Chief Design Officers in public organisations: What design leadership do we need in Singapore's public organisations?

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Abstract

Governments around the world are making tremendous efforts to innovate as they face the pressure of the VUCA - Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous - world (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Kingsinger & Walch, 2012). Design thinking (Brown, 2008; Martin, 2009) as a human-centred approach provides clues to reform the public organisations by "designing for citizens" and "designing with citizens" with the hope that they can collectively overcome large-scale problems and create new value for public policies and services (Bason, 2017).

If design is situated to transform public organisations, including the creation of policy, citizen-centric service initiatives and enabling collaboration with citizens and stakeholders, how are top leaders within the government prepared to transit towards a "design-inspired" leadership? This paper proposes the idea that the impact and sustainability of design is largely influenced by the leadership at multiple levels of the organisation, especially when there are organisational barriers in integrating design within public organisations.

The approach to this research included a systematic literature review on three aspects i.e. design applications and barriers, public sector management and design leadership followed by an empirical study using

selected cases of Singapore public organisations as case studies (Wong, 2018; "Transforming the Public Service Challenge," n.d.; "Rethinking Public Services," 2019; Voon, 2019). The qualitative research aims to gather empirical evidence on the kind of design leadership required to embed design and maximise its impact to support the public sector in its transformation goals. Findings from this research can contribute to public organisations seeking to drive change on how they can maximise the impact of design through the kind of design leadership required. While early findings have been made from the literature review, this research is still ongoing.

Keywords: design leadership, public organisations, human-centred design

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