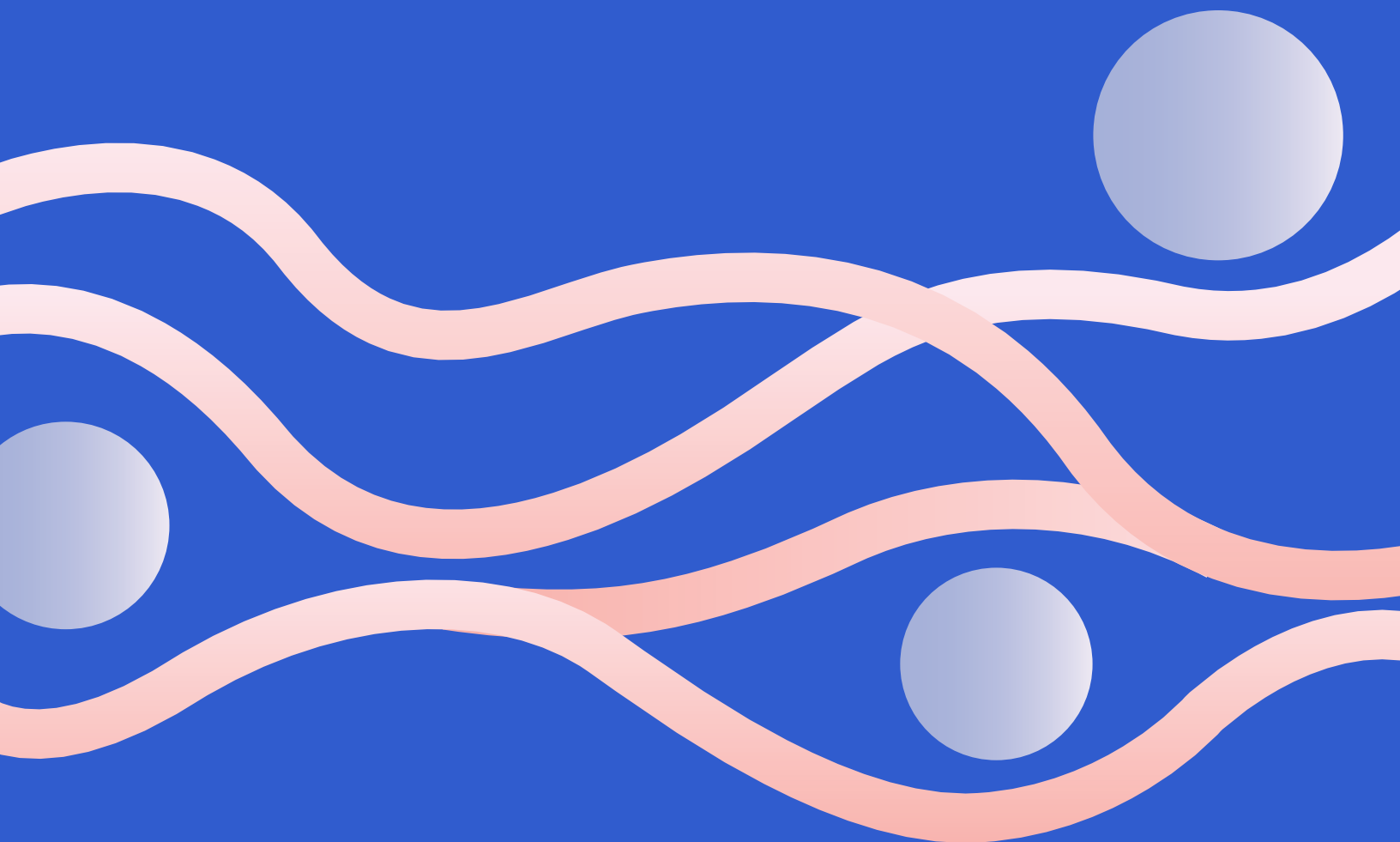
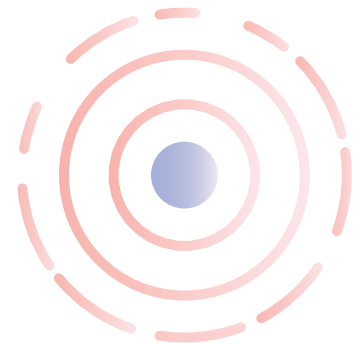
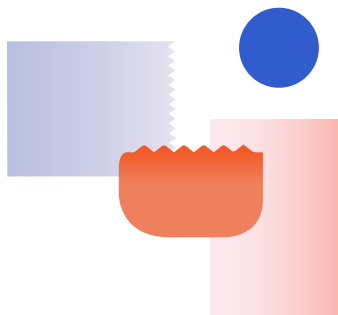
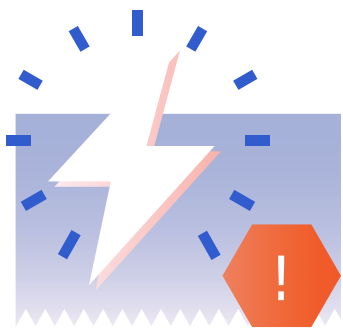


Hacks for Setting the Conditions for Service Design



In January 2019, Linn Vizard, Marie Serrano, and Spencer Beacock interviewed sixteen public servants, mostly working in design-oriented roles in the Canadian context, with the goal of answering the following question: given the unique barriers and constraints of a public sector context, what workaround or hacks are people using to get service design work done?

This document summarizes the insights that emerged from this research, organized in the following categories:



Barriers

Barriers are organizational features in terms of people, culture, and infrastructure that can stand in the way of making service design work in government.

Use these to have a conversation with your team about what's blocking you, where you're getting hung up, or to communicate to a leader exactly what you're struggling with.

Hacks

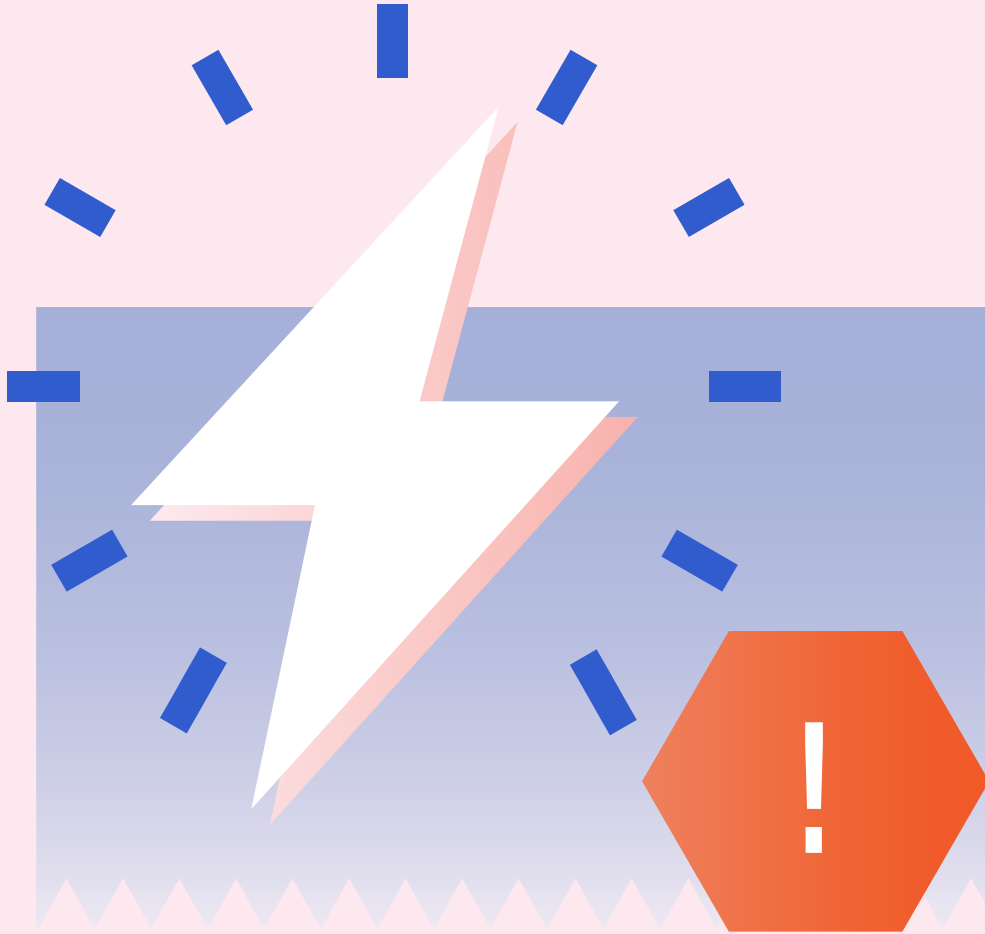
Hacks are formal and informal workarounds for barriers that you face in your work, teams, or organizations.

Use these to spark ideas for how to approach challenges in your context related to starting, scaling, or socializing service design in your organization.

Success Signals

Success signals are qualitative indicators that your hacks are working. You might think of them as conditions for service design growth. You may not need all of them, but you'll definitely need some!

Use these to have a conversation with your colleagues about how strong the conditions are for the practice of service design in your organization.



Barriers

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Talking the Talk Without Walking the Walk

The barrier: Organizations sometimes buy into the hype of design tools without understanding them fully, or having a depth of experience and practice to support their application.

Potential impact: Work may be “design-inspired”; but it can slide into innovation theatre and ultimately disappointment.

“Some people buy into the hype of the new tools and approaches and its excitement without substance. It also leads others to get skeptical.”

Legacy Lock-In

The barrier: Organizations are often locked into certain ways of working, through force of habit, fear of the unknown, or leadership preference.

Potential impact: There can be a notion that what a problem requires is more money or staff, rather than a new approach.

“When people at the top have a way they like to work that tends to trickle down, like the ‘important people’ being paper based.”

Prime Before You Paint

The barrier: Practitioners often find that their host organizations aren’t ready for their ways of working. Culture change and education become crucial.

Potential impact: They need to spend valuable time “merely” training their colleagues, and may not have a lot to show in terms of outcomes/impact.

“We’re not here to train, we’re here to do the work, but to scale we have to be able to build capacity.”

Air-Gapped Organizations

The barrier: Whether because of policy, culture, or structure, organizations can inhibit information sharing or collaboration across internal divisions.

Potential impact: Even with top-down support and bottom-up engagement, silos can be detrimental to cross-channel design, implementation planning, and research dissemination.

“A lot of our methods try to expand the number of people to get a broader perspective — it’s harder to do that operationally if we are going to work in smaller pockets.”

Betrayed by the Buzz

The barrier: Buzzwords and hype can be immediately off-putting for folks who may have experienced a carousel of change/project management approaches.

Potential impact: People may be inclined to identify service design as another fad, especially if they encounter jargon.

“People are skeptical. They think that ‘this is going to go away’; or ‘now it’s about lean!’”

Service Design David vs. Corporate Real Estate Goliath

The barrier: Moving furniture, putting things on the walls, and even noise levels may be restricted. Facilities management may be a cross-department corporate function or even work for the building management itself (and therefore outside of government!).

Potential impact: Failing to find adequate space may make design approaches appear awkward or unpolished with stakeholders, and outside hires may be demoralized by the rigid aesthetics of government.

“We’re talking now of trying to re-org the space. There are weird barriers. For the most part the problem is the building management: there are certain rules about who can move things and how they can be moved.”

No Time for Working Quickly

The barrier: While design approaches might reduce future repetition/failure, time spent on discovery and framing up front is often unworkable. Asking for more “present” time from decision-makers, who are used to being present for 15 or 30 minute chunks, is a non-starter.

Potential impact: Failure to secure adequate time may result in shallow processes that fail to deliver meaningful data or outcomes that depart from the usual tinkering around the edges.

“We say the ‘reframe’ is really important [in design facilitation], and we’ve never seen that happen in a single day... but we rarely get more than a single day.”

Digitally Dated

The barrier: Organizations may have enthusiastically embraced digital transformation in recent years, but not without some growing pains, and may be hesitant to move past this hard-won cultural shift.

Potential impact: These ways of working may clash with service design methods, as they may focus on product-oriented waterfall approaches that can result in a disconnect from end user need.

“Partners see us as giving them a digital solution (not a full service approach), partly due to the Digital First strategy.”

Never Tell Me the Odds

The barrier: Government organizations often approach risk through process and rule-adhesion. They can become fixated on avoiding past risk triggers (such as press attention or public outcry) or the perception of risk, rather than the problem-specific risks that design work can surface.

Potential impact: An unbalanced relationship to risk can make it difficult to fully embrace design approaches beyond the shallow sprint or prototyping session.

“When people have a good idea, the first thing they think is ‘what rule am I breaking’. It’s survival.”

Paperweights, Paper Waits

The barrier: Extensive paperwork, complicated governance structures, and financial constraint can hit teams hard.

Potential impact: Teams find it hard to do the kinds of things their non-government peers do easily, like attend conferences, procure vendors, and even book space for design work.

“Sometimes I have to sacrifice things because we don’t have time to fill in the paperwork.”

A View from the Top

The barrier: Distance in the org chart, operational focuses, and quick turnover can expose teams to turbulence.

Potential impact: A lack of support may reduce exposure around successes, make it more challenging to carve out time, and introduce precarity and barriers to scale.

“We got work and had some impact there, but many rungs down the chain from an ADM who didn’t even know what I was doing, and an Executive Director who barely understood. It was not going to be sustainable.”

Power to the People?

The barrier: Research with actual people is difficult due to a lack of business casing, fear of exposure, lack of understanding of the benefits, recruiting challenges with vulnerable populations, FOI, conflation of user and opinion research, and a lack of readiness to hear what the public thinks.

Potential impact: Failing to engage actual people means solutions will be shallow at best.

“I am still chasing the dream of having citizens core to the team. Part of why I am here is that people don’t know that that’s crazy, they just go ‘oh, that’s hard!’”

Don't Stop Believin'... Because Service Design Is a Journey

The barrier: Selling open-ended discovery may be the biggest challenge; governments are used to projects with a clear end goal. Pre-defined outcomes, like "we'll build you a portal", have sometimes primed decision-makers to expect ready made, cookie cutter solutions.

Potential impact: Shallow processes, low levels of engagement, and misaligned expectations can make service design tough.

"There are a lot of processes for how money gets handed out, but you need to know exactly what the solution will be, which completely doesn't fit with [design approaches]."

Intrapreneurs, Extra Burdens

The barrier: Complicated budget arrangements mean that design teams need to cost-recover or prove the value of their existence. While many practitioners bring deep design skills, one participant identified that they often lack sales skills.

Potential impact: Failure to "sell", either in the literal sense or in terms of broader awareness-building, can make it difficult to land meaningful projects and demonstrate value.

"The way our division was set up, we have a couple of areas in our division that provide services to the rest of the government but we don't have a budget. If you don't have the means then you can have all the executive ground cover you want..."

Quicksand in Committeeland

The barrier: If service design teams allow the pace of their work to slow down, before they know it they find themselves caught up in layers of approvals and committees.

Potential impact: Slow decision-making, layers of unnecessary risk-mitigation, and the perception of taking longer than conventional processes (because in the end, you wind up working in both the old way and the new way).

"As soon as we turn our back, people go back to committee land, so we now stick around past the ideation phase into implementation."

Hook, Line, and Sinker

The barrier: Gaining and retaining talent can be challenging. When hiring externally, cumbersome process, offputting workplace aesthetics (e.g. no Macbooks, beige cubicles, and steering committees), and fundamental mindset mismatches can prove challenging. When hiring internally, there may be an overall lack of expertise in design, or those with the expertise may be untested or too junior.

Potential impact: Teams that aren't set up for the work in terms of skillset, role fit, or working style may struggle to maintain morale.

"As someone coming from a non-government world, it's hard for me to wrap my head around what is hard for them to wrap their head around."

When All You've Got Are Nails, Everything's a Hammer

The barrier: Governments are used to delivering certain kinds of products and leveraging certain skillsets to do that.

Potential impact: Designers may be used ineffectively to deliver conventional government documents (e.g., reports, briefing notes, business cases, etc.) or producing sought service design artifacts that don't provide value for the actual problem solving (e.g., persona or journey map).

"I got tasked with reviewing cabinet reports to improve them before going up the chain. If you're given something bereft, you can only make it so much better."

Credibility Calamity

The barrier: Clients may ignore service design recommendations in favour of recommendations from credible legacy partners (even if those partners have led them astray in the past). Solo practitioners in particular may face more challenges building credibility.

Potential impact: A lack of credibility can make it difficult to move the work forward or tackle larger projects.

"In instances where I felt like we should not implement, partners don't always listen to what you have to say and then refer to someone that has the credibility."

Cult of Personality

The barrier: Service design functions sometimes come into existence because of the unflagging advocacy and energy of one person.

Potential impact: With their departure (and the unravelling of their network), the practice may not be that durable.

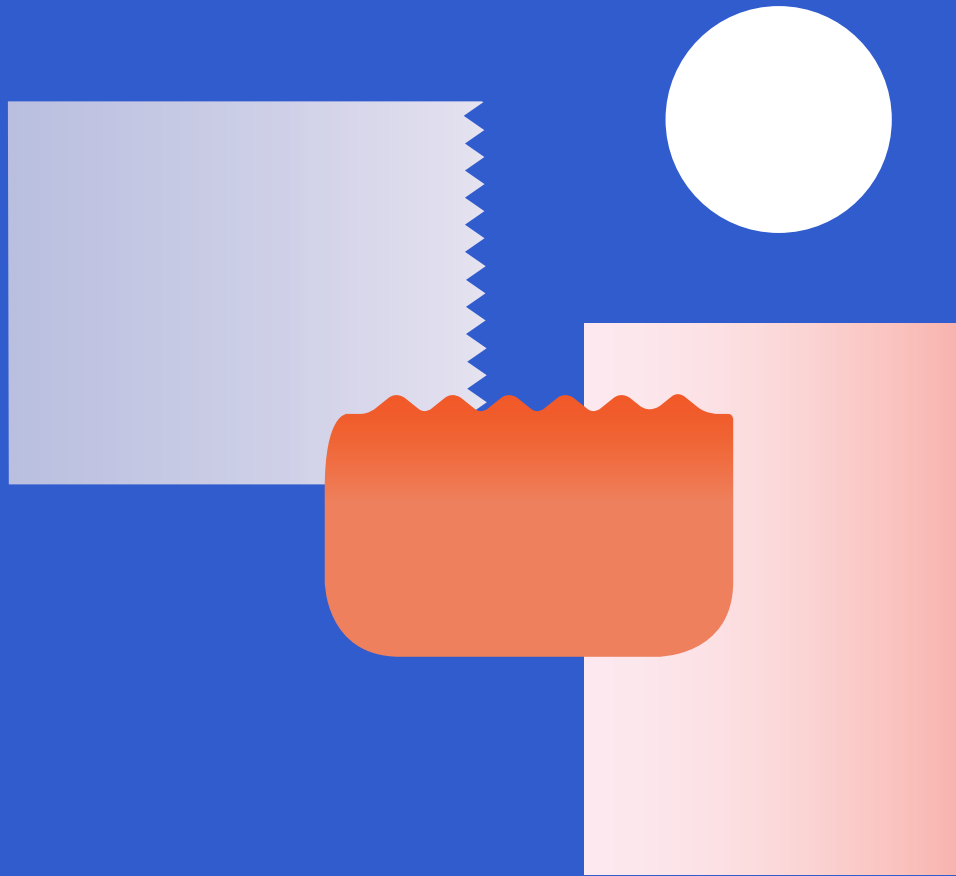
"A lot of this is about me, and I'm very bold. But I worry about what happens if I go away."

Vive le... 9-à-5?

The barrier: Challenges can arise from the clash of cultural norms with the messiness of how service design projects often unfold, such as including the need to work beyond the end of the workday, engage in on-site collaboration, and move past rigid notions of what's "in my job description" and what isn't.

Potential impact: Friction with existing workplace culture (and contractual obligations) can cause service design work to slow down or remain shallow at best.

"My team is unionized. Most of the people around me have set work-from-home days. It can be quite challenging to coordinate."



Hacks

Hacks are formal and informal workarounds for barriers that you face in your work, teams, or organizations.

Use these to spark ideas for how to approach challenges in your context related to starting, scaling, or socializing service design in your organization.

To view hacks generated by workshop participants at the Service Design in Government conference in March 2019, visit <http://october.systems/sdingov2019>

Build Community to Connect Champions, Reduce Isolation, and Expose People to Service Design

There is a craving for community among people trying to do this work in public sector contexts. These hacks aim to help people to not feel isolated and alone, find opportunities to expose people to SD, connect champions, and share best practices.

E.g.: Drop-in open office hours.

"Every Friday we open the door to city staff to come in and meet us or share a problem."

Director, Civic Innovation Lab

Befriend Bureaucracy Hackers to Work the System

Embedding policy people early on can smooth project bumps later. Government "insiders" who know how things work and how to work around them can help to move blockers, (e.g., working with privacy/security experts early).

E.g.: Design Researcher/Policy Pairs

"Find people who have been able to immerse themselves in the policy and bureaucracy and then come up with hacks and workarounds. Have those people embedded with your designer or research from the get-go."

Chief of Design, Federal Government

Find Your Allies and Build Strength in Numbers

Build alliances with allies, advocates and castaways. Ensure you honour the folks who have done this work before you came along. Learn from others before you.

E.g.: Look for the outliers who are frustrated; seek commitment from the top

"We hire castaways, people who are rejected by the formal system for being agitated, tired of how slow the system goes"

Lead, Provincial Government Design Lab

Show AND Tell to Build Buy In

Emphasising showing AND telling can be a way to alleviate fear, build executive support, work around steering committees, and demonstrate the value of what's possible with design approaches.

E.g.: Swap steering committees for show-and-tells

"Some of the partners are in much more formal contexts, so we try to negotiate compromises to avoid all of that to the extreme degree. There are usually a lot of steering committees; we try to avoid that and focus more of things like a show and tells."

Service Designer, Provincial Government

Build Relationships to Create Trust

Trust is a crucial ingredient for success, and it's natural for people to feel threatened when you're asking them to change: different is difficult.

E.g.: Accessible leaders

"In one provincial department, the Chief Digital Officer and Deputy Minister is available on Slack."

Service Designer, Provincial Government

Find Ways to Scaffold People's Thinking and Make Design Accessible

Public servants may want instruction manuals or steps. Providing playbooks or repositories to support people's approach and build confidence can help.

E.g.: High-level guides/playbooks; workbook for design sprints

"The Alberta Health Services Lab created a workbook that has all the boxes you need to fill as part of a design sprint. You still need facilitation, but it's a nice takeaway."

Design Strategist, Provincial Government Ministry

Break Work into Manageable Chunks in Order to Enable Participation

Participation in design work might need to be "chunked up or down" in order to work in context. You might need to experiment to find the right chunk level.

E.g.: 2-hour executive deep dives

"When we first started executive deep dives in Energy, we asked for a whole day session [...]. It was hard to get them to focus and meaningfully pay attention. So we moved to half days. It immediately improved uptake. Then we went to 2 hours - they said this is great, we're going to scale it out to our Executive Directors."

Director of Design, Provincial Government

Adjust Designer's Expectations to Celebrate Small Wins

Change in government is slow, and it will be frustrating at times. Focus on progress over perfection.

E.g.: Project retrospectives with partners

Build in time for retrospectives where project partners articulate how the approach made them think differently

Senior Service Designer, Provincial Government

Use Workarounds for Research with Citizens

Research with users can be a challenge in government. Find ways to work within the limitations you face.

E.g.: Embedding user research in Cabinet submissions; leverage external partners who have an easier time connecting with end users

"User research has been embedded in internal templates in the Ontario Government since late 2018."

**Design Team Manager,
Federal Government**

Enable Clear Expectations at Every Level of the Work

Alignment phases, clear engagement models, and granular expectation setting at the level of every session or meeting help to enable the work.

E.g. Clear engagement models

"We define a clear engagement model with our project partners – stages we go through, people, time commitment for every resource."

**Senior Business Consultant,
Provincial Government**

Model Collaborative, Vulnerable, and Flat Ways of Working in Order to Normalise Them

By modelling ways of working that are different from business as usual, you can normalise them. This means teams that are (more) flat, collaborative, and vulnerable. Doing this helps confront the inherent motivations and assumptions of everyone you are working with, from the tools you work with to the way you interact. It forces individuals to question themselves and the way they work with others.

E.g.: Show vulnerability; behave as equal members of a team, even with senior leaders; model collaboration and flatness even when briefing people like Assistant Deputy Ministers or Deputies

"It's helpful having a few people on the team that are more willing to be vulnerable than others. Standing up when you feel shitty, people who trust themselves to be vulnerable in front of group, normalizes it."

**Employee Experience Lead,
Provincial Government**

Make Do with the Space You Have

While custom built collaborative/ design spaces can be fantastic, there are ways to work around less ideal situations.

E.g.: The “trolley toolkit”

“We didn’t have a dedicated space and weren’t able to tuck things away so we had a trolley with all the key tools and materials for everyone to use (e.g., markers, sticky notes, …)”

Policy Resident, Provincial Government

Use Signs and Signals to Break Out of Business as Usual

There are certain cues that indicate “new” ways of working, that can manifest in space, tools, external communication. All of these give people clues that this really is different. This can be joyful or scary.

E.g.: Stickers on Macbooks

“Showing up to a meeting with a Mac, covered in stickers is powerful. It makes people think: wow you really are different, and I want to be part of your team. Appearances do matter.”

Chief of Design, Federal Government

Translate Between Government and Design in Order to Get the Job Done

Help translate government language for designers, and translate design language for folks in government.

E.g.: Translated job postings

“Have an external-facing job ad, then share the official job description once the hiring process is complete.”

Executive design leader, Provincial Government

Find the Right Partners to Help Move the Needle

Be selective about the type of projects and partnerships that are right for this type of work. Be clear about the right criteria for partners. Explore these through conversation/discussion.

E.g.: Project score cards; partnership assessment conversations

“We use project scorecards. Criteria for a good project include access to data and an opportunity to prototype. We also have partner scorecards: we’re looking for people who want change beyond status quo, and opportunities to engage with residents.”

Director of a Civic Innovation Lab



Success Signals

Success signals are qualitative indicators that your hacks are working. You might think of them as conditions for service design growth. You may not need all of them, but you'll definitely need some!

Use these to have a conversation with your colleagues about how strong the conditions are for the practice of service design in your organization.

Embed the Practice in the Work

Demonstrated impact

Case studies and evidence generated in the design process are communicated in a way that demonstrates the impact of the service design approach and enable in-house practitioners to gain confidence and credibility.

Managerial engagement

Managers are involved in scoping and driving service design projects in the organization and take action on the insights uncovered.

A safe environment

Teams are given the required time and mental space to conduct service design work, away from operations and bureaucracy. Trust and collaboration amongst the team is at the forefront of any project.

Eroded silos

Service design projects congregate multiple teams and enable horizontal work across units/branches/ministries.

Evaluated opportunities

Potential projects and partnerships are critically evaluated to ensure service design approaches are applied to the right opportunities.

Accelerate Adoption in the Organization

An embedded approach	<i>Rather than implementing service design in a “purist” form, these approaches and tools are adapted and embedded in the fabric of the organization and its existing practices.</i>
Leadership advocacy	<i>Leadership demonstrates their knowledge of the service design approach and visibly support its implementation throughout the organization.</i>
An inclusive practice	<i>Transparency and a shared understanding of the value and language of the service design methodology demystify the practice and allows individuals in the organization to contribute.</i>
Organizational trailblazers	<i>The design team has the capacity and legitimacy to take on the perceived risks associated with their work (e.g., challenging orthodoxies, engaging the public) the way an external party would be set up to do.</i>
Fostered difference	<i>Enthusiasm, willingness to try, and can-do attitude are encouraged, and individuals or teams are empowered to challenge orthodoxies in their day-to-day work.</i>
Awareness of the organizational structure	<i>The design team is aware of the strengths and risks of their position in the organization and leverage existing resources available to them to create a sustainable model/practice.</i>
Internal and external alliances	<i>Service design champions are connected across the organization and foster partnerships with external practitioners to advance the practice.</i>

Establish and Enable the Team

In-house capacity

The organization actively builds internal service design capacity (training, hiring, etc.) and instills confidence in people that have the required skills in-house.

Humility in the practice

The design team is genuine about their skill set and experience, and takes on projects that reflect the maturity of their practice and perceived credibility in the organization.

Dedicated physical space

The design team is provided with the appropriate tools and physical space to conduct service design activities in a collaborative way.

A safe environment

Teams are given the required time and mental space to conduct service design work, away from operations and bureaucracy. Trust and collaboration amongst the team is at the forefront of any project.

Awareness of the organizational structure

The design team is aware of the strengths and risks of their position in the organization and leverage existing resources available to them to create a sustainable model/practice.

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