Designing Our Studio: Reflections on Our Fall 2017 Office Hours

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Some of our Office Hour Attendees

At least twice a week, since launching the Civic Service Design Studio last October, we have been able to sit down with a variety of public servants to learn about the innovative work happening inside New York City Government.

We have reserved this time, which we call Office Hours, to invite colleagues working in government to our studio to talk about what they are tackling in order to provide project-based advice and explain how they can use the Civic Service Design Tools + Tactics in their everyday work. They are informal sessions, which some have described as "therapeutic," and any government employee can sign up for one online—but you have been warned that they fill up fast!

Since our launch, the Service Design Studio has held 36 Office Hours—engaging with 26 New York City government agencies and offices, three governments outside of NYC, three universities, and four nonprofits.

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Why Office Hours?

Our team sees the Service Design Studio as a constantly evolving design challenge. One that we have developed using the principles and methods of service design and will to continue to adapt informed by the needs of the public servants we serve. As group of designers, we know that understanding these needs is best achieved by talking with those who use our products and services.

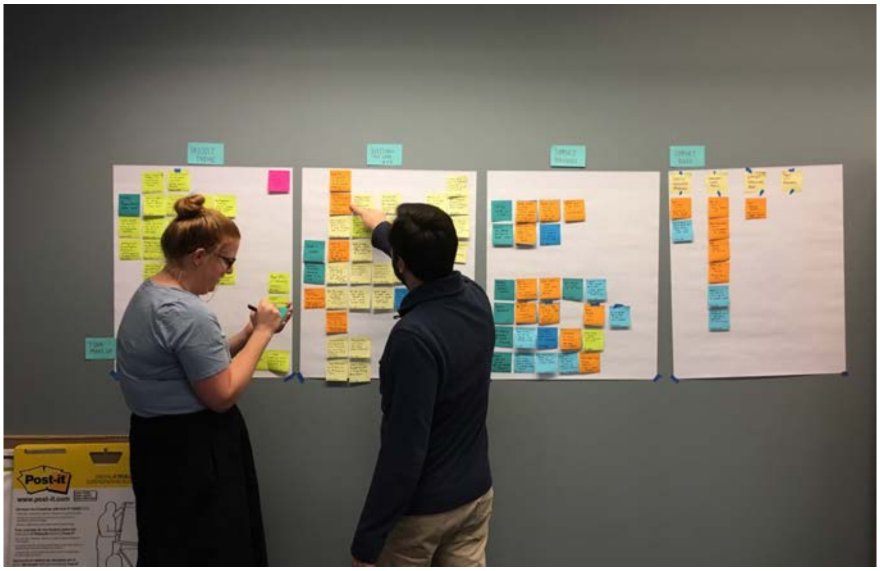
Which makes Office Hours a win-win. Yes, this time was designed with the intention of providing one-on-one support to government agencies and nonprofits, but these sessions have also provided a recurring opportunity to learn about the challenges that public servants face and test our own assumptions about how to effectively support those curious about applying service design to their own work. During each session, we take notes—highlighting key takeaways or useful observations, which we keep organized in spreadsheet and revisit before determining new service offerings.

Reflection Before Iteration

As we come to the end of our first quarter as a studio, we are transitioning from a period of data collection towards one of synthesis. Taking time to connect the dots, or in other words, unpack what we have heard in each Office Hour session to refine our strategy and offerings based on what we have learned.

In December, the team spent some time individually reviewing the notes from each Office Hour, and came together for a synthesis workshop each armed with a stack of post-its full of observations. You can only imagine how much we learned from over 36 conversations! In this workshop, we sorted what we heard into themes and patterns.

In 2018, we will continue to build on the themes below—turning our observations into insights—to inform how we structure and operate our two new 2018 service offerings: Designing for Opportunity, our open call for partnerships and our forthcoming workshop series.



Team Office Hour Synthesis Workshop

What We've Learned (So Far)

Project Topics

Attendees came to Office Hours to discuss a wide range of project topics.
A few notable themes included:

- Testing a program, service, or design concept
- Creating enhancements to scale existing programs and services
- Streamlining department processes and facilitating new ways of working
- Planning communications campaigns for behavioral change
- Building toolkits and guides that are useful to people
- Building new digital products
- Expanding capabilities and use cases for existing digital products

- Designing trainings and workshops

Support Requested

Attendees sought support with:

- **Embedding a "design approach" into program and request for proposal (RFP) scoping.** Office Hour attendees spoke about the desire to ensure they are creating project scopes (both for internal teams and consultants) that harness the principles of service design.
- **Designing and conducting user research.** While many Office Hour attendees understood the value of user research, they are overwhelmed with how to practically carry it out. Attendees expressed the following constraints:
- A limited understanding of how to design a field research process
- Defining the right kind of people to talk to
- Time constraints to plan and conduct research
- Balance between ad hoc (chatting with colleges about their experience) as well as formal (formalized research study) engagements
- Getting buy-in from leadership
- **Building stakeholder buy-in through co-design.** Office Hour attendees also were looking for guidance on how to better collaborate with and create alignment between partners and service providers. Attendees cited co-design as a challenge for a few key reasons:
- Limited understanding or awareness of a formal co-design process
- Limited workshop planning and facilitation skills; (i.e. an over-reliance of showing people things for approval rather than generating concepts together)
- Lack of time and/or power to organize a representative group of stakeholders
- Hesitation to disrupt current ways of working

- Operating “solo” without a team to amplify need for co-design
- **Getting feedback on an early stage prototype.** A variety of Office Hour attendees brought frameworks, low-fidelity mock-ups, or testing plans for the Service Design Studio to review and provide feedback on. Attendees sought advice on how to refine their prototypes or how to adapt them to collect feedback from partners at brainstorm meetings.
- **Iterating from Version One to Version Two.** A select number of Office Hour attendees came for Office Hours while transitioning from the current iteration of a program or digital product to the next. Attendees sought guidance on how to effectively synthesize lessons learned and apply them to the next iteration.
- **Selecting and working with design vendors.** Office Hour attendees often requested advice to better work with design vendors. Conversations about design vendors included: how to select (and where to find) the right vendor, what to include in a request for proposals (RFP) for a smooth and successful collaboration, and how to ensure quality of deliverables after contracting.
- **Connecting and de-siloing design work happening in the city.** A variety of Office Hour attendees wanted to learn more about our the nature of our work at NYC Opportunity, both related to service design and our digital products. Attendees also shared how their departments currently use design tools and techniques and/or expressed a desire to unite design efforts.

Support Provided

After hearing the needs of each attendee, the Service Design Studio generally provided the following categories of support:

Implementing service design methods

- **Greater clarity, depth, and nuance to the Tools + Tactics guide.** Office Hours presented an opportunity to point attendees to specific Tools + Tactics that could be applied to their specific needs. The two tactics that have the Studio has most frequently recommended are Set the Stage and Talk with People.

- **Reframing Set the Stage.** The team outlined specific design activities to help an individual's early-stage thinking or institutional knowledge onto paper into foundational project artifacts. Landscape Reviews and Stakeholder Maps were referenced as great tools to clarify project boundaries and align teams around shared definitions early on in projects.

- **Operationalizing Talk with People.** Attendees often struggled getting started talking to their users. First, the Studio clarified the goals and scale of "talking to people." Many attendees assumed that if you wanted to talk to people it meant conducting a formal research study (with numerous focus groups or structured surveys). When in reality, talking to people can be "quick and dirty" to help check assumptions throughout phases of a project.

- We also helped attendees understand what kinds of people are most valuable to talk to (i.e. guiding attendees towards talking to clients and front-line service providers, not just the normal high-level policy makers).

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Supporting teams and deliverables

- **Tactical project-based advisory.** The Studio also provided tactical feedback for attendees on specific project components. This category of support focused on the following:

- **Directly commenting on artifacts** such as user-testing protocols, surveys, strategy frameworks, and RFPs. the Studio has been reviewing these artifacts in person during the Office Hour or through a few rounds of feedback via email.

- **Helping teams prepare for multi-stakeholder collaborations.** This included helping teams set meeting objectives, creating design activities to fit within specific time allocations, providing tips on facilitation, and making worksheets for collecting participant feedback. The Studio has held a few "follow-up" Office Hours with two teams interested in gaining deeper experience with specific co-design activities.

- **Facilitating a creative space for team brainstorming and problem-solving.** Giving teams an hour of unstructured time to talk through their project helped them work through roadblocks or brainstorm new ideas related to their projects.

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Building a community of practice

- **Translating design methods and knowledge.** The Studio has helped attendees understand how design can be applied in the context of government. This support often includes:
- **Providing an overview of key design methods, theories, and ways of working.** With the Studio's design expertise and pulse on proven methods and emerging trends. The team offered knowledge for non-designers in government by breaking down jargon-filled design theories into practical and actionable approaches to addressing complex problems..
- **Supporting design in government**. By exploring design resourcing options within different agencies the Studio helped attendees find creative solutions to bringing design into their departments through a mix of internal capacity and contracting with vendors.
- **Sharing resources, examples, or best practices.** The Studio shared relevant best practices or shining examples from other governments or social contexts with attendees to show how design has been used to tackle similar challenges.

We will be revisiting and adapting these reflections as we continue to hold Office Hours. We also plan to regularly post about the process of designing the Service Design Studio and how we apply the Tools + Tactics to our own work.

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What would you like to learn about our approach to designing our Studio?

Send us a note