Do they (know they) need a service designer? An investigation of service design capabilities through the lens of the market

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Abstract

Freshly graduated service designers are often struggling to align with the expectations that companies have when they are looking for a service designer. The understanding of what service design is, which capabilities a service designer has and how these capabilities can create value for the company can be very different, making it difficult for the inexperienced job seeker to even find the right job offer. In this paper, we investigate if there is a more general misalignment between academia and the market in the definition of service design capabilities, by analysing a consistent pool of job offers in the area of service design.

Keywords: design capabilities, service design job market

Introduction

While service design can no longer be considered as an emerging discipline, it is still much less codified and structured than other more mature design disciplines,

meaning that there is no definite mutual understanding of what constitutes service design practice. As the market increasingly sees the value of service design, this becomes an issue as there is no "professionalization" of service designers (Kirchberger & Tether, 2014) and, consequently, related fields and neighbouring professions (e.g., UX designers, marketing consultants) can easily claim to offer service design (Ibid). While there is a growing request for service design capabilities from the market, the number of diverse design education programmes is also growing, building a wide array of design capabilities, but also contributing to the markets (mis)understanding of service design. This raises the question of whether the boundaries between service design, UX design, CX design, UI design, interaction design, strategic design and systemic design are clearly defined and understood.

In the academic context, the evolution of service design has been mapped out in order to analyze its multiple different definitions and dimensions, distinguishing, for example, among the systemic and human experience approach (Nisula, 2012), or between an approach that tries to integrate practices and ideas from other fields and the one that works on the basic assumptions and methods in service design (Blomkvist et al., 2010; Sangiorgi, 2009). Starting from a series of workshops held at the Service Design Conference in Finland in 2012 (White & Holmlid, 2012) and in Lancaster in 2014, the competences and skills of "tomorrow's service designer" have been recurrently discussed within the service design community in an attempt to define what an educational program should deliver for them. These competences and skills ranged from conventional and contemporary design skills to business skills[1]. In a recent document by the University of Arts London (Sangiorgi et al., 2014), service design research in the UK has been mapped out defining the different sectors, educational courses and modules in service design and emerging research themes within the discipline.

Furthermore, several papers contributed to the definition of the discipline and its core competences while focusing on the establishment of a particular programme (Al-Yassini et al., 2011; Becermen & Simeone, 2019; Blomkvist et al., 2011; de Götzen et al., 2014; Morelli & de Götzen, 2017; Morelli & Götzen, 2014; Ojasalo, 2012; Ojasalo & Ojasalo, 2009; Pacenti, 2011; Penin, 2011) or while exploring specific challenges related to in-class teaching (Ali et al., 2017; de Götzen et al., 2018;

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[1] https://tomorrowsservicedesigners.wordpress.com/

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Guersenzvaig, 2011). Besides the numerous blog-posts or online discussions in different social media platforms where practitioners present their view on the needed capabilities of a (service) designer, there are no systematic studies based on the analysis of job offers.

This paper is a preliminary and partial exploration of how the discipline translates into the market, highlighting the ambiguities, tensions and challenges both for the educated service designer looking for a job and for the company seeking for specific capabilities. After a description of the used methodology and a short investigation of (Service) Design capabilities through the literature, an analysis of 31 job postings will be presented, followed by a discussion on the related findings.

Methodology

Within the scope of this paper, a review of 31 job postings for service designers was conducted, mostly by analyzing their text and identifying which design capabilities the job market is currently requesting. The job postings were from 2017-2019, collected from different countries from all over the world. They included the explicit demand of a service designer. Although the study was limited to job postings made only in three languages (English, Danish and Norwegian), they were collected from the UK, Singapore, the Netherlands, USA, Norway, Denmark, Australia, China and Romania, with a majority of postings from the UK and Denmark. The review included job postings from both the private and public sector, which were divided into three categories: public organisations, private consultancies, and organizations looking for in-house service designers. The job postings were clustered according to recurring themes in order to find possible patterns across the organisations in the definition of service design capabilities. Such a clustering process was carried out at first independently by some of the authors of the paper and was then jointly reviewed across several iterations. In the different job postings, various terms such as capabilities, competences, skills or abilities were used as synonyms.

To understand how the service design capabilities extracted from the job postings fit into the current requests from the general market landscape, they were compared to the World Economic Forum's research on desired skills for 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2018).

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How design research views design capabilities

The concept of design capabilities has been used in a broad way and in very different contexts. In the design management literature, it mainly refers to management practices inside the organization (Mortati et al., 2014) and it is often used in relation to skills, resources, competences and capacities. Various attempts to disambiguate the different terms have been proposed (Acklin, 2013; Amit & Schoemaker, 1993) but it has proven difficult to trace clear boundaries (Delamare Le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Johnson et al., 2017). While in this section we refer to the work of other authors that either use the term capabilities, abilities or competences (and, therefore, we keep this difference in terminology), in the rest of the paper, we will use the term capabilities as a broad umbrella term that also includes skills and competences (Johnson et al., 2017).

An emerging literature has been flourishing in recent years focusing on design capability building in the public sector (Bason, 2010; Lin, 2014) where the first and easiest step to develop the design capability in a (public) organization has been identified in the ability of a given organization to hold specific skills, methods, knowledge and competences through their human resources (Malmberg & Wetter-Edman, 2016). As Malmberg & Wetter-Edman explain, design capability "can be understood as developed by increasing design competence resources, raising awareness of design and its potential contributions or through development of structures that enable use of design practice" (ibid., p. 1291).

The focus of this paper is on the human resources (e.g. the designers) that hold specific capabilities and how these capabilities are defined by the organization that is willing to grow its design potential. Private and public organizations that are looking for specific design capabilities in their future employees are in fact seeking design professionals, i.e. "those subjects whose field of interest, of research, and ultimately of work is the practice and culture of design" (Manzini, 2015, p.1). Manzini explains that design experts have specific knowledge that can be characterized as:

> In terms of content, it includes a set of tools and, most importantly, a specific culture. The tools help the experts to understand the state of things and support the co-design process, from generation of the first concept to the final results. The culture is what is needed to feed both a critical sense (of the current state of things) and a constructive attitude (proposing the values and visions on which to imagine "the new") (Manzini, 2015, p. 38)

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In a couple of publications, the strategist and design researcher, Chris Conley identified some core competences of design:

1. The ability to recognize a broad range of potential in a given problem statement.

2. The ability to work at varying levels of abstraction.

3. The ability to model and visualize solutions before all the information is available.

4. An approach to problem solving that involves the creation and evaluation of multiple alternatives.

5. The ability to add or maintain value as elements are integrated into a whole.

6. The ability to identify and respond to relationships between a solution and its context.

7. The ability to use form to embody ideas and communicate their value. (Conley, 2010, p. 46)

The abilities identified by Conley, can clearly be mapped into the ones identified by Nigel Cross in the 90s, such as "resolving ill-defined problems, adopting solution-focussed cognitive strategies, employing abductive or appositional thinking and using non-verbal modelling media" (Cross, 1990); but while Cross looks into modes of knowledge, Conley refers to abilities in a more operative way. Although Conley is referring more broadly to design, all these competences can easily apply to service design as well. In fact if we compare these seven core competences to the ones defined specifically for service design by Moritz (Moritz, 2009), it is quite evident that in addition to the before-mentioned abilities, service designers are required to have facilitation skills and skills in leading/working with cross functional and multi-disciplinary groups of people. A service designer is by definition a social animal and his/her communication skills are one of his/her core abilities. Moritz also highlights the fact that beside these competences, service designers usually have a recognized expertise in specific areas such as business, research, marketing and technology.

Findings

The 31 jobs postings collected in this research were drawn from diverse organizations - police departments, public administrations, design consultancies, medical companies, financial businesses and retail organizations. The postings are also very diverse in terms of project(s) scope, which ranges from driving digital transformation, all the way up to improving the user experience within public administration and developing new customer services. Even though there is a common ground of design capabilities requested to fulfil the needs of the different organizations, each job posting has also its own very specific focus, requesting very precise capabilities, that reflect the specific context. This might be due to the "pluggable" characteristic of service design and its versatility of being applied in projects and contexts of a very different nature. A synthesis of the most required capabilities across the various organizations, businesses, and sectors analyzed in this paper can be seen in Figure 1.

01 Design Thinking/Human-Centred Design

The capability to apply human-centred design/design thinking throughout development processes

02 Plan, Conduct and Synthesize Research

The capability to plan, conduct and synthesize research from multiple perspectives, interpret it in new, relevant and actionable ways and identify patterns and opportunities for solution development

03 Fluency in Service Design Methods

The capability to design services across multiple sectors and channels through applying service design tools and methods appropriately

04 Visualization Techniques

The capability to apply visualisation techniques to tell stories, prototype and communicate in a manner that is engaging and generates empathy and emotion

05 Stakeholder Management

The capability to deal with diverging interest by managing and engaging stakeholders throughout projects

06 Project Management

The capability to organise and manage work efficiently in order to deliver against project time and quality requirements

07 Strategic Thinking

The capability to make choices based on business insights and trends to demonstrate the potential impact of a solution

08 Collaboration

The capability to be part of a diverse team by collaborating with clients, stakeholders and cross-functional team members

09 Agile Mindset

The capability to welcome diversity of thought, learn through failure, accept change and adapt quickly

10 Facilitation

The capability to present and facilitate sessions to stakeholders and co-workers in a manner that is appropriate according to the specific actors, professions and sectors

11 Communication

The capability to clearly communicate research findings and ideas through evidence-based argumentation both written, orally and visually.

Figure 1. Synthesis of most required capabilities

While it was initially thought that there would be a clear distinction on the desired capabilities between the three categories (organizations, private consultancies, and private-in-house), they turned out to be remarkably similar, however the emphasis

put on certain capabilities varies slightly. In the public sector, stronger emphasis is put on the capability to manage stakeholders and facilitate collaborative processes, while the consultancies often emphasize visualization techniques as an important capability and companies looking for in-house service designers appreciate the capability to work in an agile manner. Private companies that are looking for in-house design capabilities often request that the candidate should educate future colleagues in design thinking so as to spread the knowledge and ways of working through the company and thereby create an organizational culture for human-centered design. Consultancies mention that the candidate will have tasks such as pitching to clients and publishing articles, while the postings from the public sector mention that the candidate should have good networking capabilities. Figure 2 presents a visual summary of the findings highlighting the most requested capabilities in relation to the various sectors.

IN-HOUSE

PUBLIC ORGANISATION

Stakeholder Management

Create culture for human-centred design

Facillitation

Networking abilities

Communication

Project Management

Plan, Conduct and Synthesize Resesearch

Agile Mindset

Strategic Thinking

Visualization Techniques

Pitching to clients
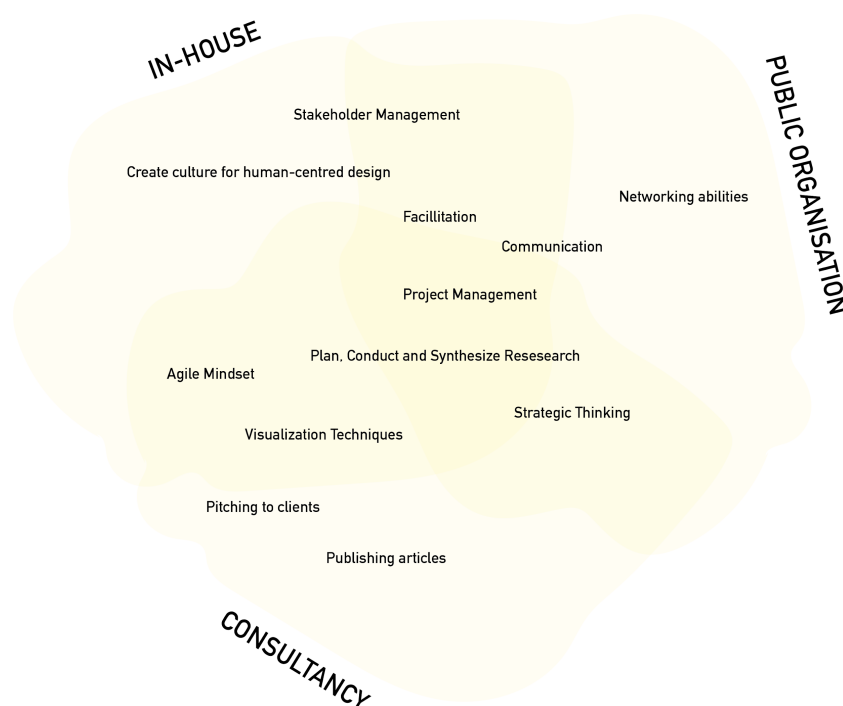
Publishing articles

CONSULTANCY

Figure 2. Capabilities across sectors

Across the categories, the majority are mentioning a master level service design education as the preferred educational background. However, many also mention that the candidate can be qualified in fields such as product design, architecture,

communication, interaction design, industrial design, behavioural psychology, and cognitive science if they have experience in working with customer experience and service design.

Besides the capabilities presented in the chart above, there are requests for capabilities stretching between fine arts, business know-how, and programming. While it might be important that a service designer has a basic understanding of those aspects, and possibly is strongly qualified in one or more, some of the postings are requesting that candidates possess all of these capabilities at an expert level. Such somewhat unrealistic expectations might suggest that service design has not yet been codified in such a way that the job market knows exactly what to expect from a service designer. It might also reflect that even though service design is at times referred (and taught) as a broad and holistic profession (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010, p.44), the job market might require narrower and deeper specializations. Figure 3 shows a job posting that exemplifies such as desire for multiple areas of specialization.

A little about You:

- Graduate degree in IT, Finance, Business Administration, Economics, etc.
- Experience in designing and conducting ethnographic research and design research.
- Ability to synthesize data from multiple-perspectives, interpret it in new, relevant and actionable ways, and identify patterns to drive creative direction and opportunity and solution development.
- Ability to create experience maps, user journeys, process maps and service blueprints.
- Expertise in standard design software such as Sketch, InVision, Adobe Suite and the like is a must. Basic HTML5, CSS3, and JavaScript skills are a good to have.
- Knowledge of visual design and branding is good to have.
- Ability to communicate insights through powerful and clear information design i.e. reports, data visualizations, illustrations, storyboards, photographs, videos and other multimedia techniques.

Figure 3. Screenshot of job posting

While this might be an extreme example, many of the postings request a quite demanding role of the service designer in terms of tasks and responsibilities, appearing to demand not just one, but several service designers to fulfil.

Besides professional qualifications, many job postings point out that they want the candidate to have personality traits such as confidence and robustness, to be able to deal with competing interests from internal and external stakeholders and to be able

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to thrive and create change in organizations undergoing transformation. Interestingly, few mention systemic thinking as a desired capability.

Final remarks

This short investigation insinuates that there is an alignment between how academia defines (service) design capabilities and the synthesis of requested capabilities from the market. It, however, also shows us that the market is requesting quite demanding roles of the service designers. Roles that they are not necessarily educated to accomplish sufficiently. As can be seen in Figure 4 the actual capabilities required by the job seekers can be clearly mapped into the categorization of the most sought after skills made by the World Economic Forum, showing that there will still be a need for service designers in the immediate future. It can be also observed that among the 6 main design skills identified by the World Economic Forum, the less requested and articulated by the market is the one related to systemic thinking. It is difficult to speculate the reason for this with the limited research that has been carried out in this investigation. We might though hypothesize that while the systemic approach to services is very often taught in service design curricula and the related capability acknowledged in the academic context, the market still associates it to a more technical role inside the organization, mostly relating the term "systems" to engineering realm rather than to design and so not relevant for the job offers under this analysis.

SOCIAL SKILLS
Coordinating with others
Negotiation
Service orientation
Emotional intelligence

PROCESS SKILLS
Critical thinking

SYSTEMS SKILLS
Judgement and decision-making

Facillitation

Strategic Thinking

Collaboration

Fluency in Service Design Methods

Plan, Conduct and Synthesize Research

Communication

Stakeholder Management

Design Thinking

Agile Mindset

Project Management

Human-Centred Design

Visualization Techniques

**COMPLEX PROBLEM
SOLVING SKILLS**
Complex problem solving

**RESOURCE AND
MANAGEMENT SKILLS**
People Management

COGNITIVE SKILLS
Creativity
Cognitive flexibility

Categorisations and most sought after skills for 2020 as proposed by the World Economic Forum

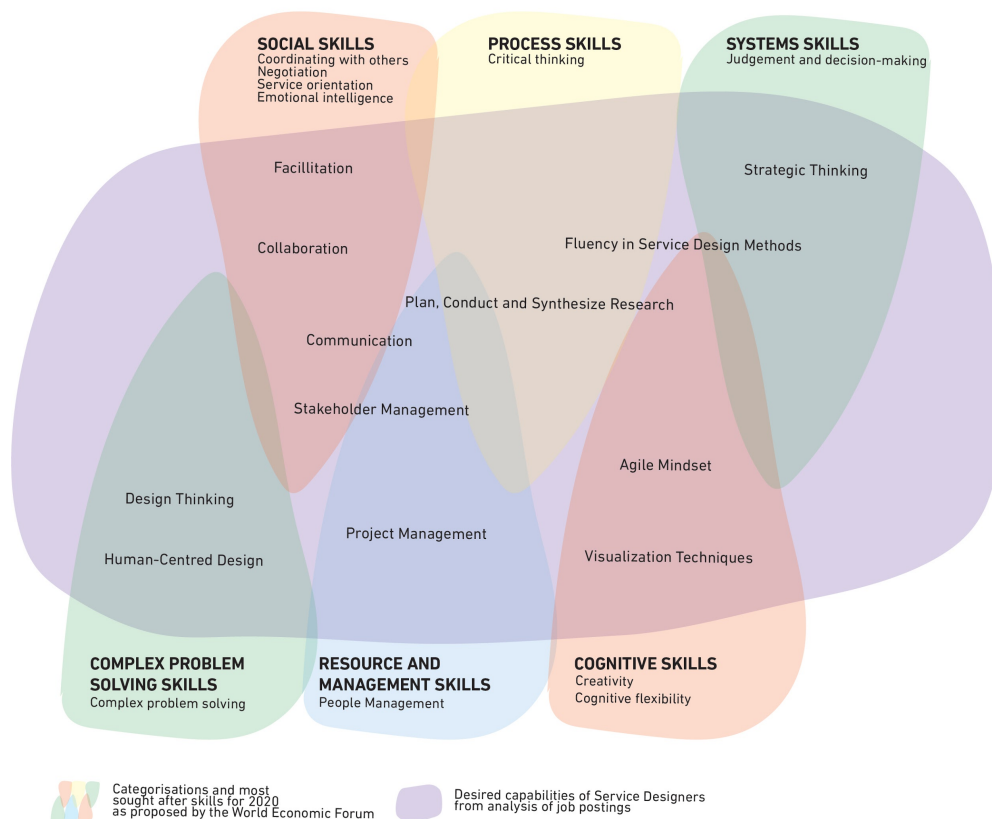Desired capabilities of Service Designers from analysis of job postings

Figure 4. Mapping of service design capabilities in relation to the World Economic Forum categorization.

As mentioned earlier, service design is often described as a "pluggable" discipline, but by pluggable it is meant that service design can be applied to various fields eg. health care, public services or the financial sector. The short analysis above shows us that there is a confusion in the market about the capabilities of a service designer, or at least that the requested capabilities overlap with other professional roles, which might derive from the pluggable nature of the profession, but which also makes it difficult for inexperienced job seekers to position themselves. The analysis also shows us that while there is a demand for service designers, the demand often requires a level of specialisation that most service design educations do not offer to its students (Becermen & Simeone, 2019).

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