



If Not Humans, Then What's At the Center?

188 million results. This is the number of hits you get when you Google “Human-Centered Design.” While obviously very popular, I have to wonder, “just how did we get so far off course that we need to be reminded to keep the humans who use our technology at the core of our design?” And, if not the humans, then we really should ask, “just what are we centering our designs around?” When I served as the deputy chief information officer for a large state, I oversaw project managers, business analysts, and countless contractors who spent hours upon hours in joint application development sessions, developing user stories, collecting requirements, and working hard, *with humans*, to set a path to success. Yet somewhere between our good intentions and implementation, projects turned from “This will increase efficiency” to “Oh my, what have we done?”

Since each project started with talking to the humans, it would stand to reason that we simply did not build what they said they wanted. Except we did ... we just built it on the wrong questions. When we ask about current system limitations and desired features to build the requirements, we end up with system-centered technology improvements and not necessarily work improvements. The more we focus on the technology, the further away we get from the human work.

If you consider the systems that many of us have today, you would think that we would have gotten the following human feedback when we first embarked upon the new information technology (IT) project and asked the simple question, “What would a successful IT system result in?”



From front-line staff:

It would be great if the new software was set up to constantly remind me of all the work that I had no time to get to yesterday, and no hope of getting to today. Maybe include ticklers, alerts, and hundreds of daily emails that all say I am late, I'm further behind, and I am inadequate. What would be even better is if everyone could see my performance and we could be regularly rated against one another to really drive home the embarrassment.

From managers:

The new system should be deadline based. Data should only show us work that has missed an arbitrary timeframe. It should not account for the individuality of the families we serve, but force

standardization at the expense of customer satisfaction. This will help us maintain a constant state of reaction, forcing us to always chase the oldest work and doomed to fight never-ending fires caused by unique life circumstances that will not fit into a box without a variance.

From clients and customers:

Can you make your system so complex that there is no way I can navigate it on my own and will be forced to call, or come in, anyway? If there is information that only pertains to some people, will you ask it in a way that makes me feel like I am missing something key that I should know? Will you make it hard to find, so just accessing the application

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will be exhausting? And I really enjoy being frustrated, so will you make sure that I can only get 85 percent of what I need from the system and require human interaction that could have been done up front and avoided any need for me to log on all together?

The truth is no one ever gives such responses when asked about a new IT system, yet it is often where we end up. Unfortunately, to correct our course, we look to... the next IT system upgrade, where we swear we won't make the same mistakes. To really get on track, we have to take the focus off the technology and instead find better ways to do our work.

True human-centered design *cannot begin in our IT systems*. Instead it begins in redesigning how we work and how we manage workflow. That means human-centered business process redesign that examines if we are working the right way to help families achieve better results. It means teaching supervisors to stop using data to manage deadlines, or as an accountability ruler smacking the knuckles of employees, and, instead, begin using it to manage workflow and innovate.

It is not the human element we have lost; it's the focus on process. When we spend all of our efforts on updating the technology, we make the system the center of design and miss the real

opportunity to radically change and improve how we work.

Technology automates our processes, adds cool features, makes us mobile, and should provide data insights galore. But it's almost always based on how we work today—and not focused on how we could work better tomorrow. To get better results, first we need to design the processes to work for the human customers and employees. Then we can use the technology to support that design. 

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nearly a fifth of applicants were not taking the final step to submit.

Focusing on that last screen, analysts discovered an opportunity to improve the user interface. While a toolbar at the top of that screen told users that their applications were 100 percent complete, users actually still needed to “submit” their applications by clicking a button at the bottom of the screen. Some users skipped scrolling down far enough to discover that button. It took only a few hours of analysis and discussion to identify this opportunity and improve the design, helping prompt more clients to successfully submit their applications online.

Another H/HS agency used HCD to respond to a significant volume of changes being introduced to its programs at a time when resources and timing were tight. The agency focused on groups that would feel the greatest impact from these changes, including those who would see their renewal periods extended, those who would see their premium payments extended, and those who were involved in multiple programs. The agency used these data to map the way information would flow when it communicated

with clients about those changes. The map helped to streamline communications and create a consistent cross-channel experience, especially for people who might otherwise be overwhelmed or confused by all the messages they received about changes to their benefits.

How can you bring in the human perspective during isolation? Engage citizens digitally.

The HCD approach aims to develop solutions that are viable for the provider's organization, desirable for users and other stakeholders, and technologically feasible. To find this point of intersection, designers often rely heavily on field interviews, focus groups, observations, and workshops. As the pandemic has made physical interaction all but impossible, many designers have quickly expanded their toolkits to include more digital methods. Not only can those methods promote safety, but they can help researchers reach underrepresented populations in remote locations and can eliminate the time and expense usually devoted to travel.

One state used email to survey program participants about their digital experience when applying for Medicaid and food assistance. The agency received an overwhelming response. Many participants offered contact information, allowing researchers to conduct more in-depth phone interviews. This strategy helped researchers obtain a robust sample, with representation from across the state.

Another state, while designing a new digital strategy, wanted to hear from a broad cross-section of residents about their digital needs and experiences. Researchers engaged a digital market research firm that recruits participants online and provides tools for virtual interviews, digital journaling, and online focus groups. This approach let researchers collect the information they needed in less than two weeks.

How can you get to better solutions faster? Prototype and test often.

Typical design workflows move from ideation, to prototyping, to testing. But when an agency needs to move quickly to protect citizens' well-being, it can use rapid prototyping