

Dead or alive: How municipalities can use service design tools to create live services that are flexible, mindful and involving

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Abstract

Regional service innovation is an emerging and important topic within the European Union. According to the OECD it is becoming ever more crucial for each European municipality to support collaborations between regional stakeholders in order to be innovative and competitive. But collaborations between large municipalities with fixed service routines and small flexible SMEs are challenging. In this paper we argue that service design and service designers' knowledge about different techniques can act as a new approach for municipalities to interact with SMEs in a creative way. As an example of this, the paper describes experiences from a workshop where service designers, SMEs and Swedish municipalities prototypes a visual mapping activity. From this first pilot study we learned that visual mapping is an activity that makes it possible for municipalities to step out of their standardised service routines and step into a more involving and flexible service offering.

KEYWORDS: participatory activity mapping, design tools, service routines

Introduction

In this exploratory case study we introduce the concept of participatory activity mapping (PAM) and explore its potential of acting as a new service strategy for Swedish municipalities. PAM is a visual design activity that has the potential to act as a bridge between small industrial companies with technology as foundation and large municipalities with services as a foundation.

It is becoming increasingly common that Swedish municipalities integrate SMEs in their regional planning processes. It is a way for the municipalities to better understand the future needs and opportunities that are available in the region. But, in practice it often turns out to be quite difficult for the municipalities to create forums that can bring both municipal representatives and local SMEs together. There are at least two obvious reasons for this.

First; municipalities are relatively large organisations compared to most local businesses. Second; the municipalities almost always have a fixed and divided work procedure to deal with people and questions. While a small business owner, on the other hand must be flexible and take care of all the organisational roles himself. This means that when these two systems finally meet they are not quite compatible.

This challenge is not something new. It has earlier been described by Horn & Weber (2007) as a bureaucratic silo effect. I.e. decision-makers fail to look beyond the boundaries of their own interest group, organisation or department. And instead of embracing all the complexity that a region contains they use 'dead routines'(Cohen, 2007) as 'taming strategies'(Roberts, 2000). This could for example mean that a local municipality reduce the complexity by creating a group of selected stakeholders and gives them the exclusive right to decide what the problems and solutions should be. This attitude has a major impact on creativity and innovation, especially in social innovation where the human meeting is crucial.

Many authors claim that this way of reducing complexity by reducing people, is the wrong way to go. It is not possible to cope with complexity or wicked problems using strategies based on tame problems (Rittel & Weber, 1984). A wicked problem requires innovative and comprehensive solutions where the politics of all stakeholders needs to be embraced and listened to (Krippendorf, 2006). Roberts (2000) describes three generic strategies to cope with wicked problems. They are: authoritative Strategies, Competitive Strategies and Collaborative Strategies. Collaborative strategies are the one that many researchers suggest as the way forward.

Research context

Our goal in this case study was to explore and develop a service strategy that enables municipalities to be more flexible and more open for collaboration with the SMEs in the region. Together with representatives from the offices for industry and commerce in the municipalities of Nybro and Lessebo we started to discuss and create a space where this new service strategy could be prototyped and integrated. This space was created inside an ongoing development project named New Innovative Garden Products (NIGP). The aim of the NIGP project was to use local resources such as; materials, production facilities and design knowledge in order to co-create new garden products and new regional innovation networks.

Searching for service components

Our grid in the search for relevant strategy components was designed to sift out core ideas about participation and service design tools. According to Abrams & Hall (2006) mapping is one of the core tool in the designer's toolbox. To design is to invent strategies for visualising information that make new interpretations possible. And when we searched the service design literature we realize that maps and map-making is not a new phenomenon in service design. Since the 1980's, maps inspired by marketing and engineering have been used as communication tools within service design (Shostack, 1984).

So the mapping aspect of service design seemed to be an important starting point, now we needed to understand how we could transform mapping into a collaborative service strategy.

And that is why we were drawn towards participatory design and researchers such as Elizabeth Sanders (2011), Bo Westerlund (2009) and Mette Agger Eriksen (2012). They all have explored the topic of bringing different stakeholders and actors together into collaborative and creative workshops. The two things that all the above researchers have in common is the use of tangible materials and professional facilitators. But, since our proposal of a new service strategy is going to be incorporated in an organisation that does not have the experience of either service design or acting as a workshop facilitator. We needed to figure out how to repackage the participatory design materials into a service concept that needed minimal facilitator experience.

During our meetings with the representatives from the municipalities we agreed upon that the workshop material needed to be pre-designed (Eriksen, 2012) in order to be sustainable. After a number of iterative meetings we finally decided on a 3 step format that would fit into the NIGP project. We called the format for participatory activity mapping (PAM). During the six month long project, the municipalities arranged three participatory activity mapping workshops, where the participants jointly mapped and visualised local product and service opportunities within the research topic; Swedish gardens and local resources. In this paper we briefly describe the first workshop.

Example: The first PAM workshop prototype

During this workshop the focus was on mapping different activities in a fictional garden and to fill the garden with suitable product prototypes. The participants in this specific workshop were all managers of small manufacturing companies from the surrounding area. The workshop took place at the Linnaeus University, School of Design and it was a full day activity. The first half of the day was focusing on mapping and the second half were focusing on furnishing the maps with product prototypes. The workshop was led by both the service designer and the representatives from the municipalities.



Figure 1 shows how the municipalities and the SMEs map a person's activities

After a short introduction of the day's activities the participants were divided into two groups. The groups were then asked to choose a picture and create a brief persona description of the people on the picture.

When the groups were done describing the people on the pictures they were given a large pre-designed cardboard field depicting a garden in different seasons. The groups moved the persona picture over the field whilst they discussed, analysed and wrote down the garden activities the persona did during spring, summer, autumn and winter on sticky notes.

From the fields, the groups isolated and pulled out places and situations that were problematic for the personas. The groups were asked to extract the problematic areas from the field and start to create quick paper prototypes that could solve the encountered problems. When the groups were satisfied with their paper prototypes they placed them in front of the fields and presented them to the other participants.



Figure 2 this picture shows how one group analysed an old man's garden activities and created a cardboard prototype that would solve the problem with his bad knees.

Reflections about the Participatory activity mapping prototype

What about the activities of participatory activity mapping? Was it a strategy that could both deal with wicked problems and act as a bridge between SMEs and municipalities? If we reflect on the mapping session using the aspect of embracing and listening to the politics of all stakeholders, as a starting point (Krippendorf, 2006). Then we can say that the discussion after the mapping session was more interesting and rewarding than the actual mapping. Because, it was only after the mapping that the participants really started to critically discuss the topic of regional innovation politics and its related problems of; competence migration, lack of distribution channels and distance to the market. It was a very lively discussion where old power hierarchies disappeared for a brief moment and both the SMEs and the representatives from the municipality could participate in the discussion on equal terms. I think this is a good example of how dead routines could be changed into live routines. This debate would not have happened if the municipal officials had stayed behind their desks. And I do not believe that the discussion would have flourished in the same way if they had not used the maps and the prototypes as vehicles to delve into the subject. During the discussions the issues bounced back and forth between the participants and the materials. So, in this situation you could say that the material and the tools actually bridged the gap between the SMEs and the municipalities. This gap bridging phenomenon was something that we could observe already in the very first mapping and prototyping activities. It became evident that the mapping activities more served as door openers for the municipalities than as a way to co-create new garden products. It functioned as a natural way for the municipalities to sit down and ask more individual questions to each of the participating SMEs.

Turning the prototype into a service

During the NIGP project we conducted three PAM workshops. After each workshop both the designers and the representatives from the municipalities sat down and reflected upon what had happened during the workshop and how the activities could be improved. From these iterative meeting processes, we created an ongoing manuscript. This manuscript was later turned into a brochure where we thoroughly described with text and pictures what we had done before, during and after the workshops. By the end of the project we sent out the brochures to local SMEs and neighbouring municipalities. This could have been the end of the project, because when the project ended the representatives from the participating municipalities disappeared onto other projects. But shortly after the project ended we found

out that the neighbouring municipalities had started to incorporate our experiences and activities in their range of services.

This quote is from the neighbouring municipalities' homepage.

The goal is to create a creative meeting place for the development of new products, services and business models. The project works with the design process as a methodology for product and service that will help the region's small and medium enterprises to increase profitability and competitiveness.

After an interview with the neighbouring municipalities I can say that they have kept the idea about working in groups and use design methods. But they have changed some of the activities. In some cases they lead the work with cardboard prototyping themselves and in other cases they hire a designer to lead the workshops for them. One thing that has not changed is the idea about the creative space. They always create a space that is outside the walls of the municipality. They think it is crucial to gather and meet the SMEs on neutral ground and not to get stuck in old places with old routines.

Conclusions

In this paper we have presented a workshop activity including mapping techniques in which participating municipalities and SMEs create knowledge about each other needs and dreams through the use of visual activity maps. This new way of working allows both the municipalities and the SMEs to change perspectives and act out future service scenarios. The outcome of the project is a service strategy that is open and flexible enough for both collaboration and inspiration. Another part of the outcome was that the municipalities increased their knowledge about other municipalities work context. Based on the experiences gained during this workshop we propose that the mapping method can be used to increase municipality's empathy for regional SMEs.

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