidding consultancies. To this end, they intentionally provided little information to allow ample freedom for the participating consultancies with a hope of receiving original submissions that would positively surprise them. However, the question-and-answer document shows that many contenders were confused by this requirement, as roughly one fourth of the questions enquired into further details of this event. Perhaps surprisingly, the answers to those questions from the procurement team in the municipality were mainly “at the discretion of the tenderer” (translated from Finnish).

We sent a lot of questions regarding [the details of the assignment] what’s the purpose [...], what’s the budget [...] and many other agencies also sent [similar questions]. [The public organisation] didn’t want to give any more information on what it should be (Consultancy_employee_J, brackets added by the author).

With the lack of information, the Consultancy employee decided to submit not an event plan, but a co-creation process with an example of a recent public-sector project of the Consultancy. The decision came from the idea that participation is not an outcome in itself but a method for co-creation in service design. Such submission could have been evaluated negatively from the perspective of the public servants involved because the example in the proposal was not prepared solely for this particular procurement. Whilst this can be seen as one of more extreme cases, it was hardly an isolated incident where the Consultancy was requested to create a proposal with insufficient information when tendering for public-sector projects and framework agreements.

4.4 Uncertainties and inflexibility in working with public-sector clients

The interviewees stated that uncertainties in the design process presented marked challenges for service design consultants to predict all the phases of a project before a project actually commenced. Changing the course of a project subsequent to the commission was not always possible due to the inflexible scope predetermined by the public-sector clients. This was complicated by peculiarities in working with the public sector, which typically involved a large number of stakeholders and users in the design process.

Client organisations did not always share all relevant information with consultancies until they formally commissioned a project (Consultancy_employee_F), which made it challenging for consultants to fully understand the project situation beforehand. Further, being highly vigilant about the budget constraints, clients from the public sector sometimes required the Consultancy to build upon material they had already produced, such as interview transcripts, or decided to perform some of the tasks themselves (Public_servant_A & M, Consultancy_employee_J). However, service design consultants found it difficult to anticipate the quality and relevance of such materials and/or the competency of the public servants for carrying out such tasks prior to kick-off (Consultancy_employee_J).

The Consultancy employees have also discussed how service design projects for the public sector may give rise to greater uncertainties than those for the commercial sector. Public-sector clients tend to require service design consultants to engage with a greater number of stakeholders and users during projects than commercial clients. Congruently, a public servant emphasised that it is crucial to involve as many of the parties delivering public services as possible (Public_servant_M), and a Consultancy employee remarked that in the public sector there is a “culture that you don’t step on somebody’s toes” (Consultancy_employee_E). The number of relevant stakeholders could grow throughout projects, as clients wanted to ensure that “voices are heard” (Consultancy_employee_G), and timely design decisions could be hindered when “important people don’t have time to participate” in workshops (Consultancy_employee_E).

To this end, many of the Consultancy employees stated that they try to adapt a project plan as they learn more about the client’s organisation and the project situation. Therefore, reframing of the project plan was considered beneficial (Consultancy_employee_B & E) or even essential (Consultancy_employee_F) by the Consultancy employees to create an impact through their work:

The nature of our projects is not always very clear in the beginning. So, we have a process we follow, but then we also learn, while we are doing

something, and then we make decisions, like, “Ah, this would be good to do, and this would be the right way.” And, you know, how the workshops go defines our next stage, even though we have a hypothesis in the beginning, what we’re going to do, it changes. (Consultancy_employee_D)

However, iterating the plan or extending the scope during a project was seen as challenging, since these uncertainties were rarely considered while a procurement was being prepared. The procurement values in a majority of the *Individual Project Procurements* (Section 3.2) discussed during the interviews fell slightly below the national threshold — likely to avoid the administrative burden. A small addition to such a procurement could result in the accumulated value exceeding the initial threshold, in which case the contracting party is required to open another tender or may face sanction by the Market Court (Part IV, Chapter 15, Section 141).

To this end, the Consultancy employees stated that they often managed the changes by replacing some tasks with others (Consultancy_employee_F) or reducing the output (Consultancy_employee_D) in an attempt to avoid increasing the procurement value. However, this was not always possible, especially when the project was limited in scope and short in duration. Expressed as “workshop-heavy” (Consultancy_employee_E), the nature of public-sector projects required approaching relevant stakeholders and users ahead of time, sometimes weeks in advance (Public_servant_M).

4.5 Fluctuation and unpredictability in project commissions in service design consultancies

The fluctuation of project commissions in service design consultancies — or of any type of consultancy that markets expert services — was described as sometimes limiting the opportunities for iterating the course of a project at an early stage. Facing annual fluctuation in project commissions, and hence unpredictability in the volume of their sales, however, they often end up providing their consultants with little work during certain periods of the year, while overwhelming them with many projects during others:

I actually was summoned into the first workshop with the senior level [public servants] without knowing anything about the project. I came late, because I had a doctor’s appointment, and I came there, like, “Hi! I’m going to be the project manager in this project!” So, this is quite typical that I join way too late. (Consultancy_employee_E)

Often termed as “resourcing” (Consultancy_employee_B, C, I & K), the decisions about assigning consultants to suitable projects comprised a recurring topic during the discussions about briefing with the Consultancy employees. As exemplified in the quote above, sometimes the consultants were assigned

to a project at the last minute, which could prevent them from being fully acquainted with the project contexts. This phenomenon was discussed as a result of fluctuation in the number of project commissions:

[...] normally Q1 is the slowest [...] Q3 is like the second best and Q4 is the best, and that's basically happening in every design agency. [...] Let's say you have this 80 per cent of capacity. But you sell only 40, so you will lose that [...] So it's really difficult to take it back in the rest of the year. (Consultancy_employee_I)

Project commissions were heavily concentrated in certain periods of each year; at other times of year, the designers in the Consultancy had insufficient work (see [Figure 3](#)).²³ As most staff of the Consultancy were on permanent employment contracts, the operating costs remained mostly constant throughout the year.

In addition to workload fluctuation, the volume of sales was described as unpredictable during the interviews:

[Mentioning a potential, large commercial project] most likely but not quite sure yet, and if this comes, everything changes. If this doesn't come, also everything changes. (Consultancy_employee_C)

Sometimes termed as “a flirting game” (Consultancy_employee_K), sales of service design projects, and the briefing imbedded in it, were depicted as a process of building an initial relationship with (potential) clients without the promise of an actual project commission. To this end, the search for new clients to enlarge the client base remained a daily routine within the Consultancy. In order to maximise the number of sales leads, the Consultancy has systematised its sales efforts, including setting a routine to make cold calls collectively.

Facing recurring fluctuation in commissions from the clients, as well as unpredictability in sales, the Consultancy had no choice but to take up as many projects as possible during the busier months. Approaching the end of the year, the period in which the project commissions tend to be most heavily concentrated, many of the discussions during the weekly meetings at the Consultancy revolved around how to increase efficiency by helping each other and reducing the idle time of designers. Accordingly, one of the directors of the Consultancy stated that it is her/his responsibility to keep a healthy balance between the profitability, the quality of design outcomes and the well-being of the Consultancy's employees (Consultancy_employee_D).

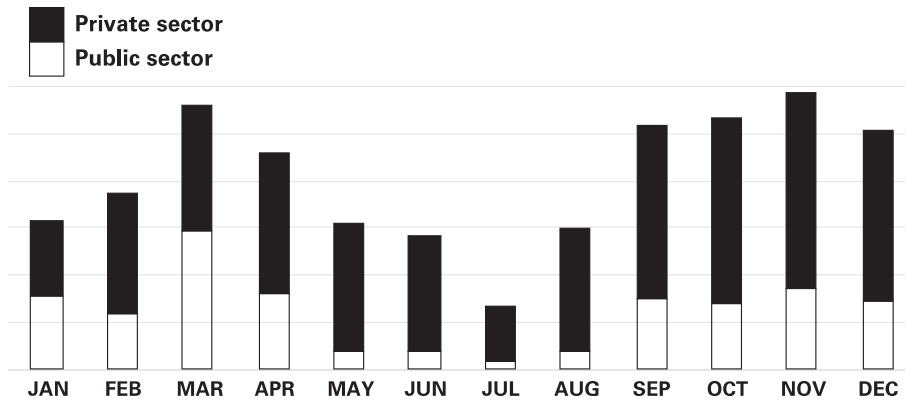


Figure 3 Relative volume of workload in the Consultancy for each month in one of the recent years (Stacked Column)

5 Towards more proactive briefing in public procurement of service design

The professional contexts discussed above present challenges to both public servants and service design consultants for continuously learning from each other and iterating the content and scope of procurements. Therefore, it would be fruitful for both parties to consider these contexts when engaging with each other through public procurements (Figure 4 maps out how briefing unfolds in public procurement of service design, extending the baseline analysis of Figure 2 with further details from Sections 4.1–4.4). To a large extent, these procedures are shaped by the legal framework and thus it would rarely be possible to drastically alter them for more effective briefing. That said, three practical responses emerged from the ways in which the interviewees perceived, and those involved in public procurements acted upon, above-mentioned challenges.

The first response pertains to how public procurements of service design work typically lacked iterative briefing in treating all contenders impartially (Section 4.3). With limited proficiency in working with service design consultants, public servants faced challenges in tailoring details of procurements and estimating appropriate scope for projects (Section 4.1). Unfortunately, iterating project scope could rarely be accommodated later in the project due to the accumulative procurement values and the procedures required accordingly by the Act (Section 3 & 4.4). Having noted such phenomenon, the Finnish Association of Designers published a recommendation titled “Effective Dialogue!”⁷ emphasising proactive communications during the early stages of public procurements (Boman-Björkell et al., 2016). Congruently, one of the lawyers interviewed for this study maintained that it is unlikely for public servants to become experts in the wide variety of goods and services they procure, and therefore they should seek multiple rounds of market consultations with “open-mindedness and humbleness” (Lawyer_A).

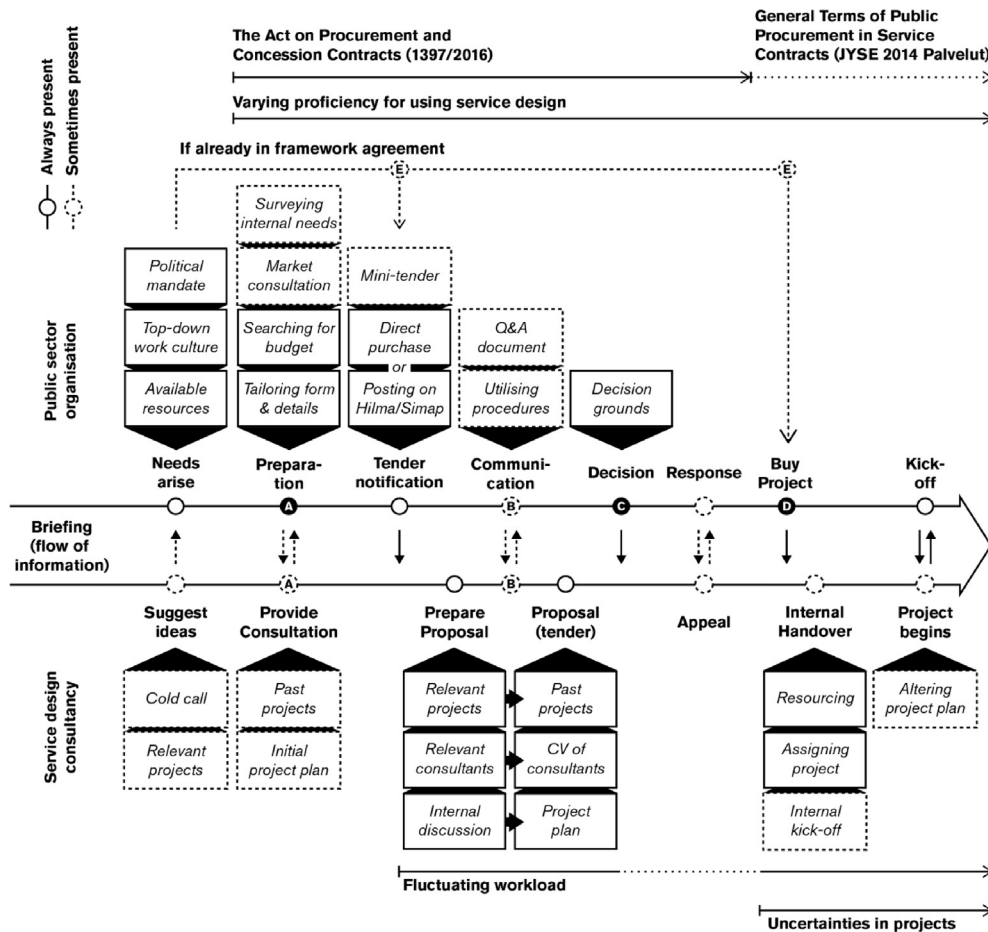


Figure 4 Briefing in public procurement of service design (extended)

To this end, it might be fruitful for public sector organisations to systematise early and continuous dialogues in moulding service design procurements to mitigate the challenges and pursue more proactive briefing (see A, B and C in Figure 4). A case in point can be found in an architectural design procurement carried out by the Finnish Innovation Fund, in which each of five consortiums (of 74 contenders) was awarded 50 thousand euros to cover five weeks of work in preparing the final proposal (Bechthold & Kane, 2010, pp. 12–14). Such approach may enable active dialogues between suppliers and clients before committing to a plan while motivating contenders to focus their expertise on creating innovative proposals. By phasing the selection process and pursuing face-to-face discussion with those contenders who pass the initial screening, client organisations may also benefit from the richness of the multitude of proposals.

The second response is related to the ways in which public organisations often engaged with service design expertise through framework agreements. Many procurements of framework agreements surfaced during the interviews recruited a large number of service design consultancies with low procurement values for direct purchases (e.g., few thousand euros). In such cases, resources were scattered across a large number of short engagements, preventing service design consultancies from gaining adequate insights into the project context and client organisations (Section 4.2). The situation resembles the common challenges companies face when hiring external design consultants due to the consultants' limited insights into the inner workings of the client's organisation (e.g., [Bruce & Morris, 1994](#)). Scholars found that such challenges can be addressed by pursuing a long-term work relationship or strategic alliance ([Bruce & Docherty, 1993](#); [Jevnaker & Bruce, 1998](#)).

Therefore, public organisations may expect more successful outcomes by recruiting fewer service design consultancies for lengthier framework agreements (see D and E in [Figure 4](#)). A relevant instance could be the procurement case by a publicly-owned company that pursued a framework agreement with a single consultancy for two years (procurement case vi in [Table 3](#), Section 3.2). Maintaining such relationships for an extended period of time may not only allow design consultants gain and mobilise tacit knowledge ([Leonard & Sensiper, 1998](#)) but also help client organisations enjoy benefits from more effective briefing, reduced uncertainty, and improved continuity ([Bruce & Morris, 1994](#), pp. 596–597). Further, it may also attract more competent consultancies to participate, as design consultancies typically value sustained relationships for reduced costs associated with sales and initial briefing activities ([Park-Lee & Person, 2018a](#), p. 77).

The third and final response pertains to the fluctuation and unpredictability in project commissions in design consultancies (Section 4.5). With the cost for salaries remaining constant throughout the year, the Consultancy sought to minimise the idle time of its designers for profitability. Facing annual fluctuation in project commission, however, the Consultancy employees were regularly overwhelmed by multiple concurrent projects, which at times prevented them from being fully acquainted with project contexts before projects commenced. The challenge could be complicated by the peculiarity of public sector clients, whose number of stakeholders is generally greater than those in commercial sector, bringing about greater uncertainty and complexity in projects (Section 4.4). Given the challenges above, public organisations may gain more effective briefing by targeting the “low” seasons (Consultancy_employee_I), typically first or third quarters of a year for execution, when preparing procurements. This way, service design consultants could be more attentive to the complex requirements of their public sector clients.

It is worth noting that the three responses for more proactive briefing discussed above ultimately concern alternative procurement practices pursued by public-sector organisations. Again, this is because the process of briefing in service design procurement is largely dictated by the legal requirements and details moulded by public servants. For this reason, the interviewees often described the role of service design consultancies as being reactive or at best responsive:

I mean, there are certain things we cannot influence, for example the small budgets that are available for some design efforts. Okay, that's the fact of the public sector, and obviously it's a good cause, because they are trying to save public tax money, but then it's hard to apply an open design process to a 5000 euros case. [...] We need to have this kind of very clear what-to-do in these smaller cases, so that we don't lose time with this uncertainty anymore. [...] One methodology, one workshop, one clear outcome that everybody who doesn't know anything about design can see the value. (Consultancy_employee_D)

As evident from the quote above, the Consultancy has proactively sought to package different service design activities to better communicate its capabilities and expertise to new clients. However, public-sector clients were not a priority in this endeavour, because the Consultancy cannot necessarily actively market such packages to public organisations in public procurements where the client in most cases initiates and dictates the processes.

It is widely accepted that problem and solution co-evolve while designing (e.g., [Beckett, 2017](#); [Dorst & Cross, 2001](#)) and thus iteration forms an essential part of design process (e.g., [Berends et al., 2011](#); [Jin & Chusilp, 2006](#)). Presenting repercussions for such iterative process, the procedures required by the Act and the professional context of public servants add to the discussions on 'silent design' (e.g., [Candi, 2010](#); [Chiva-Gomez, 2004](#); [Christensen, 1995](#); [Gorb & Dumas, 1987](#); [Junginger, 2013](#); [Walsh, 1996](#)). Introduced by Gorb and Dumas, the concept refers to 'covert' design activities in organisations that unintentionally influence the process of designing artefacts and "planning, strategies and goals surrounding those artefacts and systems of artefacts" (1987, p. 151). Scholars have explored this concept with narrower and broader definitions, from simply non-designers performing designing work (e.g., [Candi, 2010](#); [Junginger, 2013](#)) to non-designers unconsciously making design decisions while designers influence non-design aspects in new product development (e.g., [Chiva-Gomez, 2004](#)). The findings of the present study and the practical responses above broaden the application of 'silent design', as the ways in which public servants mould the details of public procurement inadvertently shape the briefing and design practices of service design consultants.

It may be premature to presume that the findings of the present study form a general pattern in public procurements of all expert services. That said, the phenomena identified here could still be relevant to some fields of consulting services and other geographical areas. For instance, the Act on Public Procurement and Concession Contracts of Finland implements European Union directives, such as 2014/24/EU and 89/665/EEC. Also, all OECD countries have commitments for transparency in public procurements with mechanisms in place to prevent risks to integrity, such as monitoring cumulative threshold (OECD, 2009). Indeed, a similar study by Warland and Mayer that interviewed IT consultants in Switzerland finds limited chances for “interactive learning” in public procurements due to the pre-defined and linear nature of invitation-to-tender (2017, pp. 116–118). Further, Warland and Mayer also find “multi-party systems” as inherent feature of public sector clients projects, which requires suppliers to engage with large number of stakeholders even for projects with relatively low procurement value (2017, pp. 114–116). To mitigate such limitations, they recommend informal communication prior to establishing a procurement process (2017, p. 116). Therefore, it would be useful for public-sector organisations to consider early communication, especially when the knowledge asymmetry is greater between clients and consultancies (Sharma, 1997).

6 *Discussions*

The present study explores the notion of briefing in public procurement of service design in Finland by identifying the key steps and untangling the complexities involved through inductive thematic analysis of interviews, ethnographic observations and documents. The result unveils the ways in which public servants shape the forms and details of service design procurements in cautiously stewarding the process, as well as how the consultants were (un)able to respond to the challenges in briefing with public-sector clients. This section contrasts the lessons from the past literature with new insights and the peculiarities involved in designing services for the public sector.

How the varying proficiency of public organisations resulted in somewhat heightened expectations for projects (Section 4.1) resonate with earlier explorations on the “design ladder” (Ramlau & Melander, 2004) and strategic use of design (Micheli, 2014). Specifically, it touches upon how client companies need to build capabilities and strategies to fully utilise the expertise of design consultants (e.g., Bruce & Jevnaker, 1998). This extends into the literature in procurement and knowledge intensive business services (KIBS) on how expert consulting services represent a major concern for managers in corporations due to the complexity involved in the process (e.g., Smeltzer & Ogden, 2002). Specifying and evaluating the attributes of successful delivery require a high degree of expertise (Haywood-Farmer, 1988; Smeltzer & Ogden, 2002, p. 68), and therefore a client organisation plays as a big role for a

successful outcome as a consultancy does (West, 1997, pp. 8–9). To this end, “a well-informed government is a prerequisite for the success of public procurement” (Chaminade & Vang, 2008, p. 1693).

The *uncertainties* in briefing are closely associated with the common difficulties in design process at an early stage of client-consultant engagements (e.g., Hakatie & Rynänen, 2007, pp. 42–44). Studies in construction surfaced uncertainties during public infrastructure procurements due to the incompleteness of information (e.g., Iimi, 2019) and in association with cost overruns and the time required for implementation in mega projects (e.g., Flyvbjerg, Skamris Holm, & Buhl, 2004). In contrast, the *uncertainties* discerned in this paper (Section 4.4) seem to be induced by the nature of service design process that is co-creative (e.g., Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011; Penin, 2018; Polaine et al., 2013), exploratory (Sangiorgi, D., Prendiville, A., & Jung, 2017), and transformative (e.g., Burns et al., 2006; Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018). As public services are usually provided through a network of organisations (Warland & Mayer, 2017, pp. 114–116), service design consultants often dealt with a large number of stakeholders and users during projects, which introduced further uncertainty into the design process.

The inflexibility in public procurement in altering the course of a project resembles the rigidity in clients’ budgeting in the commercial sector (Park-Lee & Person, 2018a, pp. 78–79). In the public sector, however, re-scoping a project tends to be more challenging due to the legal requirement because a small addition to a project could result in having to initiate a new procurement if the accumulated value rise above national or organisational thresholds (Section 3). This made the scope of service design projects inflexible, and the consultants often had to manage the changes by replacing some tasks or reducing the output in an attempt to avoid increasing the procurement value.

How public servants *minimised communication* during procurements for the sake of impartiality and practicality (Section 4.3) extends one of the general dilemmas in public procurements identified by McCue, Prier, and Swanson (2015). Through a Delphi study with five procurement experts, McCue et al. inferred how the pursuit of flexibility and efficiency for successful outcome in public procurement is often in conflict with transparency, accountability and control (2015, pp. 182–185). The present study adds to this by surfacing how *minimised communication* could sometimes lead to inadequate proposals from service design consultancies due to the limited understanding about their (potential) clients and their needs.

The ways in which service design expertise was bundled with broader mandates in framework agreements present a unique set of challenges for the work of service design consultants (Section 4.2). In such agreements, gaining qualitative user insights and involving users into design processes were

frequently overlooked due to the limited scope, which are often recognised as the primary benefits of engaging with service design expertise (e.g., [Polaine et al., 2013](#); [Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010](#)). Further, without sufficient commitments and regular resources from public-sector clients ([Hyvärinen et al., 2015](#), pp. 258–260), it would be challenging to achieve transformative impact of service design ([Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009](#), p. 8; [Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018](#), p. 98).

7 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The findings in this study benefitted from the openness of public servants in the Finnish public sector, which is renowned for its transparency. The interviewees willingly discussed their procurement practices and shared procurement-related documents for this study. That said, public procurement is a sensitive process for public organisations, as they may face accountability risks when they disclose information to a third party. Accordingly, some public servants postponed and/or declined the requests for interviews and access to naturally occurring data — likely to avoid the possibility of unwittingly disclosing sensitive information to contenders. Further, during the interviews, the public servants emphasised how the selection of tenderers was handled anonymously and systematically (Public_servant_D). Therefore, observing briefing processes first-hand *in situ* may not be feasible as a non-member of a public organisation. However, if practically possible, a focused case study with a longitudinal approach might be fruitful to extend our findings in understanding how a service design procurement is initiated and the dynamics of different experts at play in the process (e.g., [Hyysalo & Hyysalo, 2018](#); [Jensen, 2011](#); [Person et al., 2016](#); [Ryd, 2004](#)). Particularly, future studies could examine how an idea for a procurement is conceived and negotiated by different actors within a public organisation and/or through ‘market consultation’ before a procurement is announced. They could also explore how (potentially) these initiation and negotiation may impact important details of a procurement and the design process in the subsequent project and/or framework agreement.

Service design is pursued by different types of public organisations with a multiplicity of aims. The organisations for which the public servants interviewed for this study worked include publicly-owned company, educational institution, government agency, municipality, and ministry. The aims of the service design procurements identified during this study ranged from improving service experience to innovating service systems ([Burns et al., 2006](#); [Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009](#); [Mager & Alonso, 2017](#), p. 6; [Sangiorgi, 2011, 2015](#); [Sitten & Staszowski, 2016](#), pp. 30–34). As one of the first efforts to examine briefing in public procurements for service design, this study focused on identifying the key steps involved in the process and unveiling the broad professional contexts. To this end, accounting for the different organisational types in the public sector and the varying intentions in procuring service design was outside the scope of the inquiry. Future studies could investigate briefing

in service design procurements with a specific intent and/or in a single type of public organisation and explore how professional contexts in this particular setting may impact the work of service design consultants.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix 1. The topic guide for the interviews in the Consultancy

- How much are you involved in offering/briefing?
 - How are the designers selected for each project?
- Are there notable differences between working with commercial and public-sector clients?
 - What are some of the challenges you have faced in particular when dealing with public-sector clients?
 - What has been the smoothest cases in terms of briefing, and why?
 - What has been the most challenging cases in terms of briefing, and why?
- How does the transition happen from getting the commission to starting the project?
 - What have been the smoothest cases in terms of the transition, and why?
 - What have been the most challenging cases in terms of the transition, and why?
 - How do you review what was accomplished after the project?
- Have there been some projects and/or clients you prefer, and why?
 - What was the most rewarding projects you've done so far, and why?
 - What was the most challenging project you've done so far, and why?
- How would you improve your work for public-sector clients?

Appendix 2. An example of ethnographic field note from this study

27 11 2017

Logistics Cases

→ semi-public

"Communicating Company Policies Through Design"

↑ (1.5 hours heavy)

1916 company

- small independent companies

Long negotiations

semi-public ↔ smaller companies

power dynamics

unexpected outcome:
"openness", outstanding

① internal workshops / frustrated workers attacked, [their language]

② buyers, producers workshop - we did learn something gave something to work on

simple table

(1st) point out all the packages

stronger culture - later merged

additional for [unclear]

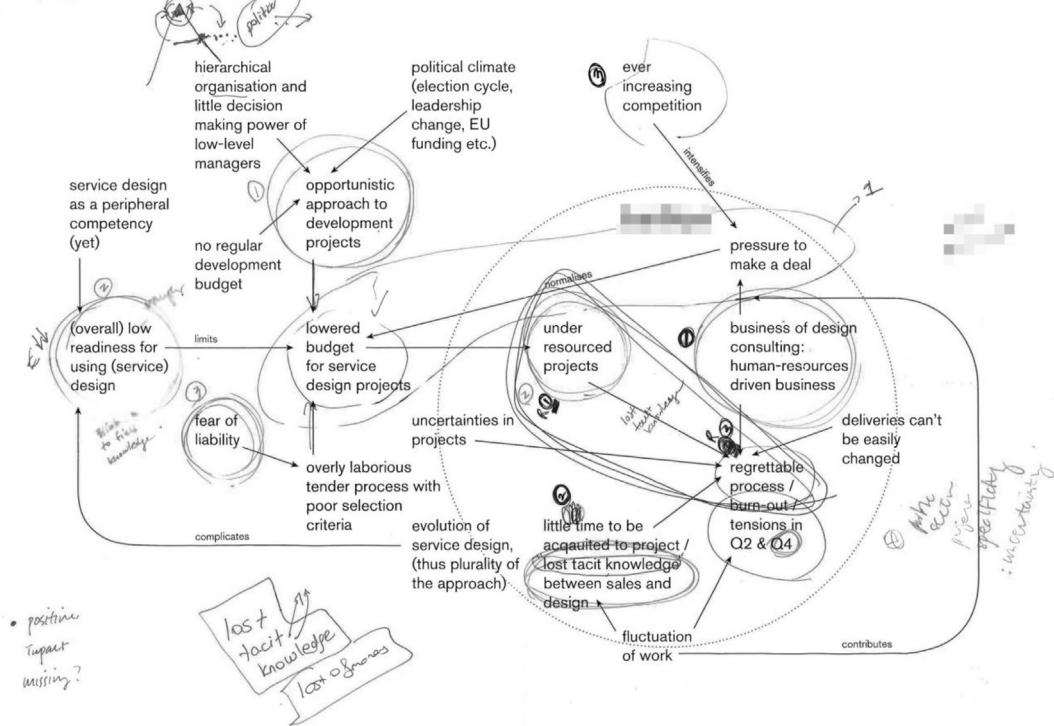
(from [unclear] → [unclear])

70-100 %		
50-69 %		
all 50 %		

workshops: the usual way didn't work - the people were more concerned about [unclear] people

Appendix 3. A research diagram with an interviewee's notes and scribble

✓ Ongoing research material - please do not circulate.



Notes

1. More widely acknowledged as Helsinki Design Lab, the unit has pioneered the strategic use of design in the public sector through a number of projects, including HDL Studios, Design Exchange Programme and Low2No. For more information, visit the website: <http://www.helsinkidesignlab.org/>.
2. Laboratorio de Gobierno represents a new approach to “improve the relationship between citizens and government” through design (Buerkli, 2017). For more information, visit the website (in Spanish only): <https://lab.gob.cl/>.
3. Established at the Office of Personnel and Management of the US federal government, The Lab works across different silos in the federal government for rapid innovation through design (Brown, 2016). It hired 22 employees as of January 2019, of which 13 are designers. For more information, visit the website: <https://lab.opm.gov/>.
4. In Korean: 행정절차법 시행령 (제 25조 2의 신설).
5. Original title in Finnish: Ratkaisujen Suomi – Puolivälin tarkistus: Hallituksen toimintasuunnitelma vuosille 2017–2019.
6. Original title in Finnish: Vaikuttavuuden hankinta.
7. Original title in Finnish: Vaikuttavaa vuoropuhelua!: Opas tulokselliseen muotoilu-hankintaan.

8. Original title in Finnish: Laki julkisista hankinnoista ja käyttöoikeussopimuksista (1397/2016). The Act applies to any procurement item from cleaning services to construction work, except some special sectors, such as water, energy, transport and postal services (1398/2016) and public transportation (869/2009). All public entities are bound to follow the Act in their procurements, including central and local government authorities, churches and state commercial institutions (Part I, Chapter 1, Section 5, *The Act*, 2016).
9. In Finnish: markkinakartoitus
10. The national threshold was 30 thousand euros until the end of 2016.
11. Hankintailmoitukset (www.hankintailmoitukset.fi) – often referred to as Hilma, the official abbreviation in Finnish – is maintained by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö in Finnish).
12. In Finnish: puitesopimus
13. In Finnish: minikilpailutus
14. The Design Exchange Programme was set up by the Strategic Design Unit of the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, more widely known as the Helsinki Design Lab. The unit itself was also a pilot programme that ran between 2009 and 2013. The fund has subsidised 50% of the salary for the designers to work in two municipalities and two ministries: Helsinki; Lahti; the Ministry of Employment and the Economy; and the Ministry of the Environment (For more details, see: [Design Exchange Programme](#), 2013).
15. The Design Driven City programme (Toimiva kaupunki -hanke in Finnish) hired three “city designers” for four participating municipalities and one ministry: Helsinki; Espoo; Kauniainen; Lahti; and the Ministry of Employment and the Economy. The responsibilities of the designers included participating and coaching in ongoing projects of the cities, creating new initiatives that encourage citizen participation and communicate the value of engaging with design and giving consultations for any public servants that wish it (For more details, see: [Aalto](#), 2012).
16. Anne Stenros, former head of design at Kone Elevators, served as the Chief Design Officer for the city of Helsinki until April 2018 (For more details, see: [Bennes](#), 2017; “[Chief Design Officer](#),” 2016).
17. Formed under the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri in Finnish), Inland is a “design and innovation lab” that fosters positive transformation in Migri and beyond by co-designing and creating cross-organisational projects ([Mindset](#), 2017).
18. In Finnish: Kansaneläkelaitos (or often referred to as its abbreviation Kela).
19. Although the exact price may vary depending upon the experience level of a consultant and the severity of competition at the time of each tender, a useful proxy can be found from naturally occurring data. The decision document of one of the procurements examined for this study reveals a mean of 917.5 euros and a median of 1074.5 euros per consultant per day across the prices offered by 19 consultancies. Using these figures, one can estimate that a project with the procurement value of 10 thousand euros would amount to 9 to 11 working days for a service design consultant.
20. Often referred to as SOTE (short for its Finnish name ‘Sote- ja maakuntaudistus’), the reform involves a somewhat controversial political mandate pursued by four consecutive prime ministers transferring the health and social care responsibilities from the existing 295 municipalities to 18 elected regional authorities with a strong inclination towards public-private collaborations. The justification is to accommodate the ageing population and their needs for health and social care and to provide “freedom of choice” to patients who will be able to choose from a range of providers (public and private) for their care by 2019 (“[Yle News explains: What is Sote?](#),” 2017).
21. The Six City Strategy (stylised as 6Aika in Finnish) is a joint strategy for sustainable urban development by the six largest cities in Finland: Helsinki; Espoo; Vantaa; Tampere; Turku; and Oulu. As a part of Finland’s structural fund programme for sustainable growth and jobs 2014–2020, the programme is funded by European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund, the Finnish Government and the participating cities ([Smart Cities Work Together](#), 2014).
22. Translated from Finnish, “digitalisaatio” and “Otetaan käyttöön kokeilukultturi”.
23. Projects for the publicly-owned companies are included in the public-sector column. The data is based on the actual workload without links to either the point of sales or

invoicing. For example, if there was a project worth 100 thousand euros sold for a certain month but only 70% of it was delivered in that month (and the rest in the next month), only 70 k is shown in that month's graph.

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