Make Space for the Customer: The Shift towards Customer Centricity

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Abstract. Companies need to understand what their products and services do for their customers. But how can we encourage the organizations that we work for to concentrate more on the needs of their customers and end users? How can we inspire each other to deliver more innovative products?

In this paper, we will discuss the impact of Design Thinking, facilitated by User Experience Design (UxD) on different levels and divisions of an organization and show how UxD can help support an organization's shift towards customer centricity.

Keywords: Innovation, Design Thinking, Customer Experience, User Experience.

1   Introduction

Peter Drucker famously stated that "the single most important thing to remember about any enterprise is that there are no results inside its walls. The result of a business is a satisfied customer". [1] This assertion is just as valid today as it was back then. And user experience in enterprise software is probably the field with most potential for improvement regarding customer experience and satisfaction.

Within the last decade, many large software companies such as Microsoft and SAP have introduced common user-centered design processes in their organizations, aligning these methods in their respective software engineering processes. This development shows that User Experience is indisputably a critical quality factor in software development, and it acknowledges that customers expect effortless, engaging interaction with desktop and web applications.

As a user experience designer, you have probably sat through numerous meetings where someone involved in your project expected you to make things "nicer looking" or "easier to use". Maybe someone was discussing innovation in the context of "really cool" features, like the Cover Flow technology in Apple iTunes® for example. Most likely you have sighed and felt that, once again, your profession is not being taken seriously. As professionals we know that creating software that is innovative and generates an enjoyable user experience is more difficult than many companies and stakeholders appreciate.

So what is innovation and how does it relate to design thinking? According to Schumpeter [2], innovation is the commercial or industrial application of something

new, a new product, process or method of production. He makes a distinction between innovation and invention, as the latter merely encompasses new ideas, whereas innovation involves the commercial application as well as the new idea.

Design Thinking [3] is a methodology that facilitates the identification of user and customer needs and the creation of potential solutions addressing these needs. It can also be seen as a creative problem-solving approach that can be applied to all kinds of problems. According to Brown, the cyclic, iterative process that is always a team activity encompasses the three phases Inspiration, Ideation, and Implementation. During the Inspiration phase, the team defines the problem and conducts research by observing and interviewing members of the target audience. The insights are shared in a group setting, ideally a project room. In the Ideation phase, the team brainstorms all possible types of ideas and creates prototypes that are validated and iterated. Once the team has agreed on the solution approach, the Implementation phase starts; this is when the solution is turned into a real product or service.

The Design Thinking approach [3] has been around since 2008, and looking closely, it doesn't seem that difficult to apply. While this approach works very well at IDEO, the company that Brown invented the concept for, working in a large enterprise setting has its own special challenges.

2   Impact on Different Organizational Levels

How does design thinking work in a large enterprise? Several factors must be considered when promoting design thinking within the enterprise to ensure the delivery of a product that fits the needs of customers and end users and, according to Schumpeter [2] provides value to customers.

Let's start at the executive level. As we all know, it is crucial to campaign for executive support because board members have to understand the importance of User Experience Design as a strategic engagement. We can achieve this by demonstrating the value of UxD within selected strategic projects that receive respective funding and resources. We also have to follow certain best practices, such as validating designs early and often, and making the results accessible throughout the organization. Most executives are indifferent towards the particulars of our profession, but are interested in how we can help create revenue. So we have to rephrase our message and emphasize the benefits; usability issues are of secondary importance here.

It is still surprising how many UxD teams have limited or no exposure at all to their sales and marketing departments. However it is precisely these people with whom we need to share our results; it is important to emphasize the value added for customers and end users and the direct relationship between this added value and an organization's strategic objectives [4, 5].

All of the above can help to increase visibility. However, the executive level is in charge of promoting a corporate design culture and together with upper management levels, they need to provide the guidance that encourages employees to embody this vision and act upon it. This needs to be a mandate and requires cultural change.

On an operational level, UxD quality criteria need to be an integral part of the product development process.

In many cases, user experience designers undertake quality assurance work in development projects and find that, once they identify usability issues, these are not acted upon; problems that they discover may not be easily solvable due to technical restrictions or other important features that would otherwise be compromised. As a consequence, the product remains hard to use. To counter this, we need to establish that:

- UxD is part of the product definition phase [6]
- Product concept including information architecture and product design vision is defined before development starts
- Nothing is implemented that does not meet known and proven customer needs
- Following UxD specifications is a major requirement for development colleagues
- The assignment of UxD staff to projects follows project management best practices (such as assigning pairs of usability experts to one project instead of splitting individuals over multiple projects)
- Usability is part of the quality assurance procedure and major usability defects have to be fixed prior to release

Irrespective of the development method (either traditional or agile) User Experience resources need to be involved in projects from the very beginning. If this is not possible, they'll only be there to limit the damage. This pre-phase can be a funding gate that cannot be crossed without executive sign-off before real coding starts [6].

Moving on to the next organizational level down, we'll now look at the UxD managers, the ones that assign UxD resources to various development projects and take the decisions that affect the design staff on a day to day basis. The biggest challenge for UxD managers is to ensure that user experience designers are embedded in projects where user experience is likely to have the greatest impact on product success and thus provide the most customer value.

Nieters et al. [7] offer a good set of criteria that help to identify such strategic projects:

- Product team receptivity. The product team itself requests support from UxD, rather than have it imposed upon it by management. If a product team is ambivalent, the UxD group disengages
- Potential revenue or cost savings. The UxD group seeks projects that they anticipate will see a significant revenue increase in the first year
- Advanced or emerging technology – a new technology that has not yet been introduced to the market, so the UxD group can make a larger impact than on legacy products
- Leveraging the respective user experience standards (user interface guidelines). If a product team does not intend to adopt these standards, the UxD group will not assign resources
- High visibility. If a project is a "pet project" of a cross-functional or highly visible organization within the company, the UxD group is more willing to accept it

- Point in the product lifecycle. If design has already begun, it is often too late to impact a product's overall experience on a fundamental level. There are times when the UxD group agrees to work on a project through multiple iterations, starting late in one cycle to impact a subsequent release
- Realistic time-to-market demands. If project schedules make delivering a high-quality user experience impossible, the UxD group is less likely to accept the project.

The UxD managers should also act as facilitators for cultural and process change. They should be assessed by the value of customer insights that get used, adopted, and implemented across the organization [8].

However, it's not just the organization around us that has to change; we as user experience professionals also need to change in order to help transform the organization in way that we call "making space for the customer".

Every member of a company's User Experience Design team needs to shoulder responsibility for satisfying its customers. User experience professionals can glean customer insight by employing user-centered design methods and carrying the results through the product development process. This helps to promote customer centricity by facilitating the adoption of user-centered design methods, tools, and deliverables and encouraging fellow team members to do likewise.

In this regard, SAP has introduced the role of Ux Advocate in product and Scrum teams. Colleagues from development and product management are taking over Ux tasks, helping to scale the user-centered design process within the context of agile development. The Ux Advocates are embedded within a team of ten and receive coaching from members of the Ux team, ensuring that they ask the right questions: who are the end users, what goals are they working towards, and what tasks do they perform?

In addition, the recently established customer engagement initiative (CEI) – enables SAP project teams to engage more easily with customers in all phases of product development, from invent to implement – helps drive the shift towards customer-centricity.

It's not just actual product designs created in the design process that benefit the customer experience. Many other artifacts are generated that can help market a product successfully. Establishing a persona and scenario library, has, for instance proven a useful practice at OpenText; all relevant stakeholders, such as product management, sales enablement, marketing – and even training services – can search for and find information. OpenText uses its personas consistently from development through to marketing of products, including the definition of demo scenarios for new software releases. This is consistent with Watson [8] from Wells Fargo stressing that it is crucial to keep real people and their stories at the center of product development. Wells Fargo accomplished this by creating consumable and reusable UCD tools – key tools such as user profiles and user task models, actionable by their connection to so-called "scenario starters" – to communicate with different audiences. Instead of formal training sessions, Wells Fargo's Ux team shared methods across the organization, allowing stakeholders to engage with these reusable UCD tools without recourse to the design team.

3   Conclusion

User Experience Design is a strategic topic that interfaces with many other divisions in an organization. Generally perceived as a service provider to development, it is actually a source of insights about customer needs, insights that are the basis for creating great products, customer, and end user experiences. Deploying UxD across the enterprise requires management support, strategic engagements, and cross-departmental collaboration. It also requires us as UxD professionals to think and act strategically. Customers should continue to demand better experiences that will help us to change the company culture and structure.

When we talk about "making space for the customer" we are referring to space in the heads and hearts of our colleagues. After all, it takes an entire company to deliver a great user experience.

Based on our own experience, and borrowing from the relevant published recommendations [3, 9], we have identified the following set of principles that you can implement to make space for your customers:

Make yourselves easy to use! Make it easy to consume as well as to refer to customer insights. Make your deliverables stakeholder-centered. Show how the insight fits in the process, create empathy by letting people feel what frustrates as well as what delights customers and end users; show them, instead of telling them.

Get there early! When working on new projects, aim to get there ahead of time – be involved from the beginning, during the research and ideation phases. Be a facilitator, and provide access to customer insights.

Create a vision! Describe how becoming customer-centered encompasses multiple product aspects. Look at what is needed in a project and learn from your stakeholders, and let them learn from you, but without causing bad feelings or setting up communication barriers.

Leave your silo! Cross collaborate with Sales, Marketing, Product Management, as well as development and be willing to share and gain insights. Work with the customer intelligence team or the colleagues at your company who measure customer satisfaction.

Get strategic! Refer to User Experience Design as a strategic engagement that should be reflected on different organizational levels, and look and campaign for executive support.

Give and share credit! When a project is successful, make sure to be there to take and share the credit, as the value provided by user-centered design needs to be made transparent to the audience. They like your product – excellent, let them know what made it so great. Share the credit, again, across the organization.

Measure success! User experience professionals should get assessed in their capacity as facilitators, the value of insights that get used, and methods that are adopted across the organization to drive cultural and process change should be appreciated and communicated.

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